

# LIFE AS A STORY – SELF AS A TEXT

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**Ingrida Vaňková**

**Abstract:** Human action is always mediated symbolically and our symbolic conventions and discursive practices give our actions a specific significance. Because, as selves, we express ourselves meaningfully in utterances and see these expressions in their relationship to certain reasons, desires, beliefs, and other motivating factors, we can think of selves as texts that have textual qualities. An understanding of the problem of personal identity as a sense-making area is what motivates us to discuss the problem of narrative configuration, which mediates between lived experience and discourse, thereby relating the story told to the world of human acting and suffering. If identity is constructed narratively and in corresponding action, then, unavoidably and comprehensively, identity is text.

**Key words:** hermeneutics, narrative, narrative configuration, self, text

“Metaphors can be understood as ways of imagining reality, or portraying in concept, image or symbol something about the nature of what one is trying to understand or express” (Olds, 1992, p. 55). Given that metaphors are ways of describing and making sense of the world, they influence our thinking about ontological and epistemological issues, and metaphors thereby influence our thinking about our existence. The narrative metaphor can be characterised as describing or interpreting the natural world, and the social world, and our individual lives, as a story or a set of stories. When we look through the narrative metaphor, events are understood not in causal terms but in terms of context and plot, in terms of the meaning which follows from the place of each event in relation to the overall pattern of events as they occur over time and in relation to their impact upon the concerns of people who are actors in the drama. The narrative metaphor has powerful explanatory value. “Before the modern era, all peoples of the world, whatever their level of sophistication or lack of it, attempted to answer (these and other) ‘big questions’ (Why is there something and not nothing? Who made the world and why? Why did trouble and sorrow enter the world?) through stories.” (Parry, Doan, 1994, p. 2)

Stories, as narratives, are major features of our lives from a very early age. Children are willing audiences for the stories told from personal knowledge or from the well-established store of written or oral literature. Bettelheim (1975) argues that narratives in the form of fairytales are essential in the development of children because in order to find deeper meaning, one must be able to transcend the narrow confines of a self-centred existence and believe that one will make a significant contribution to life. This belief is mostly a belief in a capacity that may not exist until some future time, but it is nevertheless a capacity that the child can begin to develop through the stories of her culture, stories which posit that a rewarding and good life is possible in spite of the adversities that can be encountered along the way. Bettelheim (1975) argues that a child without fairytales lacks the means to make sense of the problematic nature of life and is not assisted in developing a rich imagination, and MacIntyre similarly argues that depriving children of stories leaves them “unscripted anxious stutterers in their actions and their words and that there is no way to have an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources” (Macintyre, 1981, p. 201).

The importance of this kind of cultural participation is emphasised by Bruner who argues that it is by virtue of our participation in culture that “... meaning is rendered public and shared. Our culturally adapted way of life depends upon shared meanings and shared concepts and depends as well upon shared modes of discourse for negotiating differences in meaning and interpretation” (Bruner, 1990, p. 12). Similarly Polkinghorne argues that “Narrative recognises the meaningfulness of individual experiences by noting how they function as parts in a whole” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 36). MacIntyre

posits "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'" (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 201). And Barthes tells us

The narratives of the world are numberless. Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances – as though any material were fit to receive man's stories. ... Narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, drama, comedy, mime, painting ... stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news item, conversation ... Narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself (Barthes, 1977, p. 251).

In arguing that narrative is primary to the transactions of daily discourse, Ricoeur (1984) defines narrative through emphasis on the activity of making a synthesis or a 'grasping together' of the heterogeneous within language. To connect events and actions over time in a manner that reveals their significance in relation to each other, to their contexts, and to a valued endpoint, is to employ the transformational effect of plot. When we provide a meaningful constellation for a set of events, we call upon the human capacity for emplotment. Bruner uses the term 'hermeneutic composability' for the revealing effect of plot: "parts and wholes in a narrative rely on each other for their viability. This is true both for the construction and the comprehension of narratives" (Bruner, 1981, p. 150). Our capacity for hermeneutic composition is pivotal to how we reach an understanding of our lives and action. Paul Ricoeur provides us with an account that not only explains how plot is implicit in our understandings of everyday action, but also explains how an implicit plot can be opened up to conscious awareness through being articulated, and how – once articulated as a particular configuration – plot is available to be reconfigured, just as a person's life can become available for reconsideration and re-authoring. Plots provide relational significance for the parts and wholes through which and within which we live.

According to Paul Ricoeur, an understanding of the objects of our experiences is only possible if we are able to interrupt our experiences of them in order to understand the significance of the objects experienced as well as the significance of our experiences. Such understanding, in turn, requires that reality lends itself to signification and that we do, in fact, relate to the real by signifying it, that is, by employing language. The linguistic signification of reality sets us apart from the objects of our experiences: this is the moment of interruption, which Ricoeur calls *distantiation* – that makes hermeneutic understanding possible. *Distantiation* means that our understanding of objects of experience must proceed through the mediations of language. This involves both explanatory and interpretive procedures which are away from the ground of experience. Attempting to understand the objects of one's experience leads invariably to reflection upon oneself and upon one's own participation with those objects.

Understanding of the problem of personal identity as a sense-making area is what motivates Ricoeur's discussion of narrative configuration. The operation of configuration is a creative variant of the process of hermeneutic understanding. As such it provides a model of unification that accounts for the creativity involved in making sense of the various aspects of a person's life. It is a picture of an entity whose constitution is entirely mediated by the signs, symbols, texts, traditions, practices, and other significant elements which together make up the various cultures in which people live.

Narrative configuration or emplotment has been a prominent concept in much of Paul Ricoeur's work since it saw its initial development in the three volumes of his *Time and Narrative*, where Ricoeur elaborated his particular theory of narrative from the perspective of human time (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 114). In *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur brings to light the role configuration plays in the constitution of the self at the level of personal identity. In his view, configuration provides us with a model of interconnection that characterizes aptly both the form and formation of human selfhood and of human experience in general. As such, it allows us to think of the self on the model of the text, specifically, the narrative text. For Ricoeur contends that human experience exhibits a "virtual narrativity which constitutes a genuine demand for narrative" (Wood, 1991, p. 29.) Now I will look at Ricoeur's application of the model of configuration to human selfhood, concentrating here on explaining and clarifying Ricoeur's views concerning configuration and the self. Ricoeur's development of narrative configuration is guided by Aristotle's idea of *muthos*, or emplotment. As Aristotle argues in *Poetics*,

*muthos* denotes the poetic act involved in the composition of the tragic poem (Ricoeur, 1984, p.31). By focusing on the configurational operation constitutive of emplotment, and on the model of interconnection it gives rise to Ricoeur argues that the scope of Aristotelian emplotment should be extended beyond the bounds of the tragic poem to every composition that can be called a narrative (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 35). This is important because it prefigures the extension of this model of interconnection from works of written discourse to an understanding of the structure of personal identity and the unity of human lives. This extension lends coherence to the very idea of a hermeneutics of the self conceived in Ricoeurian terms, for his hermeneutic methodology is based on the model of the text. John W. Van Den Hengel notes, and as is made clear by Ricoeur in various essays, since Ricoeur's hermeneutics is one based on the problems involved with the interpretation of the text and is not strictly speaking a hermeneutics of the written text, we can think of the notion of the text, or of textuality, as having a wide variety of applications. David Pellauer writes, "text becomes a paradigm for any object of hermeneutical inquiry... Taking it to its limit, the entirety of human existence becomes a text to be interpreted." (Pellauer, 1979, p.111). Because, as selves, we express ourselves meaningfully in utterances and deeds, and see these expressions in their relationship to certain reasons, desires, beliefs, and other motivating factors, we can think of selves as texts that have textual qualities.

The claim in *Oneself as Another* which concerns us here is that the key textual quality is one that selves share with narrative texts, namely, the configurational unity between the various characters, actions, events, and so forth, which help to advance the story in the case of the narrative text, and that between the many elements that together make up a human life. Selves are seen as narrators who shape personal identity narratively. Furthermore, to understand who these selves are is also to interpret them in light of factors as plots and characters of narrative texts.

Ricoeur characterizes emplotment or configuration both as "the organization of the events" (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 33), which is Aristotle's understanding of the term, and as "plot" understood as a well-constructed story (Wood, 1991, p. 21). The latter interpretation refers to the structure of a story. The organization of events, according to Ricoeur, should not be thought of merely as a static structure: rather, the primary sense of organization at play here is an active one, that of an integrating operation, the process of narrating, rather than, or in addition to, the organization that is the narrative. Narrating, though, is not merely an organizational activity. It is also a mimetic activity, taking as its subject matter the world of lived human experience (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 34). The events that get organised into a plot are tied together by the general theme of human acting and suffering. To understand emplotment, says Ricoeur, is to understand it in both of its facets, as the organization of the events (*muthos*), and as the imitation of action (*mimesis*), that is "the active process of imitating or representing something" (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 33).

Ricoeur refers to the first level of our capacity for emplotment as 'mimesis1'. At this level, events are not experienced consciously as narrative, but they are prefigured in narrative form. At the level of *mimesis1*, we can speak of "the pre-comprehension or implicit understanding which we have of human action – of the way in which everyday activity orders past, present, and future in relation to each other. Such an understanding recognises, in action itself, temporal structures which prefigure narration" (Wood, 1991, p. 23). Ricoeur makes the same point by saying "the composition of the plot is grounded in a pre-understanding of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal character" (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 54). He characterises actions as goal directed and intentional so when we act or observe action our experience is already that of a prefigured narrative. David Carr argues, that "no elements enter our experience un-storied or un-narrativized" (Carr, 1986, p. 16).

Meaning, as the relational significance revealed by plot, is opened up through the act of configuration, which is referred to by Ricoeur as 'mimesis2'. If we configure a prefigured life narrative, we answer questions about what is happening or what has been happening in our life. To put this act in Ricoeur's terms, when we configure a life, we transform "the events into a story. This configurational act consists of 'grasping together' the detailed actions or what I have called the story's incidents. It draws from this manifold of events the unity of one temporal whole" (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 66). A configured

life, a narrativised life, exhibits concordant discordance, through the work of the productive imagination.

Refiguration (mimesis<sup>3</sup>) leads to the capacity to forge new narratives and therefore new ways of acting in the world. “Mimesis<sup>3</sup> marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader; the intersection, therefore, of the world configured by the poem and the world wherein real action occurs and unfolds its specific temporality” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 72). When we encounter a text, we encounter a configuration that can lead us to re-understand, to reconfigure, our prior understanding of who and where we are. Whereas an act of configuration produces a narrativised account of where we are or where we have been, and provides some indication of where we might go, re-figuration leads to the question of where to go next in terms of action and understanding.

Plot, as the organization of events, is characterized by Ricoeur as a threefold mediation or “synthesis of heterogeneous elements” (Wood, 1991, p. 21). First, plot integrates a number of different incidents in a story, mediating between them and the narrative as a unified, intelligible whole. Through this the plot makes that which is multiple one. Second, plots are totalities made up of a number of discordant elements. However, they are characterized by a primacy of concordance over discordance. The demand for concordance places interpretive demands on us as we follow stories. Following a story, one is “guided by expectations concerning the outcome of the story” (Wood, 1991, p. 21). As the story unfolds, the reader inevitably comes across such surprising incidents as reversals of fortune and unforeseen discoveries which are often discordant in light of the tale that preceded their disclosure. Their discordant elements force the reader to readjust his or her expectations concerning the story’s conclusion until these expectations and the outcome of the story coincide. The composition of a plot always tends towards a unification of the many disparate events that make up a story such that as the story is told, retold, or received by a reader or listener, the unexpected and discordant aspects of these events become less captivating than does the way that each of them leads towards and is necessary for the narrative’s conclusion (Wood, 1991, p. 22). The third synthesis of the plot is one of two temporalities (Wood, 1991, p. 22). On the one hand, plots capture the time of succession, which is open and whose passage can be thought of as infinite. The events recounted can be thought of in terms of their sequential unfolding. However, stories need not be recounted along the lines of the serial unfolding of their constituent events. The narrative ordering of occurrences often employ such devices as analepses and prolepses, or flashbacks and flashes toward. This is just to say that though we may think of the events recounted in terms of their seriality, they need not be recounted in that fashion. An event recounted may be followed by a flashback to some set of prior events not as yet recounted. This may serve to lift some of the mystery surrounding the initially recounted event, or perhaps to deepen it. Neither the order in which the events occurred, nor that in which they were recounted, is alterable. To change these aspects would change the text significantly, for the way in which they work together helps determine the way the text affects its readers, which is itself a key component of the text. Narrative configurations, then, also display what Ricoeur calls the time of configuration (Wood, 1991, p. 22), an ideal time which is characterized by the integration, culmination, and ultimate closure of the events that make up a story. In this regard, the story is a temporal totality. In bringing a story together, a configuration is drawn out of a succession and the time of the story – its temporal identity- is “something that endures and remains across that which passes and flows away” (Wood, 1991, p. 22).

Emplotment confers a certain necessity on events which were once disparate or contingent occurrences. Ricoeur calls this “narrative necessity” (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 142). Configuration “inverts the effect of contingency, in the sense of that which could have happened differently or which might not have happened at all, by incorporating it in some way into the effect of necessity or probability exerted by the configuring act” (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 142). Configuration incorporates events, as mere occurrences which are sometimes surprising or unexpected, into integral parts of the story being told. We commonly experience this transformation of surprising occurrences into narratively necessary events when we read stories. As stories unfold, we not only continually readjust our expectations concerning their outcomes as we go along, but we also look back, so to speak, on the events that have followed them as well as with those that preceded them. Narrative events, then, are more than mere happenings. They contribute to the progress of the story of which they are a part and they further our understanding of both that story’s beginning as well as its conclusion (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 65).

To sum up so far, narrative configuration is an ideal structure. Governed by a demand for concordance and closure, configuration integrates a variety of disparate elements forming a temporal totality. Within the context of the narrative, these various elements play necessary roles. They help to explain each other, lending plausibility both to the events that are recounted throughout the course of the narrative as well as to the plot itself.

Even in this barest of sketches there appears to be serious point of disanalogy between conventional, literary narratives and the unfolding of human lives, already giving us reason to question Ricoeur's proposed account of the latter in terms of the former. The most troubling incongruity is that literary narratives display a degree of concordance and closure that human lives could never attain. This is because narratives, as Aristotle brought to our attention, have a beginning, middle, and an end. While they are lived, lives clearly do not have more than an abstractly anticipated end. Birth may be thought to demarcate clearly the beginning of people's life-stories, but this is not unproblematic. In fact, it seems the clarity of this demarcation is the only point in favour of thinking of birth as analogous to a narrative beginning, and to hold that it does forces into the lived narrative middle many years that are lost to memory, where perhaps only a few scattered incidents can be recalled, and these somewhat cloudily.

In addition to the lack of closure, human lives do not display the concordance of literary narratives, and it is difficult to see how the events that punctuate a life could display anything like the necessity of narrative events. For one, such narrative necessity is a function of, and depends upon, the closure of the narrative. Moreover, narrative events are the result of calculated authorship whereas lived events, especially those of the surprising variety, are quite often random, unplanned, and genuinely unexpected from the point of view of everyone involved. Any necessity attributed to such lived events would have to be attributed to them after their occurrence, and would involve the retrospective reinterpretation of one's past, as well as an attempt to situate this reinterpretation in relation to an anticipated, though certainly not necessary, future or end. This type of reinterpretation, while similar to that needed when one comes across a surprising occurrence in a story, appears to differ in one important respect. In the case of the reinterpretation of lived experience, it looks like one is altering that experience by imputing an order where none existed. The reinterpretation involved in reading, on the other hand, need not be thought of as an alternation. One might think it to be part of the author's calculations. The objection, then, is basically that the reinterpretation of lived events is different than that involved in reading, and the difference stems from significant structural and existential dissimilarities between lives and stories.

This objection, however, is premature and not without its own problems. To maintain the posited distinction between literary narratives and those that Ricoeur holds are lived, one would either have to grant to authors of literary narratives an unimaginable omniscience or hold an overly narrow and deterministic view of the effectiveness of their stories. The first option is unimaginable because it amounts to holding that authors can foresee and calculate the wide variety of effects their stories will have on their readers. For Ricoeur, this would have the author imagining and calculating the potentially infinite number of combinations of life-experiences and other such factors which would colour the interpretive perspectives of, and therefore the interpretations open to, his readers. This is clearly unreasonable.

The second option, acknowledging the limitations of the foresight of even the most skilled authors, would involve limiting severely the interpretive scope of readers, holding that those possible interpretations that do violence to the integrity of the story. On this view, misinterpretations might be construed as incorrect and therefore unjustified alterations of the authorially intended configuration of the story. Here, however, the language of correct versus incorrect, and of the less stringent sounding justified versus unjustified, understandings of stories gives us reason to be suspicious. When the appropriate yardstick is taken beyond the events recounted in the story and located in the intentions of the author, this language marks the imposition of epistemic demands on the reader that, in most cases, cannot be met. Further, the epistemology of right or wrong that it implies seems misplaced in the context of literary interpretation. A reader's primary concern is not with whether or not his interpretation measures up to the author's intentions. Rather, he is trying to understand what is going on, to make sense of the various events that make up the story. Given that in most instances he would

not be able to compare his reading with that of the author, the task of trying to make sense seems quite enough.

The authorial intention debate aside, this objection rests upon a superficial distinction between authors and readers, comparing the retrospective narrative ordering of lived events to reading and contrasting the resultant order with that created by literary authors. The distinction is superficial because the central activity performed by readers and that exercised by authors are in fact one and the same: narrative configuration. This operation is central to the narrative picture of the self. Like authors and readers, selves use configuration in order to make sense of themselves and of their lives. The objection this distinction grounds is premature because it is aimed only at a strict account of the structure of personal identity in terms of configuration qua narrative structure. However, structure is secondary to the activity that produces it. For Ricoeur narrative is secondary to narrating.

Narrating is the operational dimension of configuration. It involves the creative exercise of hermeneutic understanding in a sense-making problematic. Governed by the demand for concordance and closure that is characteristic of narratives, it involves the selective ordering of a variety of elements drawn from the sphere of human action into a concordant whole. It is the source of semantic innovation, that is, new meaning effects which result from novel organizations of events. Authors employ this ability in the creation of their narratives. Readers use it as well; however they use it not to create plots, but rather to understand them. What readers are able to create with configuration is the meaning of a story, which is both a function of the organization internal to the plot as well as a product of the relation between the plot and the lived experience of the reader. Narrative configuration, as actively employed by readers, mediates between lived experience and discourse, thereby relating the story told to the world of human acting and suffering (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 31).

Narrative and narrating are not just grounded in an understanding of the dynamics of human action and interaction. Narrative configuration also makes possible potential changes in the practical world; that is, it also stands in a relationship of transformation with respect to the practical sphere (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 55). It clarifies the relationships between action, agents, goals, motives, circumstances, human well-being and suffering- a clarification that presupposes an understanding of the dynamics and significance of human interaction. Insofar as it is such a clarification, it also adds to this understanding, making possible new understandings of human experience as well as transformation of human practices. This is because configuration, as an instance of hermeneutic understanding, culminates in the reflective act of appropriation where one applies what one comes to understand to his own life. In the context of reading a text, Ricoeur speaks of this moment of appropriation as a fusion of the horizons of the text with those of the reader. This expression acknowledges that the understanding of texts enriches reader's understandings of themselves and can thereby effect their actions. At the same time it acknowledges that what readers take from an encounter with a text is influenced strongly by what they brought to it.

In this we can see an indirect relation between narrative and the self. The narrating required to write and read stories provides one with a greater understanding of the practical world. Texts provide us with examples with thought experiments that test the pragmatic and moral consequences of certain courses of action (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 164). We can learn from these examples and adjust our own actions accordingly. The proper appropriation of the meanings of texts, however, involves a more direct relation between narrative and the self. Properly carried out, appropriation involves the dialectical interplay of one's understanding of the text and one's understanding of oneself. This self-understanding, on Ricoeur's view, takes form of narrative understanding where one's self is the text.

The understanding of one's self and one's past as well as the changes that one might wish to bring about in one's future, are products of the exercise of narrative configuration. In the same way that authors and readers use configuration to make sense of the various elements of literary texts, people throughout the ordinary course of their lives find themselves having to make sense of their experiences. Selves each "have a history, are their own history" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 113), and are akin to readers of stories in their attempts to understand this aspect of themselves. Unlike readers, and more like authors, selves also possess a measure of control over their futures, and therefore face a configurational problem similar to that which faces authors.

While Ricoeur contends that here is a genuine demand for narrative in the structure of human experience and of personal identity (Wood, 1991, p. 29), his position is not one that is free from criticism. One common criticism, says Ricoeur, goes as follows: “stories are recounted and not lived; life is lived and not recounted” (Wood, 1991, p. 20). This view sees a disjunction between living and narrating, and considers the two activities to be incompatible, if not mutually exclusive. As such, not only do we not structure our lives and personal identities in a narrative fashion, but we could not do so even if we wished to. If this objection holds, then either Ricoeur is wrong to think that there is a genuine demand for narrative structuring in our lives, or this demand is actual but we are nevertheless left in a position from which we are unable to satisfy it. Ricoeur’s response to this objection is that we are able to use configuration to add structure to our lives but that we might not need to do so.

Ricoeur counters this objection by arguing for the complementarity of living and configuration. For one thing, he reminds us that narratives take as their subject matter human acting and suffering. Stories tell about human lives. Second, he notes that stories serve as thought experiments which can teach us about the consequences of certain courses of action. Some stories are cautionary tales which warn us against pursuing certain goals. There are also inspirational stories which can move people to act. As such, stories have the power to influence human lives.

In addition, Ricoeur argues that there is a sense in which we can say that lives are told- not that stories tell about life, but that life is lived as a story that is told. If this were the case, then we could see why there would be a genuine demand for configuration in human lives. Ricoeur, however, strengthens his contention that there is this genuine demand when he tells us that without interpretation a life can be no more than a biological phenomenon (Wood, 1991, p. 27-28). Given the context of this claim, it would be safe to think that the form of interpretation that is implied here is that involved in narrative configuration. It would appear, then, that Ricoeur is claiming that not only is there a genuine need for narrative in human affairs, but that it is a need shared by all humans, for narrative configuration is what is required to elevate human life above the level of physical things and biological organisms. That this is the case, however, is not what Ricoeur establishes in his arguments for the complementarity of human life and narrative.

Ricoeur’s arguments do not make the case that there is in fact a genuine and universal need for narrative configuration in human life, that is, that human life really is not distinctively human unless it is interpreted narratively. At best what his arguments establish is that human lives are interpretable. In support of this he reminds us of the semantics of action in the structure of human action and suffering, which confers meaning on our actions and lets us distinguish them from mere physical movement or behaviour. He also points to “the symbolic resources of the practical field” (Wood, 1991, p. 28), such as specific signs, rules, and norms, which together serve as a context of description for our actions. Human action is always mediated symbolically, and our symbolic conventions and discursive practices give our actions a specific significance (Wood, 1991, p. 29). In light of these considerations it makes sense to think of human life as a potential story possessing a “pre-narrative quality” (Wood, 1991, p. 29) insofar as it is made of meaningful actions and is situated within a meaningful context.

If we are able to recognise, articulate, critically reflect upon, and if necessary, add to or amend, the plots, the stories, and the genres in which we are tangled, then we have the potential to become more like authors in the construction of our identities, more like protagonists in our own lives, and less like characters in the narrative work of an other. This potential depends not only upon clarification and emplotment but also upon the taking of action, for if our authorship is to be fully realised, then we have to act in ways that reflect and express our preferred sense of story and in ways that reflect and express the projects, plans, and commitments that matter to us: the future that we care about and have identified with. Ricoeur’s arguments make a strong case against the view that narrating and living are mutually exclusive activities. He highlights many areas in which they are complementary and brings to our attention certain circumstances in which configuration is useful in helping us to make sense of certain events in our lives.

Acting in accordance with the identity that is our story, not only in the sense of acting in character but also in the sense of working to produce the outcomes upon which our stories of identity are projected, matters because identity is not experienced unless it is expressed. Without expression, our identity can

remain in a prefigured, shadowy form – a form which influences our actions without giving us the resources to explain those actions. Parry and Doan make a strong and general claim about the connection between expression and experience when they write: “If narrative is truly fundamental to the way humans organize and give meaning to experience (then) an event only becomes an experience by being narrated” (Parry, Doan, 1994, p. 22). Their point alerts us to the ways in which sense-making, through narration, changes the nature of our being-in-the-world, by the deepening that accompanies employment.

When we express a view of our identity through action, we therefore bring a reflection of the configuration – the shape – which lies at the heart of the narrative of our identity, into a set of actions over time that come to constitute who we are. A consequence of the points already made is that if identity is constructed narratively and in corresponding action, then identity is unavoidably and comprehensively text.

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## Author

Mgr. Ingrida Vaňková, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Natural Sciences and Humanities, Prešov University in Prešov, Slovakia, e-mail: ingrida.vankova@centrum.sk