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# 6 What is Life Story Genre?

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This paper is an attempt to examine the concept of “genre” and its usefulness in the analysis of life stories. The present analysis is based on narrative interviews focused on the line of a participant’s life, which he or she was asked to draw. Inspired by the terms *agon*, *pathos* and *anagnorisis*, borrowed from the theory of literature, three levels of genre are brought in: action, experiencing and reflection. The life story genre is also discussed as a kind of configuration, which means storytelling in an intelligible way that expresses continuity, shape and purpose in human life. The psychological meaning of Northrop Fry’s generic plots (*mythoi*) typology is also examined. Some aspects of life story genres are illustrated by research examples.

**Key words:** Life story genre, storytelling, narrative configuration of experience.

## How Have We Come to the Concept of Genre?

We brought together 52 autobiographical narratives of “middle aged” adults, each in a different way: Ivo took part in the research; Vladimír became involved once the texts were already transcribed. Moreover, each of us worked on our own, interpreting data in our own way, and the results have also been published (Čermák, 2004; Chrz, 2003). Our meeting was predetermined by at least two factors; we work at the same institute and share a common research interest.

The stories, which formed the cornerstone of our joint exploration of life story, were obtained through the method of semi-structured interviews, which was facilitated by the technique, “life lines” (Tyl, 1985). Interviewees were first requested to draw their “life line” without any instructions to enable them to do this. Afterwards they were asked to indicate and describe significant events along this line. They were further stimulated to tell about their lives in a semi-structured way.

In the above mentioned independent analysis, the concept of genre appeared as central. We both used the formal type of narrative analysis (Leiblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber, 1998). Using holistic-formal narrative analysis, Ivo (Čermák, 2004) identified a number of genres expressed with a typical shape of the life line and a corresponding shaping of the narrative. The analysis of these genres led to two levels: basic troubles (the behaviour level) and emotional tuning (the experiential level). Vladimír (Chrz, 2003) used the categorical-form narrative analysis, through which he analysed specific

“aspects of the shaping of life”. These are: (a) life themes; (b) the shaping of the individual action; (c) plots and figures; (d) values and convictions; (e) images of the self and others; (f) reflection and viewpoint. He subsequently suggested that these “aspects of shaping life” be labelled with the unifying and fitting concept of genre.

### **Aspects of Genre: Agon, Pathos and Anagnorisis**

The origin of the word genre, *genus* in Latin, implies that it regards the general and at the same time the “generative”. Genre thus represents a “code” (Ricoeur, 1984, 1985) composed both from rules for construction, as well as from rules for understanding. Genre as a “type” always means something in general and complex, which is realised in individual cases with specific content and components (Bruner, 1996). Through integration into a specific genre, it is possible to understand our experiences and communicate about them. Life story genres also represent the way of “giving meaning” to experiences.

If we accept the concept of genre as an interpretative instrument, we find ourselves, as psychologists, in a field traditionally discussed as part of literary science or poetics. We can also begin to research the viewpoint of poetics with hope that a number of new connections will open to us which we would otherwise not have noticed. We will first deal with some related terms, which we have borrowed from poetics and literary science. These are the terms *agon*, *pathos* and *anagnorisis*. Even though they traditionally mark certain phases or moments in the plot of the story (Frye, 1957; Murray, 1989), they can also be used for marking specific aspects of the appropriate genre, ie. for the level of *action*, the level of *experience* and the level of *reflection*.

### **Agon: The Level of Action**

The word *agon*, ie. “struggle”, comes from the Greek *agó* and means “I lead” or “I exercise”. Similarly, as in Caillois (2001), the classification of games, the concept *agon* can be generally used for the field of the activity and free will struggle. We understand the expression *agon* as *pars pro toto*, ie. as referring to the level focused on action. Shaping one’s life through the means of the life story means to shape a certain manner and extent of agency. The order of the story is the order of human action. In this sense, the classic Aristotle (1993) already expressed the formulation according to which the plot of the story is the “representation of action” (*mimésis praxeós*).

If we follow what is the means which transform an autobiographic recounting into a specific genre of story, then we can say that it is a specific way of telling about action, ie. expression or shaping it. This characteristic is

evident in life story genres in Ivo's analysis (Čermák, 2004). The essential aspect here is the mode of managing life's difficulties, or in general terms, the mode of action. For example, in the genre called "planned gain with estimated risk", life is shaped from the point of view of expedience with instrumental focus on the goals pursued. An essential aspect of this genre is the specific manner of agency in the ongoing "management" of life's gains and losses.

In his analysis of autobiographical narratives, Vladimír (Chrz, 2003) does not deal with genre explicitly, but discusses the "overall life shape", which is close to the concept of genre. He describes three cases, which he summarises using names apt for a certain life configuration: "It is as it should be", "Accomplish more", and "A life full of aggrandisement". In each of these cases the essential aspect of the "overall life shape" is the certain specific manner of agency. For example, in recounting "Accomplish more", in which the professional career is considerably accented, the narrator understands himself or herself as one who believes that "what I don't obtain myself, I don't have". It is principally his or her own activities which lead towards the desired result.

The examples given show that the essential aspect of genre or "the overall life shape" is the specific modus of shaping action, whether understood as agency, or as a way of managing difficulties. A specific capacity to act in the face of life's challenges, demands, threats, or losses is characteristic of individual genres. In this way, a certain sphere and manner of influence are defined, or, in other words, the manner in which a person achieves what he or she wants and avoids that which he or she does not want. The manner in which something is accepted (or not accepted) is also a fundamental side of the genres mentioned. This means what is in our power and what is not, and whether the dominant characteristic of the genre is trust, resignation, the feeling of absurdity, powerlessness, or hopelessness. Finally, its component is also the manner in which an individual confronts life's crises, losses, or threats. The last dimension of life story genre mentioned leads us to a further important aspect, which is the level of experiencing things, and of emotions.

### **Pathos: The Level of Experiencing Things**

The expression pathos traditionally denotes a strong stirring of the mind, excitement, or affect. In Aristotle's "Poetics" (1993), the concept of pathos is used for the part of the story in which pain, injury or death are caused, and which is thus a source of feelings such as fear or compassion. As in the case of the word agon this expression (*pars pro toto*) is also used for emotions and experience on that level in general.

This experiential level in the life story can also be identified. It concerns the manner in which one manages life's challenges, demands, threats or losses in a passive or rather receptive sense. That is, what a person's characteristic

emotional reaction and emotional tuning are. However, it is also necessary to consider that *agon* and *pathos* are interrelated, which may again be illustrated in examples from analysis (Čermák, 2004). In the case of the genre labelled “life crisis – fall and dash”, the overall emotional tuning is denoted by, metaphorically said, “depth”. As a result negative emotions also arise, originating from life’s crises, with a more marked intensity. This brings about vulnerability including the possibility of depressive experience. An important element of this genre is, however, the ability not to give up, to fight and begin again. It is thus apparent here that an element of shaping emotions and experience is also the “*agon*” aspect discussed above and that the experiential level and the action level are “organically” interconnected in the case of genre. It can also be said this “organising principle” (Sarbin, 1986) giving experiences their integrity and shape is indeed the story and its genre or that emotional reaction and tuning are part of the narrative organisation of experience.

In relation to this, there remains the question as to the way in which emotions are embedded in the life story genre. Beginning from Aristotle, a certain superior level of action above the experiential level can be followed with regards to contemplation of the story. The story is principally the shaping of action. On the other hand, in Aristotle (1993) the theory of drama, particularly in the conception of the cathartic effects of tragic events, is emphasised in the experience of feelings of fear and compassion. Aristotle’s catharsis is often understood as the reaction to emotional tension. In contrast, Ricoeur (1984) shows that catharsis rests primarily in the integration of emotions into a certain structure, in which the element of recognition plays an important role. This brings us to the third aspect of life story genre, the level of reflection and understanding.

### **Anagnorisis: The Level of Reflection**

The expression *anagnorisis* denotes a certain part of the story in which recognition occurs. In “*Poetics*” (1993), Aristotle defines *anagnorisis* as the “change from the ignorance to recognition”. This recognition, temporally located in a certain moment of the story, is, however, also an expression for a certain type of understanding, which is characteristic for the relevant genre. For example, recognition occurs in the comedy’s conclusion, where nothing prevents the hero’s wedding, or there is a certain moment of recognising the hero in the narrative in which the hero demonstrates his heroism. The expression *anagnorisis* can then be used in a more general sense, ie. for denoting the fact that the story is the bearer of a certain type of understanding and reflection.

Up to now, it appeared useful to conceive of genre from the point of view of life’s difficulties. Using Bruner’s term “trouble” (Bruner, 1996), it is also

possible to look at the life story from the point of view of its function in understanding one's own life, without needing to suppress the importance of the two preceding aspects. Bruner assumes that the key moment in the narrative construction is the disruption of the ordinary, regular or expected. The term "trouble" is used for this. "Trouble" is that which "drives" the story and which makes it a worthy account. According to Bruner, the narrative constructs reasons and justifications related to actors' responsibility and actions with respect to a certain "trouble". "Trouble" is, however, also difficulties, sufferings, problems or crises. It is precisely in this relationship to certain "trouble" that narrators construct their reasons, justifications, values and convictions that configure to a certain genre. Life stories, and the values and convictions embodied in them, give meaning through how they correspond to the challenges of "troubles", ie. life's difficulties, crises or cases when order is disrupted.

Genre also makes it possible for life to be lived and people to understand it. It is possible to illustrate the level of understanding as an important aspect of genre using, for example, a comparison of the genres "moratorium" and "metanoia" (Čermák, 2004). In the genre of "moratorium" life is accepted as being absurd, without the possibility of influencing events and without emotional participation. There is also a certain type of understanding, ie. of a certain semblance of making sense. The question of sense in the genre "moratorium" is, in its own way, urgent and burning (that which is, so to say, "frozen" still does not cease to exist). In contrast, in the genre "metanoia" the question of meaning explicitly and distinctly reaches the forefront. Life here is shaped and experience as an intensive searching and finding of meaning and values. A sort of "rewriting" of prior life occurs, which rests on an intensive re-evaluating of the past and on finding new coherence and new directions.

The story itself means or even is understanding; however that understanding can be reflected to various extents. In their stories, narrators shape life as events and action, but also express the meaning and reasons of their actions, thus they understand themselves and others as acting on the basis of certain wishes, objectives and convictions. Experience created in autobiographical narratives also takes place, in the words of Bruner (1996), in two "landscapes": in the "landscape of action" and the "landscape of consciousness". Our experience denotes different extents of reflection, ie. various proportions of use of the "landscape of consciousness". Understanding experience means understanding the means by which action or experience shaped by "intentional states", ie. conviction, wishes and objectives. Experience could not "give meaning" as the person who experiences it did not think something, or wish for something, or have any intentions.

In the narrative construction, experience is shaped through the "consciousness filter" and that "filter" creates a certain point of view. The category of point of view denotes the "angle of view", or, in other words,

“where” the experience in a given case was created. In reality this “where” has two meanings: (1) who is narrating; and (2) who is “watching”. This means that the narrator can, but does not have to, be identical with the centre or source of reflection. Vladimír (Chrz, 2003) identified a number of types of points of view in the autobiographical narratives: Most often a point of view from a subjective perspective grammatically expressed in the first person singular occurred. Besides their own subjective perspective, participants also expressed others’ perspectives, both in the case of narration in the third person, or letting these “others” speak themselves. Another type of perspective is the point of view “generalised people” having the usual grammatical form of the third person with the subject “one”. In some autobiographical narratives, the narrator shaped his or her experience in the dialogue or in conflicting points of view.

Life story genre is the expression and, at the same time, also an instrument of a certain type of “narrative understanding” (Ricoeur, 1985). There is action and experience in narratives integrated into a certain type of comprehensible connections. Through their narrative organisation, life gains shape, order, coherence, direction and also sense. By means of the narrative construction, life is simultaneously shaped and interpreted.

### **Genre as Configuration**

So far we have dealt with some aspects of life story genre more or less separately. We have also indicated that these aspects are inseparably related. *Action* and *experience* are shared in narration in the framework of a certain *understandable* connections. It is possible here to ask the question as to what the principle of this shaping is. The answer could be the construction of relationships among events, or a certain plot or configuration.

As part of the genre, our life assumes form, direction and shape; we become aware of continuity or connections. In other words, our experience gains the shape of a plot. Thus we experience life as a connected sequence of events. However, temporal ordering by itself does not yet make a plot of events and action. In order for it to be possible to talk about a plot, it is necessary for at least some events to arise from each other. While a significant part of this sort of causal sequence, or “causality” is characteristic in that the order of narration is the order of reasons and intentions. The logic of the narrative concatenation of experience is the logic of the actors, which has its reasons and which, at least to a certain extent, consciously and freely follows its objectives and goals.

If we use the concept from literature theory, it is then plot, which gives our experience connection and direction. Besides this, plot makes our experience a unit whole, ie. which has a “beginning, middle and end”, and which also

“makes sense”, that which gives meaning. Using the narrative construction, life is imprinted with an overall shape; experience becomes configuration.

The expression configuration points to a further aspect of the narrative structuring of experiences. As I already mentioned, it is through the means of the plot that human experience gains a temporal, causal and goal-orientated structure. Besides its diachronical, temporal or linear dimension, however, its narrative construction also has a synchronic, spatial or figurative dimension. Biographical narration also belongs to the ordering of forms, analogies and parallels.

That life story genre represents a specific configuration is entirely apparent in the case of graphical depiction on the life line, which is in and of itself (although not always) understandable with the expression of the “logic” of the narrative shaping expressed in the interview. Various types of life configurations were also similarly found in Vladimír’s research (Chrz, 2003), in which the identification of the “overall life shape” is primarily supported by verbal material. For example, the narration “Life full of aggrandisement” denotes a strong configuration, in which life is shaped as a direction which is evaluated and fulfilled through current aggrandisement of a professional career and family life. The pivotal and critical point of this narration is the divorce, subsequent brave step into a new relationship, and into life in a different land. Using verbal expression, a similar type of reality is thus shaped through graphical depiction on the life line, ie. with rises, falls, peaks, drops, crashes, etc.

In narrative research, it is necessary to also understand more complex types of life configurations, which represent a certain “logic” or perspective in the shaping of life. For this it is helpful to use types of plots, which were formulated in literary theory by Frye (1957) and which Murray (1989) inspirationally used in the field of narrative psychology. According to this concept, a number of basic archetypal perspectives exist in the shaping of life, which corresponds to classical genres, comedy, romance, tragedy and irony.

The important question is, the way in which can Frye’s typology of plots or configurations in narrative psychology can be used. So far, there have only been attempts to place individual genres of life narratives into Frye’s types (McAdams, 1993; Murray, 1989). To a certain extent, it is also possible to do this with some of the genres or narratives, which we identified (Čermák, 2004; Chrz, 2003). The genres “moratorium” and “metanoia” can be looked at from this point of view. It is possible to place the genre “moratorium” into Frye’s genre irony. In the case of “moratorium” there is a consistent “non heroic” stance, consisting of resignation, in “not experiencing” things, and accepting life’s absurdity. As we have already stated, this life configuration can be represented as a sort of “freezing”, which is, according to Frye, one of the central figures in the ironic genre. Understanding “moratorium” from the point of view of Frye’s typology enables one to better see the adaptive side of this



genre, including a “sense” of the absurdity and incomprehensibility of life. It is possible partly to place the genre “metanoia” into Frye’s romance (never, however, in the current usual meaning of the word). This genre corresponds to Frye’s romance in the structure of searching and finding something valuable (having rules of a spiritual nature), as well as in its emphasis on change and transformation, and in that it is also often necessary to conquer new values in the midst of confusion and regression, and sometimes also outside of the established community.

The inspiration of Frye’s conception, however, does not just lie in assigning genres to four basic types. This typology does not only represent four separate categories, but can also be understood as a sort of consortium, or at least as an approach that enables gentler differentiation. Perhaps Frye’s system also offers something more, which it would be possible to term the “logic of narrative configuration” or the “logic of genres”. It concerns the basic structure of the principle of narrative imagination, which, in its generality and “generativity” creates a universe of human experience. Frye points out that the logic of the universe is given by conceivable structures and boundaries, which are primarily the structures of “desire”, that is achievement of the desirable and an avoidance of the undesirable. This imaginative universe offers a certain space of possibilities, within which one can respond to situations’ demands as called for in life, in order to shape it as a good and meaningful story.

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