LENA LINNE

# Unlived Lives in English Literature

## A Typological Study

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# Contents

# I Introduction

> "Do you ever wonder what life would have been like if you'd said yes?" said Ridcully.
> "No."
> "I suppose we'd have settled down, had children, grandchildren, that sort of thing…"
> Granny shrugged. It was the sort of thing romantic idiots said. But there was something in the air tonight…
> "What about the fire?" she said.
> "What fire?"
> "Swept through the house just after we were married. Killed us both."
> "*What* fire? I don't know anything about any fire?"
> Granny turned around.
> "Of course not! It didn't happen. But the point is, it *might* have happened. You can't say 'if *this* didn't happen then *that* would have happened' because you don't *know* everything that might have happened. You might think something'd be good, but for all you know it could have turned out horrible. You can't say 'If only I'd…' because you could be wishing for *anything*. The point is, you'll never know. You've gone past. So there's no use thinking about it. So I don't." (224-25, emphases in the original)

In Terry Pratchett's Discworld novel *Lords and Ladies* (1992), a parody of William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c. 1595), the Archchancellor of the wizarding university, Mustrum Ridcully, wonders how his life would have developed if the witch Granny Weatherwax had not, decades previously, refused his proposal of marriage. Before questioning Granny about her own view on the matter in the quoted scene, Ridcully indulged in happy memories of the summer he spent with Granny in their youth. Imagining an idyllic scene of affectionate family life, he now clearly assumes that, had they got married, the two of them would have been granted a happy life together, a life that would have been preferable to their actual, separate ones. In contrast, Granny is much more rational about the situation. Aware that she can no more than speculate about alternative directions her life might have taken, Granny insists that there will never be any certainty about what might have been and that, possibly, the different life would have been the worse option, for a wedding ceremony is not necessarily the beginning of domestic bliss. She does not only picture a fire that would have killed Ridcully and herself in the early days of their marriage but later on continues her argument by maintaining that Ridcully might have turned out a philanderer and an alcoholic (228). Thus, she imagines two outcomes much worse than reality: one in which the young couple die prematurely and lead no life at all, and another one in which they find themselves trapped in a disastrous marriage.

In Pratchett's characteristically light-hearted fashion, *Lords and Ladies* displays little sympathy for Ridcully's contemplations. Ridcully frequently attempts to draw his fellow professors' attention to his fond reminiscences of his youthful experiences with Granny

and the significant impact these might have had on his life, yet hardly anybody shows much interest in the matter (e.g. 109, 195-96). Ultimately, Granny consoles him by suggesting that the two of them most certainly married and "'lived happily ever after'" (381) in some other universe – a notion which will most likely not be very comforting for Ridcully. In the above-quoted episode, Granny pokes fun at her former suitor's "romantic" vision, yet she also makes a serious point about the seeming futility of thought experiments concerned with questions of what might have been. In her down-to-earth manner, she exposes the openness and, in her view, uselessness of such speculations.

In *Lords and Ladies*, the myriads of different directions human lives can develop into are briefly considered by Granny, who sees in the countless opportunities the very reason why nothing can be gained from hypothesising about alternative lives. The various possible developments are pondered on by characters within the novel and, in Granny's case at least, they are contemplated for a temporarily limited period. In narratives by other writers, the manifold directions take centre stage and are acted out in multiple, mutually exclusive plot lines. The most classic case of this type of narrative in English literature is perhaps John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), in which wealthy Charles Smithson finds himself caught between two women: Ernestina Freeman, his rich and respectable fiancée, and Sarah Woodruff, penniless and in disgrace for an affair with the eponymous French lieutenant. The novel provides three different, incompatible endings for this love triangle. In the first and most conventional version, Charles marries Ernestina and never sees Sarah again. In the second, he has intercourse with Sarah and breaks his engagement to Ernestina, yet Sarah disappears after a misunderstanding; Charles locates her in London and hopes that they will be united after all. In the third version, he traces Sarah in London, but the two split up. Although it is suggested that the first version occurs merely in Charles's mind (342) and that the final version by virtue of being the last creates the impression that it is "the 'real' version" (409), none of the three contradictory plot lines is ultimately given precedence over the other two.

More recent works also depict the diverse directions in which plot lines can develop. Some specifically foreground the multitude of different roads the life of a particular human being (or character) can take. Laura Barnett's *The Versions of Us* (2015) exploits the idea that a single encounter can – but does not have to – influence the entire rest of our lives. The novel narrates three parallel versions of its protagonists' lives from the 1950s to the present. All three versions begin when Eva and Jim run into each other as students, yet from this chance meeting onwards their lives develop in entirely different ways – "one path is taken, and another missed" (23). The narrative juxtaposes the three versions with each other, interspersing scenes from the first one, in which Eva and Jim soon get married, with those from the second, in which they go their separate ways after the chance encounter, and those from the third, in which Eva marries her boyfriend although she has fallen in love with Jim. In a similar fashion, Kate Atkinson's *Life After Life* (2013) portrays innumerable, mutually incompatible versions of its protagonist's life. Born in 1910, Ursula Todd dies immediately in the shortest version but lives until 1967 in the longest. Whenever she dies – indicated by the characteristic phrase "Darkness fell" (20), repeated verbatim and in numerous variations throughout the novel –, the narrative rewinds and tells another version of Ursula's life. For instance, she experiences the Blitz in London and rescues survivors from the ruins in one version but marries a German lawyer and suffers the English and American air raids on Berlin in another. Both *The Versions of U*s

and *Life After Life* rely upon the idea that lives can take many different paths and that minor incidents can have major consequences. Juxtaposing various plot lines without prioritising any, both novels emphasise the role of contingency in human lives.

The present study focuses less on the randomness of human experience than on how the awareness of the other directions their lives might have taken affects literary characters. Like Ridcully in *Lords and Ladies*, characters in the narratives under discussion contemplate hypothetical lives which differ from their real ones. In spite of Granny's contempt for Ridcully's ruminations, human beings (and literary characters) are prone to imagine such alternatives to reality. The respective considerations may be concerned with trivial issues, like "If I had not planted flowers too early in March, they would not have been killed by frost," but they may also centre upon serious matters, like Ridcully's conviction that, if Granny had accepted his marriage proposal, the two of them would now be the heads of an extended family. The former kind of contemplation occurs frequently in everyday life and will soon be overshadowed by more important issues, the latter type bears the potential to have significant, long-term effects upon the individual's contentedness and mental health.

Thus, questions as to what might be or might have been are part and parcel of human experience. They play an essential role in fiction and are, consequently, worth looking into for literary critics. In the texts examined in the present study, this fundamental human tendency to speculate about alternative worlds, and specifically alternative lives, plays a more prominent role than in Pratchett's novel, in which it only figures as a minor element in one of its several parallel plot lines. As will be shown, characters are rarely as rational and level-headed as Granny when it comes to lives they failed to live. Instead, they display a deep emotional involvement in the matter. While Granny is a capable, content and successful character who has little reason to ponder on lost opportunities, many of the characters affected by unrealised options are melancholy, passive, dissatisfied and outright unhappy. Frequently, they ponder not only but even yearn for a different, preferable life they might have led – for the "un-lived" life that is an imaginary alternative to their actual one.

In chapter II of the study, I will provide an overview of different approaches to and understandings of the term "unlived life" that have been introduced by literary scholars since the late 1980s. In referencing "unlived lives," critics do not necessarily discuss alternative possibilities characters might have had, like the potential marriage between Granny and Ridcully. It is therefore crucial to distinguish between various understandings of the concept. I will do so by contrasting two major definitions of "unlived lives." The first involves a figurative, or metaphorical, understanding of the concept, the second depends on a literal approach to the term and will serve as a springboard for the present study. I will focus on cases like Ridcully's, in which characters look back at their past, reconsider important events and either ask themselves what would have happened if at a particular moment they had taken another decision and acted differently, or wonder what would have happened if circumstances beyond their own control had given their lives a push into a different direction. I will discuss the literal approach in the context of theories of counterfactuality and their relevance for literary studies. Finally, I will propose my

own definition of "unlived life" so as to complement and improve the conceptualisations of the motif suggested thus far.[1]

Against the backdrop of this definition, chapter III will elaborate on different versions of the motif. Characters contemplating alternative paths their lives might have taken feature across English literature from the nineteenth century to the present. The fictional texts I will discuss include narratives, plays and poems by English, Scottish, Irish, US-American and Canadian writers.[2] Authors interested in the motif range from Henry James to Virginia Woolf, Vita Sackville-West, Samuel Beckett, Kazuo Ishiguro, Alice Munro and others. I will chiefly deal with short stories, e.g. James Joyce's "A Little Cloud" (1914)[3] and Margaret Atwood's "Hair Jewellery" (1977), novels, for instance Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* (1920) and Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* (1998), and plays, like August Wilson's *Fences* (1985) and Tom Stoppard's *The Invention of Love* (1997). In exceptional cases, I will also reference particularly striking examples in languages other than English, such as the novel *L'horizon* (2010) by French Noble Prize winner Patrick Modiano. With this diverse corpus of texts, I will develop a typology of the motif. First, I will focus on the characteristics of the unlived life itself and differentiate between the types of counterfactuals that come into play. For instance, I will distinguish between the different spheres of human experience unlived lives can be concerned with, i.e. between unlived lives consisting in unrealised love relationships and those comprising other kinds of alternatives. Second, I will discuss the involvement of the characters. In this section, I will illustrate the effects of unlived lives and the various types of emotional responses displayed by the characters.

The typological part will be rounded off with a chapter which draws upon formalist analysis and the study of motifs. In this section, I will relate the unlived life to previous definitions of "motif" and argue that the unlived life goes beyond traditional understandings of the concept because it requires and generates particular techniques of representation. Subsequently, I will address these literary methods which are employed to convey the significance of the unlived life. Authors are faced with the difficult task of portraying an alternative possibility that never materialises. While some explicit references to speculations about different lives can be traced in the corpus, unlived-life narratives rely chiefly upon implicit techniques. After distinguishing between explicit and implicit representation, I will therefore focus on the latter and differentiate between various types of implicit methods, among them projection and foil characters. I will also discuss the treatment of time and the role of narrator and point of view in relation to the motif before I

[1] As indicated in the acknowledgements, the present book is based on my doctoral dissertation. Occasionally, it also draws on the results of my master's thesis, in which I dealt with "The Motif of the Unlived Life in Alice Munro." In revised and abbreviated form, parts of my master's thesis were subsequently published as "Unlived Lives in Alice Munro's 'Walker Brothers Cowboy' and 'Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You'" in *Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* in 2015.

[2] The present study will focus primarily on narrative fiction, yet it will also consider some dramatic texts and, in rare cases, poems. In the following, all of these genres will be subsumed under the category of "unlived-life narratives."

[3] Hereafter, the years of publication for poems, short stories and also for novels first published in serialised form refer to their first book publication.

will briefly address historical issues to account for the emergence of unlived-life narratives in the nineteenth century and their heyday in the twentieth and twenty-first.

The conceptual part in chapter III will provide an overview of the corpus and the variety of unlived lives. It will illustrate the frequency with which unlived lives occur in English literature of the last one hundred and fifty years and do justice to the diversity of the motif. Subsequently, the different kinds of unlived lives and techniques of representation will feature in seven selected case studies, which will foreground the specific meanings the unlived life can gain. The detailed readings in this part will also indicate that some characteristics of unlived lives distinguished in the typology tend to occur together. The typology will be structured along the characteristics which can be applied to the different versions of the motif; the selected readings will emphasise particular cases and offer in-depth discussions of especially representative, interesting and challenging instances of unlived lives.

# II Towards a Definition of "Unlived Life"

As several recent manuals, handbooks and popular scientific publications indicate, there is a widespread notion in contemporary culture that unrealised opportunities preoccupy all human beings and that the lives they are not leading can affect them as intensely as the lives they are. In *Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life* (2012), a popular scientific monograph published by Penguin, psychoanalyst Adam Phillips claims that "much of our so-called mental life is about the lives we are not living, the lives we are missing out on, the lives we could be leading but for some reason are not" (xi). If our preferable alternative lives and unrealised wishes, our frustrations and disappointments gain control over our actual lives, "[o]ur lives become an elegy to needs unmet and desires sacrificed, to possibilities refused, to roads not taken" (xiii). In a similar fashion, psychologists Robert Johnson and Jerry Ruhl begin their handbook *Living Your Unlived Life: Coping with Unrealized Dreams and Fulfilling Your Purpose in the Second Half of Life* (2007) by asking "What is unlived life?" (1), and they provide the following answer:

> [unlived life] includes all those essential aspects of you that have not been adequately integrated into your experience. We can hear the distant drumbeat of unlived life in the mutterings that go on in the back of our heads: "Woulda-coulda-shoulda." Or in second-guessing our life choices. Or those late-night longings. The unexpected grief that arises seemingly out of nowhere. A sense that somehow we have missed the mark or failed to do something we were so sure we were supposed to do. Where did we go wrong, and what is this life that we find ourselves living, so different from what we set out to do? (1-2)

According to Johnson and Ruhl's broad understanding of the concept, the opposite of whatever we are, experience or do remains unlived. Among these "unlived lives," there are, for instance, the experiences of having siblings (for an only child) and of being a Muslim (for a Christian) (2), hence the authors' claim that "[w]hatever seems to be missing – that is part of your unlived life" (ibid.).

In the following, the focus will be on approaches to unlived lives suggested in literary studies. While some critics have spoken of "unlived lives" and others of "lives unled," the two terms will be used synonymously throughout the present study. The majority of publications featuring either or both of the terms employ them in a non-specific manner. The by far most profound examinations of the "unlived life," or rather of a family of related motifs all subsumed under this very label, are those by Edward Engelberg, Andrew Miller and Burkhard Niederhoff. The earliest and only book-length study dealing with "unlived lives" is a monograph by Engelberg, who focuses on what I suggest to call the "figurative" understanding of the term. Engelberg mostly applies the term "unlived life" to wasted and meaningless lives considered empty and not lived to the full. In contrast, Miller and Niederhoff use the term in a "literal" manner. Both discuss lives that are

actually not lived; more precisely, both deal with imaginary alternatives to the characters' real lives that are pondered on in retrospect.

## 1 The Figurative Understanding

The figurative understanding of the motif features prominently in Engelberg's *Elegiac Fictions: The Motif of the Unlived Life* (1989), in which Engelberg concentrates on characters who experience the lives they are leading as unsatisfactory, empty and "unlived." In Engelberg's words,

> [t]he unlived life may […] be literally unlived because the protagonist dies too young to have had a chance to live. Or, the opportunity of fulfillment has either been missing, headed in the wrong direction, or is too late now to undertake. These are merely sample variations; no rigid framework will work, nor should it. What unites all these figures is a sense of personal dispossession, loss, enervation, resentfulness, and a yearning for experiences encapsulated in a past – but a past that has shut its doors and is therefore elegized. (5)

In spite of the brief reference that the unlived life may be "literally unlived" due to a character's premature death, Engelberg restricts himself almost entirely to what he states immediately afterwards: the characters are affected by discontent, anxiety, disappointment, pessimism and similarly negative emotions. As the title suggests, the focus of Engelberg's study lies on "elegiac fictions," which are conceptualised as fictions centring upon loneliness, dejection, despair, angst and death. They are "a particular manifestation of the modern sense of personal loss and dispossession, and of a special kind of sadness that validates the belief that one's life has been a series of missed opportunities" (2). The protagonist of elegiac fictions "savages himself or others, pines for what is not, is full of regret for actions not taken, or feels that to take them now is 'too late'; in addition, this character type views his own life as *wasted*, indeed as *unlived*" (ibid., emphases added). As the last part of the quotation implies, these utterly unhappy characters are not content with their lives. Aware of chances they lost, convinced that they have missed out on life altogether, they fret against the lives they are leading because these are not enjoyed to the full. The majority of these weary and disappointed characters are not preoccupied with imagining a different life but with complaining about the one they are living. Meaninglessness, isolation, self-hatred, void and melancholy are among the dominant characteristics of their (unlived) lives. This "meaninglessness," Engelberg points out, "takes many forms, from cosmic anguish, of which there are many manifestations, to the discovery that daily life, in its repetitious banality, leaves us little to embrace" (13).[4]

[4] In a similar fashion, Hart's short essay "The Unlived Life" deals with wasted and purposeless lives. Hart's approach is reminiscent of Engelberg's because it understands the unlived life as the very opposite of the "fully lived life" (395). In her unpublished doctoral dissertation *Alienation and the Motif of the Unlived Life in Contemporary Chinese Literature*, Linder seizes upon Engelberg's concept of the motif and applies it to Chinese fiction. Detecting in post-Mao literature "an estrangement from life itself, reflected in the motif of the unlived life" (43-44), she suggests that the unlived life plays a crucial role in post-Mao fiction. For an introduction to her

*Elegiac Fictions* distinguishes between three major kinds of unlived lives. The first type features narcissistic characters. Realising that their lives are hollow, wasted, boring and unbearable, some of these characters, full of despair, anger and resentment, tend to break into a "narcissistic rage" (a term Engelberg borrows from Heinz Kohut) and subsequently wish to die (31). The characters of the second type are preoccupied with chances they missed, and with real as well as imaginary losses they endured. The "mourners" among them regret the real loss of a person or object, the "melancholics" an imaginary one: "Actual loss activates grief for the object lost; loss of a possibility mobilizes a languishing sense of deprivation: 'Tis better to have had and lost than never to have had at all" (111). Finally, the third type of the motif portrays characters arriving at "some stoical sense of existential survival: Beckett's 'I can't go on, I'll go on'" (207). These characters have learnt "merely to exist until time has run its course; to exist without much complaint, without regret, without hope" (209). The wide scope of Engelberg's study includes world literature in English, German, French and Russian. Focusing on narrative fiction but also drawing upon dramatic texts and epic poetry whenever feasible, Engelberg covers authors ranging from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Lord Byron to Emily Brontë, Gustave Flaubert, Ivan Turgenev, Franz Kafka, Joyce, Beckett and Ernest Hemingway. Though not observing a clear chronological order in his series of analyses, Engelberg proposes that the motif, which "appears to have become almost obligatory" (13), developed in the late eighteenth and reached its climax in the twentieth century.

Engelberg is primarily concerned with the philosophical and psychological implications of what he calls "unlived life." Among other issues, he links the hollow and purposeless lives he focuses on to notions of narcissism, *ressentiment* and melancholia, at times paying more attention to the related concepts than to the literary realisation of the motif itself. His interest lies with the world views displayed in elegiac fictions. Consequently, Engelberg ignores the literary techniques with which the motif is conveyed. Indeed, the broadness of his approach does not allow of any precise definition of "unlived life."[5] As indicated above, "unlived life" in the context of Engelberg's elegiac fictions primarily refers to the waste and void of a character's actual life. However, especially when the second version of the motif comes into play, "unlived life" can also be related to a character's wistful pondering of missed opportunities and ardent longing for what might have been. Thus, the term can implicitly incorporate the different life a character might have led. In these cases, exemplified for instance by Engelberg's discussions of James's "The Jolly Corner" (1908) and Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *Elegiac Fictions* touches upon the narrower, literal understanding of "unlived life."

argument, see her spin-off article "Alienation and the Motif of the Unlived Life in Liu Heng's Fiction."

5 For these differences between Engelberg's (figurative) and his own (and the present study's literal) understanding of the concept, see also Niederhoff ("Unlived Lives" 184n4).

## 2 The Literal Understanding

Approached from the literal angle, unlived lives have been understood as hypothetical lives which are contemplated as possibilities but not actually lived by the characters. They are imaginary alternatives to reality and consist in events contrary to the facts of the characters' real lives. In other words, unlived lives are "counter-factual." So far, only Miller and Niederhoff have seriously treated the motif from this perspective. In the following, I will first provide an introduction to the concept of counterfactuality across various disciplines and to the kinds of counterfactuality relevant in the context of narrative fiction. Subsequently, I will turn to counterfactual unlived lives and supplement the existing definitions of the motif with a more precise one of my own.

### 2.1 Counterfactuality

"The term *counterfactual* means, literally, contrary to the facts" (Roese and Olson, "Counterfactual Thinking" 1). A counterfactual course of events is a hypothetical series of incidents. Human beings display an innate tendency to conduct counterfactual thought experiments. They imagine counterfactual events, i.e. events which are incompatible with reality, for the past, present and future. For instance, I can ponder on what I might have done yesterday if I hadn't worked on my doctoral dissertation (past), on what I might be doing right now if I weren't writing a chapter on counterfactuality for my study (present), and, assuming that I will revise the chapter tomorrow, on what I might do tomorrow if I were willing to take time out (future). In the first case, I am concerned with an opportunity irrevocably lost in the past; in the second, I muse about an alternative to the present; and in the third, I contemplate a future possibility which I consider unlikely, yet which might become realised and hence turn out *not* contrary to the facts.

Counterfactuality has been of interest to philosophers, historians, linguists, psychologists, sociologists and other researchers alike. The perspectives from which these look at and the purposes to which they employ counterfactual thinking differ profoundly. As Dorothee Birke, Michael Butter and Tilmann Köppe put it in their introduction to *Counterfactual Thinking – Counterfactual Writing*, "[a] basic distinction […] is between disciplines such as psychology, for which counterfactuals constitute an object of study, and disciplines such as historiography that employ counterfactual thinking as a method" (3-4). Historians conduct counterfactual thought experiments in order to model scenarios of how the course of history might have developed had a particular event occurred, not occurred or occurred differently. In contrast, psychologists study the fundamental human capacity for counterfactual thinking, research what causes people to ponder on what might be and might have been, compare and contrast various kinds of counterfactual speculations and investigate the effects of counterfactual thinking on human behaviour and mental health. The intellectual capacity to undo reality, especially when it concerns our own lives, is a basic human ability. As psychologists Neal Roese and James Olson phrase it, "[t]he ability to imagine alternative, or *counterfactual*, versions of actual occurrences appears to be a pervasive, perhaps even essential, feature of our mental lives" ("Counterfactual Thinking" 1, emphasis in the original). Scientists as well as scholars have pointed out that counterfactual thought experiments can be concerned with mundane issues and

short-term effects ("If the weather had been fine, I could have gone for a run"), but that they can also centre upon serious matters and far-reaching consequences ("If I had studied medicine, I would now be able to rescue human lives" or "If my partner had not deserted me ten years ago, we might have married and had children together"). The latter type of counterfactual can have crucial and sustained impact on the person conducting such thought experiments.[6]

As indicated, counterfactuality has been dealt with and employed across many different disciplines. Hence, it does not come as a surprise that not only approaches to but also definitions of the concept differ widely. Applying the literal meaning of the term ("contrary to the facts"), the present study will disregard theories of counterfactuality which include future possibilities. Since it is impossible to determine if a future course of events contradicts reality, future speculations will not be discussed. Instead, the following chapters will focus on counterfactuals which are either restricted to the past or begin in the past and extend until the present: "if I had not worked on my doctoral dissertation yesterday, I would have taken a Yoga lesson" (past counterfactual); "if I had not obtained a master's degree, I would not be working on a thesis now" (present counterfactual). Linguistically, this kind of counterfactuality can be expressed as conditional type III (if circumstances had been different, the course of events would have taken another direction) or as a combination of conditional types III and II (if circumstances had been different, the present situation would not be what it is). A concise definition of this type of counterfactuality, which will form the basis of the following chapters, is provided by Hilary Dannenberg in *Coincidence and Counterfactuality: Plotting Time and Space in Narrative Fiction*:

> A *counterfactual* is a hypothetical alteration in a past sequence of events that changes the events in a *factual* sequence in order to create a different, *counter*factual outcome. The term *antecedent* refers to the event in the past where the alteration is made. The *consequent* (or *outcome*) refers to the result of the alteration. (119, emphases in the original, see also 110-11)[7]

A counterfactual is a thought experiment about an imaginary series of occurrences which at some particular point in the past (antecedent) deviates from the actual series, resulting in a course of actions and a past or present situation (consequent) which differs from

[6] For an overview of definitions of counterfactuality, counterfactual research methods and research in the field of counterfactuality in different disciplines, see the essays collected in *Counterfactual Thinking – Counterfactual Writing* and its "Introduction: England Win" by Birke, Butter and Köppe. The introductory chapter "Counterfactual Thinking: A Critical Overview" in the anthology edited by Roese and Olson provides useful insight into research conducted in social psychology. Dannenberg's *Coincidence and Counterfactuality* also offers an introduction to research into counterfactuals across various disciplines, with a special focus on social psychology and how its concepts can be applied in literary studies (109-15). Dannenberg continues with the role counterfactuality has played in narratology (115-16) and with research that has been conducted into literary genres dependent on counterfactuality (116-18). Some of these issues will feature below in the typology in chapters III.1 and III.2.

[7] If not marked otherwise, references to Dannenberg hereafter will be to her monograph.

reality. As Dannenberg points out, "[a] counterfactual involves a binary pair of events, the *factual* one and its hypothetical other – the *counter*-factual" (63, emphases in the original).[8]

### 2.1.1 Counterfactuality and Fiction

Counterfactuals feature not only as thought experiments conducted by real human beings in everyday life and in scientific or scholarly research; they also play a crucial role in the context of narrative fiction. On a very basic level, counterfactuality and related issues have long been employed to approach the quintessential nature of fiction. After all, every fictional world can be regarded as invented, imaginary, incompatible with reality and, thus, counterfactual.

As early as the fourth century BC, Aristotle famously claimed in his *Poetics* (c. 335 BC) that fiction depicts counterfactual scenarios (of course, Aristotle did not employ this very terminology). According to the *Poetics*, the decisive difference between historiography (the historian) and fiction (the poet) is that the former adheres to facts while the latter goes beyond them and imagines possible scenarios:

> What we have said already makes it further clear that a poet's object is not to tell what actually happened but *what could and would happen* either probably or inevitably. The difference between a historian and a poet is not that one writes in prose and the other in verse – indeed the writings of Herodotus could be put into verse and yet would still be a kind of history, whether written in metre or not. The real difference is this, that one tells what happened and the other *what might happen*. (ch. IX, emphases added)

Aristotle implies that fictional worlds are counterfactual because they portray the world not as it is but as it might be (a notion which, in Aristotle's view, does not detract from the "truth value" of the fictional text, for "poetry tends to give general truths while history gives particular facts" [ibid.]). By arguing that poetry shows "what might happen" (γένοιτο in the Greek original), Aristotle refers to a counterfactual concerned with the present or future rather than with the past. Yet since he attributes a general truth value to poetry and continues a point he has just made about Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in the preceding section (ch. VIII), it can be assumed that he also means to include the past: fiction depicts what might have happened; it is not limited to facts but has the freedom to envision possibilities.

More recent approaches to fictional worlds as alternatives to reality are connected to possible-worlds theories and their application to fiction. Though few of the critics working in this field use the term "counterfactual" to denote the fictional world, they rely on

[8] In the following, "counterfactual" will be contrasted with "factual" but also with "actual" in the sense of "Existing in fact, real; carried out, acted in reality" and, most importantly, of "Opposed to *potential*, *possible*, *ideal*, etc." (*OED*, s.v. "actual, *adj*. and *n*." A.2.a.).

the idea that fictional worlds are possible alternatives to the real one.[9] The actual world of reader and writer is complemented by an infinite number of possible worlds, and the fictional world of a particular narrative is one realisation of these countless conceivable scenarios. As Lubomír Doležel puts it, "[*f*]*ictional worlds are sets of possible states of affairs*" ("Mimesis and Possible Worlds" 482), their "*set* […] *is unlimited and maximally varied*" (483) and they are "*accessible from the actual world*" (484, emphases in the original). Since fictional worlds are "ensembles of nonactualized possible particulars – persons, states, events, and so on" ("Possible Worlds" 787), they "are not imitations or representations of the actual world (*realia*) but sovereign realms of *possibilia*" (788). Constructed by their human creators (789), they depict what might be rather than what is.[10]

In *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*, Marie-Laure Ryan maintains that fictional texts portray alternative possible worlds yet depict them as if they were actual: "we know that the textual universe, as a whole, is an imaginary alternative to our system of reality; but […] we behave as if the actual world of the textual universe were *the* actual world" (23, emphasis in the original). Though readers know that the fictional world is only a possible one, they become immersed in it and, for the time being, pretend that the fictional world is actual. This process requires a "recentering": the writer of fiction "relocates to what is for us a mere possible world, and makes it the center of an alternative system of reality" (24). Ryan's possible-worlds theory of fictionality depends on three different worlds placed side by side: the actual world of writer and readers, the textual actual world of the characters and the textual reference world of the implied speaker (24-25).

Thus, issues of possible worlds and counterfactuality have been addressed to explain the very nature of fiction. Some critics even take it for granted that fictional worlds are by definition counterfactual. Rüdiger Heinze, for instance, begins his essay on "Time Travel and Counterfactuality in Literature and Film" by claiming right in the very first sentence that "[b]roadly speaking, all literary worlds are ontologically counterfactual if we understand counterfactual in its basic sense as 'contrary to fact'" (212). In contrast, the present study argues that the term "counterfactuality" should be avoided in such general contexts precisely because, although fictional worlds are perhaps never entirely identical with the readers' actual world, they do *not* necessarily contradict the facts. Many authors go to great lengths to ensure that the fictional world (Ryan's textual actual world) resembles their own actual world as strongly as possible. Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, for example, is set in London in 1923, i.e. in her readers' here and now, and it includes nothing incompatible with what her audience know about their own world. It is perfectly plausible that a certain Clarissa Dalloway lived in London and hosted an evening party on a June day of that year. Thus, a "possible" fictional world is not automatically incompatible with the real world. Besides, if all fictional texts were counterfactual by definition, the concept would become ubiquitous and lose its value for the discussion of those pieces of fiction

[9] Moving from Aristotle to possible-worlds theory, Schaeffer in his handbook entry on "Fictional vs. Factual Narration" points out: "In terms of possible worlds theories, a fictional world is a counterfactual world" (104).

[10] For a concise introduction to possible-worlds theory and narrative fiction, see Ryan's handbook entry "Possible Worlds."

which are truly "counterfactual" in the sense of Dannenberg's above-quoted definition and the "hypothetical alteration in a past sequence of events" at its very core.

### 2.1.2 Counterfactual Fictional Worlds

While fictional texts are thus not necessarily counterfactual, there are yet a considerable number of literary counterfactuals that are clearly marked as alternatives either to the actual world of the readers or to the "actual," fictional world of the characters. As Dannenberg shows in her monograph on counterfactuality and narrative fiction,[11] such counterfactuals include a variety of different types: on the one hand, fully-fledged fictional worlds fashioned as counterfactual are incompatible with the nature of the writer's and readers' actual world from a specific antecedent onwards; on the other, thought experiments about what might be or might have been different in the fictional world are conducted by characters or narrators within the fictional world.

The first category comprises fully-developed fictional realms that differ from the readers' actual world after a particular incident. This applies to narratives known as alternate histories. These are set in environments, or rather timelines, at odds with the actual course of history in the readers' world. More precisely, they rely on the assumption that, from a specific moment on (antecedent), history moves in a direction incompatible with the readers' knowledge. Based on the same premises as counterfactual thought experiments conducted by historians, alternate histories "propos[e] a hypothetical deviation from real-world history" (Dannenberg 53, see also 126-29). They take their starting point from thought experiments speculating about complex what-if questions, such as "what if Napoleon had successfully conquered Russia?" or "what if John F. Kennedy had not been assassinated?". In a recent book-length study, Kathleen Singles develops ten criteria of a poetics of alternate histories, among them the following crucial characteristic: "[*t*]*he fictional world of an alternate history diverges at a specific point from the normalized narrative of the real past*" (7, 81, emphasis in the original).[12] The antecedent usually concerns a moment of historic importance and changes the overall course of history.

The fictional world resulting from the alteration at the antecedent is counterfactual in its entirety, creating the illusion that the counterfactual world is the actual one. Though readers are fully conscious that the fictional world of the alternate history diverges from their own reality, alternate histories represent their alternative world as if it were factual:

[11] To the best of my knowledge, Dannenberg has been the first to fully digest the usefulness of counterfactual concepts – and particularly of social psychologist research into this area – as a tool for literary studies. In her monograph, she transfers the findings of various researchers to the realm of fictional characters. She relies strongly on the anthology edited by Roese and Olson and models her own definition of counterfactuality, which has been quoted above, on theirs (see "Counterfactual Thinking" [1-2]; Dannenberg [119] also references Tetlock and Belkin as models for her definition; see Tetlock and Belkin [4, 6]). For an introduction to Dannenberg's study of counterfactuals, see her spin-off article "Divergent Plot Patterns."

[12] In addition to her conceptual part, Singles provides seven detailed case studies of alternate histories, among them Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, Fry's *Making History* and Roth's *The Plot Against America*. The three novels will be briefly referred to below.

"the hypothetical status of the counterfactual world is suppressed, and events are articulated as those of the *actual narrative world* for the whole duration of the text" (Dannenberg 54, emphasis in the original). In the fictional world, the counterfactual events are "real" (126-27). The characters in the alternate history are unaware of the counterfactual nature of their world. Thus, alternate histories are dependent on the readers' historical knowledge and their ability to distinguish between the actual course of history (their own world) and the counterfactual one (the fictional world of the alternate history) (Singles 9, 119).[13]

Some alternate histories stick to the premises of realist fiction. Though their alternative courses of events are incompatible with real-world history, they involve nothing that violates the laws of nature. The "actual," fictional world of the narrative is counterfactual to the readers' world, but it is the only world that exists in the narrative. Alternate histories of this type portray the world as it might be or might have been. The Second World War and the Third Reich have proven particularly popular as antecedents,[14] and especially the speculation "what if Hitler had won?" has inspired authors to create alternative worlds of this nature. Both Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) and Robert Harris's *Fatherland* (1992) explore this question. Dick's novel depicts a scenario in which Germany and Japan have won the war and divided the United States into a German Eastern section and a Japanese Western section; Harris's novel is set in an alternative 1960s Berlin which is still ruled by the Nazi party.

Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004) also takes its cue from the period of the Second World War. Roth speculates what might have happened had Franklin D. Roosevelt not been re-elected in the 1940 presidential elections (antecedent). He depicts a counterfactual scenario in which anti-Semitic forces in American society come to the fore (consequent). In his essay "The Story Behind *The Plot Against America*," printed in the *New York Times* some weeks before the publication of the novel, Roth emphasises that he intends his counterfactual world as a plausible course of events in which actual historical figures behave in a credible manner: "I […] had to believe that, in the circumstances I imagine, each might well have done or said something very like what I have him or her doing or saying" (n. pag.). Roth adds a postscript to the novel in which he provides a detailed account of the actual course of events so as to allow his readers to "[track] where historical fact ends and historical imagining begins" (364). Hence, Roth does not mean to violate the rules of what is possible or likely. His comments on the construction of his alternate history are reminiscent of Atwood's on the construction of her historical novel *Alias Grace* (1996). Atwood explains:

> I devised the following set of guidelines for myself: when there was a solid fact, I could not alter it […]. Also, every major element in the book had to be suggested by something in the writing about Grace and her times […]; but, in the parts left unexplained – the gaps left unfilled – I was free to invent. (1515)

[13] Alternate histories have received considerable critical attention in recent years. Diverse, often competing understandings of terms such as *alternate history*, *alternative history* and *uchronia* have been suggested. For an overview, see for instance Singles (14-26).

[14] On this dominance of issues related to the Third Reich, see Rosenfeld.

Both writers mean to depict plausible events. The crucial difference is that, as an author of a historical novel, Atwood remains within the "gaps" left by historical facts whereas, as an author of an alternate history, Roth leaves historical facts behind and pictures a world that extends from these into the future. Therefore, Atwood's historical novel supplements the known facts but does not contradict them; Roth's alternate history in contrast is inconsistent with what is known about the US government from 1940 to 1942, hence its "counterfactual" nature.[15]

Alternate histories start out from history as it has come down to us and portray a world which deviates from this actual course of events. In a similar vein, a particular kind of narrative stems from previously published fictions and depicts fictional worlds which diverge from the earlier ones. Such narratives feature counterfactuals not concerned with actual history but with older, mostly well-known or canonical fiction. Matt Hills fittingly suggests the term "counterfictionality" for narratives which "deliberately [set] out to reconstruct, modify, and merge prior, existent fictional worlds" (440).[16] With reference to Hills, Richard Saint-Gelais proposes a slightly narrower definition of the concept, which he understands "as the alteration of a previous fiction, i.e. the replacement of at least one of its episodes, facts, etc., by other states of affairs" (244). Hence, the counterfictional story "is a text that sets out to modify the diegesis of a former fictional narrative" (ibid.). As with counterfactuality, the present study argues that the prefix "counter" in "counterfictionality" should be taken seriously: rewritings need to be incompatible with, hence contradict their model to justify the label "counterfictional." Narratives which add to the original, for instance by means of a sequel, are not necessarily counterfictional. Counterfictional narratives provide alternative versions of established stories, and they depend on their readers' knowledge of the fictional model just as alternate histories are contingent upon their readers' awareness of history. The resulting narratives create fictional worlds

[15] Alternate histories can also violate the laws of nature. A substantial number of them rely upon time travel to change the actual course of events. In Fry's *Making History*, a doctoral candidate in history and an elderly professor of physics deliberately change history by precluding Hitler's birth. The novel thus features two different worlds, both of which are "real" within the narrative. For an overview of how alternate histories transgress the boundaries of realist fiction, see Dannenberg (128-29); for the relationship between time travel and counterfactuality, see also Heinze. Hellekson even claims "that the alternate history is a subgenre of the genre of science fiction" (*The Alternate History* 3). Tellingly, there are entries on "alternate history" by Hellekson and Duncan in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction* and *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* respectively. However, considering the wide variety of texts subsumed under the category of "alternate history" (there is nothing in Roth's *The Plot Against America*, for instance, that would align the novel with science fiction), it seems more plausible to follow Butter's argument: "Daher erscheint es sinnvoll, *alternate history* als ein eigenständiges Genre zu begreifen, das im Spannungsfeld von Science Fiction und historischem Roman sowie utopischer und dystopischer Literatur angesiedelt ist" (66-67).

[16] Hills focuses on Newman and his recent rewritings of Stoker's *Dracula* and Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

which are in their entirety counterfictional: the previous fictional world provides the "actual" counterpart to the counterfictional one.[17]

Francis H. Little's *The Untold Sequel of The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1890),[18] for instance, an early response to Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), is not a mere sequel to Stevenson's tale but offers new explanations for the mysterious events, thereby contradicting the logic of Stevenson's original. It sets in when Mr Utterson, after he has made Jekyll's metamorphoses into Hyde public, begins to doubt that any drug can transform a human being into somebody else: "I could not bring myself to believe in the conclusions which were arrived at. It did not seem possible for Dr. Jekyll, or any other man, to accomplish what Jekyll claimed to have accomplished" (23). Consequently, Utterson starts to make enquiries, and he finds a secret passage behind Jekyll's cabinet in which he discovers Jekyll's corpse and a manuscript with the "confession" of Edward Hyde. To put it in a nutshell, these "confessions" reveal that Jekyll attempted but never managed to invent the said drug, that Jekyll and Hyde were two separate human beings, and that Hyde was a talented actor who learned to imitate his benefactor Jekyll, whom he ultimately murdered. Thus, Little's sequel creates a counterfictional world which deviates from the world of Stevenson's novella at its very core when Jekyll's experiments fail.

### 2.1.3 Counterfactual Thought Experiments in the Fictional World

In the realist tradition, fiction can ultimately grant actuality to only one possible world. In such "realist ontological hierarchies" (Dannenberg's terminology [e.g. 120]), either the whole fictional world is counterfactual to the readers' world but portrayed as if actual, or the only "actual" world is represented by the fictional world while counterfactuals are imagined as hypothetical scenarios by characters and/or narrators.[19] In other words,

> [l]iterary scholars may use counterfactual patterns to explore the ways in which our notions of "the real" are engendered – a concern they share with historians and social scientists. Or

[17] In "Characters and Their Versions," Margolin distinguishes between intratextual, intertextual and extratextual relationships between original characters and their versions. Some of his "intertextual" versions might be considered instances of "counterfictionality."

[18] *The Untold Sequel* was published anonymously but is generally attributed to Little.

[19] Dannenberg claims that, in the wake of postmodernism, the realist ontological hierarchy in which only one world is depicted as "real" is increasingly replaced by more complex and ambiguous relationships between different worlds. Along a scale of diminishing realism, she distinguishes three kinds of ontological hierarchy: the *realist ontological hierarchy* (see main text); the *semirealist ontological hierarchy* (e.g. in science fiction), in which the parallel existence of several "actual" worlds is logically explained (121); and the *antirealist ontological hierarchy* (e.g. in metafiction), in which there is no apparent causal or hierarchical connection between various "actual" worlds that exist alongside each other (ibid.). In the following, types no. 2 and 3 will be disregarded because the destruction of the ontological hierarchy makes it impossible to designate any world as "contrary to the facts," thereby rendering the label "counterfactual" superfluous.

> they may, like psychologists, be interested in the impact of counterfactuals on our emotions and evaluations. (Birke, Butter and Köppe, "Introduction: England Win" 11)

The editors of *Counterfactual Thinking – Counterfactual Writing* here indicate the difference between counterfactual fictional worlds and counterfactual thought experiments within fictional worlds. In the first case, scholars (and writers, I would argue) behave like historians and social scientists, contemplating what constitutes "the real" and speculating what our world might be like if, for instance, Hitler had won the Second World War; in the latter, they share the interest psychologists take in what counterfactual thinking does to human beings, and they extend this interest to literary characters and narrators.

Thus, counterfactual thought experiments can be indulged in by characters and narrators (if these exist independent of the characters). In this context, Dannenberg suggests the labels "autobiographical counterfactuals" and "narratorial counterfactuals," which involve explicit references by either character ("autobiographical") or narrator ("narratorial") to different directions into which the action might have developed. A similar distinction is made by Jennifer Harding in "Evaluative Stance and Counterfactuals in Language and Literature," a discussion of explicit references to counterfactual scenarios in non-fictional and fictional texts. Harding proposes the collective term "narrative counterfactual" for "a particular scenario that diverges from the state of affairs depicted in fictional reality" (272) and that is referred to either by "individual characters, a narrator, or a blend of the two" (273).[20] While Dannenberg and Harding keep the term "counterfactuality" for references to how the plot might have developed differently, some critics, Robyn Warhol in "Dickens's Narrative Refusals" among them, prefer to talk about "counterfictionality" in these cases. Warhol's understanding of "counterfictionality" differs from that introduced by Hill and Saint-Gelais and employed in the previous chapter, for it denotes the relationship between a fictional world and the hypothetical alternatives it evokes, not the relationship between two different fictional worlds. In the following, the present study will adhere to the terminology used by Dannenberg, Harding and others, who refer to the unrealised alternatives within a fictional world as "counterfactuals," because this terminology foregrounds the perspective of the characters and narrators conducting the thought experiment. Pondering on counterfactuals, i.e. on what might have happened in the fictional world, they believe these alternatives to be contrary to the "facts" of their world (and not to "fiction").

In Dannenberg's "narratorial counterfactuals," third-person narrators speculate about different roads the action might have taken (55, see also 123-24). Dannenberg illustrates

[20] Revised versions of Harding's essays "Evaluative Stance" and "Regret and Counterfactuals" were later incorporated into her monograph *Similes, Puns, and Counterfactuals in Literary Narrative* (104-27, 128-39). In her book-length study, she treats counterfactuals as figures of speech and prefers the term "figurative counterfactual in narrative" to the term "narrative counterfactual" when she refers to figurative counterfactuals that feature within narrative (as opposed to figurative counterfactuals employed by actual people) (119). Her monograph also contains an elaborate definition of "figurative counterfactuals," which include, in addition to "moot scenarios" (which roughly tally with Dannenberg's above-quoted definition of counterfactuality), "invented scenarios" (which "*need not have a specific time orientation*") and "hypothetical future scenarios" (which "*are oriented toward the future*") (118, emphases in the original).