



Coincidences in the Novel

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If you want to know how a novel works, look at how it uses coincidence.

It might sound paradoxical to talk of novelist's 'using coincidence', for often a reliance on coincidence is declared to be a weakness – even a fatal weakness – of a novel. Here is a notorious example.

In 2008, Sebastian Barry won the Costa Book of the Year prize for his novel *The Secret Scripture*. Shortly after the winner was announced and the prize presented, the Chair of the Costa judges took the unusual step of announcing that *The Secret Scripture* had won despite its ending.

“The novelist Sebastian Barry was named the winner of the Costa Book of the Year award last night in spite of writing a novel that was, according to the judges “flawed in many ways”. ...

*Matthew Parris, the columnist and chair of the judges, said the competition between Barry and Adam Foulds, who nearly claimed the prize for his poetic works, *The Broken Word*, was “extraordinarily close”. Parris said the judges agreed to give the prize to Barry’s book despite its less than perfect ending.*

*“It was an extraordinarily close finish among the judges,” said Parris. “There was huge support for both. The feeling among judges was that there was a lot wrong with it [*The Secret Scripture*]. It was flawed in many ways, almost no one liked its ending. For some, this was fatal. I don’t think the ending works, nobody thought the ending worked. But there was a feeling among the judges that many great works of literature are also flawed.”*

The Independent, January 28, 2009

What so irked the judges that they wanted to attach this caveat to their decision? It was a coincidence.

The novel consists of two interleaved, first-person narratives. One of the narrators is Roseanna McNulty, a woman nearly a hundred years old, who has been an in-patient in an Irish ‘mental hospital’ for half a century. The other is the psychiatrist in charge of her case, Dr Greene, who is intrigued by her history and begins digging in to her past.

Roseanna’s story is also a small history of Ireland in the early decades of the twentieth century. Brought up a Protestant, she has incurred the enmity of the local priest, the grim and unyielding Father Gaunt. He (wrongly) believes that she has been having an extra-marital affair and persuades her husband to have their marriage annulled. Ostracised by her rural community, she lives as a kind of hermit. Yet she becomes pregnant – by her former husband’s brother, as it happens - and has a child, who is taken away from her. The priest ensures that she is branded a ‘nymphomaniac’, sectioned, and confined in the mental hospital.

Dr Grene’s increasingly obsessive research take him to England, to a Catholic orphanage where, he has found, Roseanna’s child ended up. The child was a boy and was given up for adoption. The orphanage still has the records. The adoptive parents were Mr and Mrs Grene, of Padstow, Cornwall. Dr Grene is, in fact, Roseanna’s son.

There is a little machinery to explain this breath-taking coincidence. The caretaker at the hospital turns out to have been the son of the man with whom Roseanna was supposed to have had an affair. He has sought her

out, watched over her, and tried to bring her and Dr Grene together. But still ...

Sebastian Barry has himself referred to it as a 'Dickensian ending'.

Here, indeed, is a great work of literature that similarly plumped for a coincidence to provide a sense of an ending.

It is the revised ending that Charles Dickens wrote for *Great Expectations*, after his friend, Bulwer Lytton, told him that his readers would resent the ending that he first wrote – in which Pip encounters Estella, now married to a Shropshire doctor, in the street in London.

In the 'improved' version, Pip returns to Kent to see Joe and Biddy, now married with children. In the evening, he walks to the ruined Satis House, where he once visited Miss Havisham.

“A cold silvery mist had veiled the afternoon, and the moon was not yet up to scatter it. But, the stars were shining beyond the mist, and the moon was coming, and the evening was not dark. I could trace out where every part of the old house had been, and where the brewery had been, and where the gates, and where the casks. I had done so, and was looking along the desolate garden walk, when I beheld a solitary figure in it.

The figure showed itself aware of me, as I advanced. It had been moving towards me, but it stood still. As I drew nearer, I saw it to be the figure of a woman. As I drew nearer yet, it was about to turn away, when it stopped, and let me come up with it. Then, it faltered, as if much surprised, and uttered my name, and I cried out,—

“Estella!”

Charles Dickens, Great Expectations, Ch. LIX

Dickens left his own acknowledgement of the sheer unlikeliness of this encounter.

“We sat down on a bench that was near, and I said, “After so many years, it is strange that we should thus meet again, Estella, here where our first meeting was! Do you often come back?”

“I have never been here since.”

“Nor I.”

Charles Dickens, Great Expectations, Ch. LIX

It is as if Dickens is signalling: you want this happy meeting – see how improbable it has to be.

In London, of course, all encounters are possible – perhaps probable. Here is Maggie, arguably the central character in Henry James's *The Golden Bowl*, explaining to her (in fact adulterous) husband, Prince Amerigo, how she has detected his relationship with her father's young wife, Charlotte. By chance, she has bought a golden bowl that the Prince and Charlotte once rejected, for being flawed. The shopkeeper has visited her home to tell her that he has overcharged her, seen photographs of the Prince and Charlotte, and told Maggie that he has seen them together. The bowl that is the novel's central symbol is the embodiment of coincidence.

Here the Prince speaks:

“I agree with you that the coincidence is extraordinary—the sort of thing that happens mainly in novels and plays. But I don't see, you must let me say, the importance or the connexion—”

“Of my having made the purchase where you failed of it?” She had quickly taken him up; but she had, with her eyes on him once more, another drop into the order of her thoughts, to which, through whatever he might say, she was still adhering. “It's not my having gone into the place, at the end of four years, that makes the strangeness of the coincidence; for don't such chances as that, in London, easily occur?”

Henry James, The Golden Bowl (1904), XXXIV

Geography often has something to do with coincidence in fiction.

When the word first starts being used in English, it means occupying the same space. Only later, in the late 17th century, does it mean 'A notable concurrence of events or circumstances having no apparent causal connection': OED records the first use as Sir Thomas Browne in 1682.

When coincidences happen outside London, they are likely to be less credible.

Which incontrovertibly great novel contains the most absurd coincidence?

There are plenty of candidates, but I offer this one.

The heroine of *Jane Eyre*, discovering at the altar that Mr Rochester is already married, flees in despair from Thornfield, travelling blindly across England until her money runs out, then wandering through unknown country until she collapses, exhausted, at the doorstep of an isolated house.

"You are not, perhaps, aware that I am your namesake?—that I was christened St. John Eyre Rivers?"

"No, indeed! I remember now seeing the letter E. comprised in your initials written in books you have at different times lent me; but I never asked for what name it stood. But what then? Surely—"

I stopped: I could not trust myself to entertain, much less to express, the thought that rushed upon me—that embodied itself,—that, in a second, stood out a strong, solid probability. Circumstances knit themselves, fitted themselves, shot into order: the chain that had been lying hitherto a formless lump of links was drawn out straight,—every ring was perfect, the connection complete. I knew, by instinct, how the matter stood, before St. John had said another word; but I cannot expect the reader to have the same intuitive perception, so I must repeat his explanation.'

Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre (1847), Vol. III, Ch. VII

Later, on the brink of accepting that she must marry the coldly virtuous St John Rivers, she seems to hear a voice, Rochester's voice, calling to her. She returns to him. As he tells the story of the fire that has destroyed Thornfield and the death of his wife, he tells Jane that he called out to her.

'Reader, it was on Monday night—near midnight—that I too had received the mysterious summons: those were the very words by which I replied to it. I listened to Mr. Rochester's narrative, but made no disclosure in return. The coincidence struck me as too awful and inexplicable to be communicated or discussed. If I told anything, my tale would be such as must necessarily make a profound impression on the mind of my hearer: and that mind, yet from its sufferings too prone to gloom, needed not the deeper shade of the supernatural. I kept these things then, and pondered them in my heart.'

Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre, Vol. III, Ch. XI

Characteristically, Jane tells the reader, in confidence, but does not tell Mr Rochester. The very inexplicability of this 'coincidence' is evidence of its significance – and of the spiritual as well as physical bond between her and him. But we have already been prepared for this discovery by another fervent declaration by the heroine.

'Presentiments are strange things! and so are sympathies; and so are signs; and the three combined make one mystery to which humanity has not yet found the key. I never laughed at presentiments in my life, because I have had strange ones of my own. Sympathies, I believe, exist (for instance, between far-distant, long-absent, wholly estranged relatives asserting, notwithstanding their alienation, the unity of the source to which each traces his origin) whose workings baffle mortal comprehension. And signs, for aught we know, may be but the sympathies of Nature with man.'

Jane Eyre Vol. II, Ch. VI

With the very force of her convictions, Charlotte Brontë's narrator may dare us to disbelieve what she is telling.

Yet hers is but one way of making sense of the coincidences on which all Victorian novels seem to turn. Here is a very different kind of coincidence – far-fetched in its own way – from a novelist who is famous for her ‘realism’ – her obedience to laws of probability: George Eliot.

You won’t get any mystical ‘presentiments’ in *Middlemarch*, the great novel of ordinary men and women muddling their ways through life. Yet even here, the guiding hand of coincidence is required.

Deep in the novel, the shady, boozy John Raffles turns up to try to squeeze some money out of his stepson, Joshua Rigg, who has just inherited a small fortune from the rich miser Peter Featherstone, whose illegitimate son he is. Rigg, who was beaten by Raffles when he was a boy, is anything but welcoming – but, while threatening him if he ever comes again, he agrees to give him one sovereign and a drop of brandy.

‘He jerked forward the flask and Rigg went to a fine old oaken bureau with his keys. But Raffles had reminded himself by his movement with the flask that it had become dangerously loose from its leather covering, and catching sight of a folded paper which had fallen within the fender, he took it up and shoved it under the leather so as to make the glass firm.

He played this part now with as much spirit as if his journey had been entirely successful, resorting at frequent intervals to his flask. The paper with which he had wedged it was a letter signed Nicholas Bulstrode, but Raffles was not likely to disturb it from its present useful position.

George Eliot, Middlemarch (1871-2), Ch. XLI

There. Eliot has placed her note. It just happens to be to hand at just the moment when it is needed for another purpose. Eliot has prepared us for this essential bit of business a little earlier, at the opening of the chapter. She tells us,

‘As the stone which has been kicked by generations of clowns may come by curious little links of effect under the eyes of a scholar, through whose labors it may at last fix the date of invasions and unlock religions, a bit of ink and paper which has long been an innocent wrapping or stop-gap may at last be laid open under the one pair of eyes which have knowledge enough to turn it into the opening of a catastrophe. To Uriel watching the progress of planetary history from the sun, the one result would be just as much of a coincidence as the other.’

Sure enough, the next time Raffles appears in the novel, it is to accost the aforementioned Nicholas Bulstrode, the puritanical banker. Raffles has been triggered, as we might say. He has been led by the letter to find Bulstrode, for he knows the secrets of his past: that he concealed from the rich, elderly widow, Mrs Dunkirk, whom he married, years earlier, that her daughter was still alive – thus ensuring that, when she died, he would inherit all her money.

“I did not indeed expect to see you in this remote country place.”

“Well, it belongs to a stepson of mine,” said Raffles, adjusting himself in a swaggering attitude. “I came to see him here before. I’m not so surprised at seeing you, old fellow, because I picked up a letter—what you may call a providential thing. It’s uncommonly fortunate I met you, though; for I don’t care about seeing my stepson: he’s not affectionate, and his poor mother’s gone now. To tell the truth, I came out of love to you, Nick: I came to get your address, for—look here!” Raffles drew a crumpled paper from his pocket.’

Middlemarch, Ch. LIII

Raffles, of course, will proceed to blackmail Bulstrode. The intrusion of Bulstrode’s past into the novel is essential (the daughter he disinherited was the mother of Ladislaw, whom Dorothea loves). It is managed by coincidence.

Coincidence can be a novelist’s only way of jolting a plot.

When it comes to unlikeliness, Forster's *Howards End* is a strong contender. At the wedding reception of Evie Wilcox, Leonard Bast and Jacky arrive with Margaret Schlegel's sister, Helen. Jacky becomes drunk. Henry Wilcox, the wealthy widower to whom Margaret is now engaged, becomes twitchy about her presence.

"She's overtired," Margaret whispered.

"She's something else," said Henry. "This won't do. I can't have her in my garden in this state."

"Is she—" Margaret hesitated to add "drunk." Now that she was going to marry him, he had grown particular. He discountenanced risqué conversations now.

Henry went up to the woman. She raised her face, which gleamed in the twilight like a puff-ball.

"Madam, you will be more comfortable at the hotel," he said sharply.

Jacky replied: "If it isn't Hen!"

"Ne crois pas que le mari lui ressemble," apologised Margaret. "Il est tout à fait différent."

"Henry!" she repeated, quite distinctly.

Mr. Wilcox was much annoyed. "I congratulate you on your proteges," he remarked.

"Hen, don't go. You do love me, dear, don't you?"

E.M. Forster, Howards End (1910), Ch. XXVI

A first-time reader is likely to take as long as the unworldly Margaret to catch on to the truth. Henry Wilcox is not grumpy about the presence of a vulgar drunk; like Eliot's Bulstrode, he is being made to confront his past. Margaret may be in her 30s, and intellectually sophisticated, but she is sexually innocent – as her husband to be does not comprehend.

'Margaret began to grow frightened. "I don't know what it is all about," she said. "Let's come in."

But he thought she was acting. He thought he was trapped. He saw his whole life crumbling. "Don't you indeed?" he said biting. "I do. Allow me to congratulate you on the success of your plan."

"This is Helen's plan, not mine."

"I now understand your interest in the Basts. Very well thought out. I am amused at your caution, Margaret. You are quite right—it was necessary. I am a man, and have lived a man's past. I have the honour to release you from your engagement."

Still she could not understand. She knew of life's seamy side as a theory; she could not grasp it as a fact. More words from Jacky were necessary—words unequivocal, un denied.'

E.M. Forster, Howards End Ch. XXVI

Forster, as if in politeness to his heroine, does not tell us what Jacky actually says. Out of all the possible candidates in the wide world, it was she who was Henry Wilcox's mistress.

Forster did not need this coincidence (he could have found another way of revealing that Henry had not been faithful to Ruth Wilcox, his first wife). But he wanted it. He wanted not just to show Margaret that her fiancé was not the utterly proper person he pretended to be – but also that, in all the arrogance of his wealth, he was not really 'above' the Basts. Forster (arguably) manages to get away with the coincidence by letting Margaret's confusion take possession of the scene.

The smuggling of coincidences into a novel can be a high art.

So, Jane Austen offers her reader the pleasure of seeing how she can smuggle any really important coincidence into a novel.

In the opening chapters of *Persuasion*, the feckless Sir Walter Elliot's lawyer, Mr Shepherd, has found a tenant who will rent his house – an Admiral Croft. He reassures Sir Walter and his daughters, Elizabeth and Anne, that

the Admiral has a wife, who will ensure that the property is well looked after.

“And a very well-spoken, genteel, shrewd lady, she seemed to be,” continued he; ‘asked more questions about the house, and terms, and taxes, than the Admiral himself, and seemed more conversant with business; and moreover, Sir Walter, I found she was not quite unconnected in this country, any more than her husband; that is to say, she is sister to a gentleman who did live amongst us once; she told me so herself: sister to the gentleman who lived a few years back at Monkford. Bless me! what was his name? At this moment I cannot recollect his name, though I have heard it so lately. Penelope, my dear, can you help me to the name of the gentleman who lived at Monkford: Mrs Croft’s brother?’

But Mrs Clay was talking so eagerly with Miss Elliot, that she did not hear the appeal.’

Jane Austen, Persuasion (1818), I Ch. III

It will be Anne who has to supply the name of Mrs Croft’s brother: Wentworth. He is the man whom Anne loved and still loves. The man to whom she was engaged – and from whom she was persuaded to part – eight years earlier. Austen wants to bring him back, and so makes him, by coincidence, the brother-in-law of the man who will move into Anne’s once-family home.

In all these examples, the novelist has to either smuggle in the coincidence, or offer some explanation of it. Before the 19th C., neither sleight of hand nor explanation were needed.

In the mid-eighteenth century, Henry Fielding’s novels relied without embarrassment on multiple coincidences. Indeed, they revelled in them. Here we are at the dénouement of his first novel, *Joseph Andrews*, who hero is (apparently) a humble servant, the son of Mr and Mrs Andrews. Expelled from his position for declining the sexual advances of his mistress, he wanders the country with his companion, Parson Adams. One night, fleeing thieves, they turn up at the isolated home of a Mr Wilson, who takes them in (and narrates his life story). He promises to visit Adams if he ever passes through his parish. Which, later in the novel, is what he does. He turns up just as Mr and Mrs Andrews are recalling how their daughter was taken from them as a baby, with a sickly boy being substituted. He had a strawberry birthmark.

‘The reader may please to recollect that Mr Wilson had intended a journey to the west, in which he was to pass through Mr Adams’s parish, and had promised to call on him. ... Mr Adams had no sooner mentioned the discovery of a stolen child, and had uttered the word strawberry, than Mr Wilson, with wildness in his looks, and the utmost eagerness in his words, begged to be shewed into the room, ... Joseph complied with the request of Mr Wilson, who no sooner saw the mark than, abandoning himself to the most extravagant rapture of passion, he embraced Joseph with inexpressible ecstasy, and cried out in tears of joy, “I have discovered my son, I have him again in my arms!”’

Henry Fielding, Joseph Andrews, Bk. IV Ch. XV

Joseph is, after all, the son of a gentleman.

Here the novelist really is like God, arranging providential outcomes. The comic coincidences that proliferate in Fielding’s novels belong to a Christian view of the world.

Contemporary novelists need their coincidences too. We do not have providence anymore, so they are likely to disguise their coincidences. Here is an artful example.

‘CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Monday Morning

MONDAY 15 JULY 2002

Belsize Park

The radio alarm sounds as usual at 07.05. It is already bright and clear outside, but neither of them move just yet’

It is the opening of the sixteenth chapter of the hugely successful novel *One Day*. As many of you will know, it begins on 15th July 1988, with the two central characters, Emma Morley and Dexter Mayhew, university students who have finished their final exams, spending the night together without actually consummating their relationship. They go their separate ways, each subsequent chapter revisiting them on the same day, 15 July (St Swithin's Day) in each subsequent year. They keep in touch with each other, keep re-encountering each other, and now, finally, after many a missed chance and wrong step, they are back together – married, and living (where could be happier?) in Belsize Park.

Yet the date means something. Spoiler alert! Two chapters later – two years later – 15 July 2004, Emma is cycling to work and she is knocked off her bike – and killed. Quite a coincidence that it should be the very same 'one day' on which they first came together. Yet the novel's ingenious structure has disguised the novelist's manipulation of events.

Immediately after Emma's death, we turn the page and we find this epigraph, from one of Nicholls's favourites novelists.

'She philosophically noted dates as they came past in the revolution of the year; the disastrous night of her undoing at Trantridge with its dark background of The Chase; also the dates of the baby's birth and death; also her own birthday; and every other day individualized by incidents in which she had taken some share. She suddenly thought one afternoon, when looking in the glass at her fairness, that there was yet another date, of greater importance to her than those; that of her own death, when all these charms would have disappeared; a day which lay sly and unseen among all the other days of the year, giving no sign or sound when she annually passed over it; but not the less surely there.'

Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), Ch. XV

Nicholls said that this is the passage that sparked the idea for his novel. If it had come any earlier, it would have prepared us for his heroine's death – and the coincidence on which the book rests.

Coincidences abound in Hardy's fiction, and they are often fateful – even deadly. As here. Shortly before their marriage, Angel Clare discovers that Tess is distantly related to the once aristocratic d'Urbervilles. He is foolishly pleased.

"...For your own sake I rejoice in your descent. Society is hopelessly snobbish, and this fact of your extraction may make an appreciable difference to its acceptance of you as my wife, after I have made you the well-read woman that I mean to make you. My mother too, poor soul, will think so much better of you on account of it. Tess, you must spell your name correctly—d'Urberville—from this very day."

"I like the other way rather best."

"But you must, dearest! Good heavens, why dozens of mushroom millionaires would jump at such a possession! By the bye, there's one of that kidney who has taken the name—where have I heard of him?—Up in the neighbourhood of The Chase, I think. Why, he is the very man who had that rumpus with my father I told you of. What an odd coincidence!"

"Angel, I think I would rather not take the name! It is unlucky, perhaps!"

She was agitated.'

Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Ch. XXX

No wonder she is 'agitated'. The 'very man' is, of course, Alec d'Urberville. The 'odd coincidence' that Angel notes is the sign that he is still playing a part in her life – that the bad luck of that name will return upon her. Angel brushes up against her secret – which will, in the end, destroy their happiness.

Such are the coincidences that signal tragedy. Yet there are also the delicious coincidences of comic fiction.

Dickens was the connoisseur of these.

'On the coincidences, resemblances and surprises of life Dickens liked especially to dwell, and few things moved his fancy so pleasantly. The world, he would say, was so much smaller than we thought it; we were all so connected by fate without knowing it; people supposed to be far apart were so constantly elbowing each other; and tomorrow bore so close a resemblance to nothing half so much as to yesterday.'

Here, David Copperfield meets Dora Spenlow, the daughter of his employer, and falls instantly in love with her.

'There was no pausing on the brink; no looking down, or looking back; I was gone, headlong, before I had sense to say a word to her.'

'I,' observed a well-remembered voice, when I had bowed and murmured something, 'have seen Mr. Copperfield before.'

The speaker was not Dora. No; the confidential friend, Miss Murdstone!

I don't think I was much astonished. To the best of my judgement, no capacity of astonishment was left in me. There was nothing worth mentioning in the material world, but Dora Spenlow, to be astonished about. I said, 'How do you do, Miss Murdstone? I hope you are well.' She answered, 'Very well.' I said, 'How is Mr. Murdstone?' She replied, 'My brother is robust, I am obliged to you.'

Charles Dickens, David Copperfield (1849-50), Ch. XXVI

By a chance in a million, Dora's paid companion is the gruesome Miss Murdstone, forbidding sister of Mr Murdstone, the man who married (and helped kill) David's mother. But, like David, we cannot be 'much astonished'. She was bound to turn up again. Who better, as a guard against the approaches of young men than the life-denying Miss Murdstone?

Later in the novel, another old friend turns up again. David's former headmaster, Mr Creakle, now manages a model prison and invites David and his friend Traddles to visit, in order to appreciate his system for 'making sincere and lasting converts and penitents'.

'Mr. Creakle directed the door of the cell to be unlocked, and Twenty Seven to be invited out into the passage. This was done; and whom should Traddles and I then behold, to our amazement, in this converted Number Twenty Seven, but Uriah Heep! ...'

Twenty Seven stood in the midst of us, as if he felt himself the principal object of merit in a highly meritorious museum. That we, the neophytes, might have an excess of light shining upon us all at once, orders were given to let out Twenty Eight.

I had been so much astonished already, that I only felt a kind of resigned wonder when Mr. Littimer walked forth, reading a good book!'

David Copperfield, Ch. LXI

There is no keeping down a real rogue. Here is a great reader of Dickens, Evelyn Waugh, sending Paul Pennyfeather, the naïve protagonist of *Decline and Fall*, to prison – taking the rap on behalf of the Honourable Margot Beste-Chetwynde, whom he planned to marry.

'Paul found another old friend at Egdon Heath Prison: a short, thick-set, cheerful figure who stumped along in front of him on the way to chapel, making a good deal of noise with an artificial leg. 'Here we are again, old boy!' he remarked during one of the responses. 'I'm in the soup as per usual.'

'Didn't you like the job?' Paul asked.

'Top hole,' said Grimes, 'but the hell of a thing happened. Tell you later.'

That morning, complete with pickaxes, field-telephone and two armed and mounted warders, Paul and a little squad of fellow-criminals were led to the quarries. Grimes was in the party.

'I've been here a fortnight,' said Grimes as soon as they got an opportunity of talking, 'and it seems too long already. I've always been a sociable chap, and I don't like it. Three years is too long, old boy. Still, we'll have God's own beano when I get out. I've been thinking about that day and night.'

'I suppose it was bigamy?' said Paul.

'The same. I ought to have stayed abroad. I was arrested as soon as I landed.'

Evelyn Waugh, Decline and Fall, Part Three, Ch. IV

Of course (we say again)! There is Captain Grimes, the dissolute prep-schoolmaster who was Paul's colleague when he himself was a master at the terrible Llanabba Castle school. Inevitable, really, that he would turn up in the very same prison.

Evelyn Waugh cannot resist telling us why we will keep bumping into Grimes.

'But later, thinking things over as he ate peacefully, one by one, the oysters that had been provided as a 'relish' for his supper, Paul knew that Grimes was not dead. ... Grimes, Paul at last realized, was of the immortals. He was a life force. Sentenced to death in Flanders, he popped up in Wales; drowned in Wales, he emerged in South America; engulfed in the dark mystery of Egdon Mire, he would rise again somewhere at some time, shaking from his limbs the musty integuments of the tomb.'

But, to end, let us return to that most ridiculous coincidence in *Jane Eyre*. Here is a telling comment by a late twentieth-century novelist, Muriel Spark.

'Well, I was always very interested in the Brontës. I think they were a remarkable set of people and very non-Victorian. They came straight out of the eighteenth century and into the twentieth century, or almost. They were extremely advanced. A little group of people in Haworth in the North, with only the old father to bring them up. Really they brought themselves up. He was a very interesting man, the father, the minister of the Parish. He let them have a lot of leeway and he had an Irish turn of thought. He was very much a radical, and they were radical. They were free-spoken for young women of the time, very advanced and the books are charming. Jane Eyre is an absolutely lovely book, full of improbabilities and 'dragged-in' coincidences. I thought that Emily Brontë's book was marvellous too.'

Muriel Spark, interview with Martin McQuillan, November 1998

Spark was the post-modernist *doyenne* of coincidences. Who else would begin a novel in the Paris consulting room of a successful but fraudulent psychiatrist who has two patients claiming to be Lord Lucan?

Graham Greene, a friend and a great admirer of her fiction, rightly took coincidence to be one of her special – and frightening – skills, when he wrote to her in 1970. He had just finished reading her new novel, *The Driver's Seat*.

'I enjoyed it thoroughly, beginning it suitably in a restaurant crowded with old American couples on a cruise except for one solitary middle-aged woman who waited for me beside the lift & pounced — but I was warned by your book & saw the headlines, American Hostess Found Strangled in Author's Bed & left her coldly at the door — on the same floor as mine, a sinister Sparkian coincidence, & I finished your novel in my bed—safe'

Graham Greene, letter to Muriel Spark, 1970

Greene must have had in mind precisely this, the return of Lise, the novel's protagonist, to a hotel in some unspecified Southern European city.

‘Meanwhile the new arrival, having been jostled by Lise, turns to look at her. He starts, and bends to pick up his bags. Lise touches him on the arm. ‘You’re coming with me,’ she says.

‘No,’ he says, trembling. His round face is pink and white, his eyes are wide open with fear. He looks neat in his business suit and white shirt, as he did this morning when Lise first followed and then sat next to him on the plane. ‘Leave everything,’ says Lise. ‘Come on, it’s getting late’. She starts propelling him to the door.’

Muriel Spark, The Driver’s Seat (1970), 7

We should have known, but we know now, that she has seen him before. He was the young man who sat next to her on the plane, but who had to move seats when he saw her.

‘Suddenly her other neighbour looks at Lise in alarm. He stares, as if recognizing her, with his brief-case on his lap, and his hand in the position of pulling out a batch of papers. Something about Lise, about her exchange with the man on her left, has caused a kind of paralysis in his act of fetching out some papers from his brief-case. He opens his mouth, gasping and startled, staring at her as if she is someone he has known and forgotten and now sees again. She smiles at him; it is a smile of relief and delight. His hand moves again, hurriedly putting back the papers that he had half drawn out of his brief-case. He trembles as he unfastens his seat-belt and makes as if to leave his seat, grabbing his brief-case. On the evening of the following day he will tell the police, quite truthfully, ‘The first time I saw her was at the airport. Then on the plane. She sat beside me.’

Muriel Spark, The Driver’s Seat, 3

Spark’s novel carries that post-modernist requirement to keep being aware, as we read, of how the narrative is being made. In the reconstruction of Lise’s fate, from the accounts and perceptions and reactions and future memories of others, she is a woman who seeks her own murder – and her own murderer. When she bumps into that young man again, it is he who is fearful at the coincidence.

She gets into the driver’s seat – of course! – and drives off with him. He says, ‘I don’t know who you are. I never saw you before in my life.’ But this is a reflex at the dreadful coincidence. According to him, none of this is his fault.

Hardy’s coincidences alert us to tragic fate; Dickens’s coincidences alert us to comic logic; Spark’s coincidences alert us to the malice of narrative pattern.

Unlike many novelists, all three want us to notice coincidence. The offence against probability is the very power of coincidence that each of them uses.

As I said at the beginning of this lecture, if you want to know how a novel works, look at how it uses coincidence.