

Grief in Reverse: Formal Subversion and the Limits of Narrative in Lorrie Moore's *How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes)*

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Abstract:

This article argues that in *How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes)*, Lorrie Moore transforms formal experimentation into philosophical statement: the story's reverse chronology and second-person narration work together not merely as stylistic innovation but as a structural argument about the nature of grief, memory, and the limits of narrative as a tool for processing loss. Where conventional narrative promises meaning through sequence and closure, Moore's inverted form deliberately withholds both. Drawing on Gérard Genette's narratological framework – specifically his concepts of narrative order and *anachrony* – and Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of narrative time and *emplotment*, the article demonstrates that Moore's formal choices enact rather than describe the failure of narrative identity under grief. The analysis is further informed by recent philosophical accounts of grief and selfhood, as well as interdisciplinary scholarship on second-person narration. Close reading of the story reveals that its second-person address and reversed timeline are mutually constitutive devices that together stage a coherent philosophical argument: that some losses resist the structures culture has developed to accommodate them, leaving narrative – and the self it was meant to sustain – irrevocably incomplete.

Keywords: narratology, second-person narration, reverse chronology, grief, narrative identity, Lorrie Moore, short fiction

Introduction

Narrative has been understood as one of humanity's primary tools for making sense of experience. From Aristotle's insistence on the wholeness of plot to contemporary narrative therapy, the underlying cultural assumption remains consistent: to tell a story about what has happened to us is to impose order on disorder, to transform the raw material of experience – and particularly of loss – into something meaningful and livable. It is precisely this assumption that Lorrie Moore places under sustained formal pressure in *Self-Help* (1985), especially in *How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes)*, a story that deploys its narrative

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architecture as a structural argument against the redemptive promise of storytelling itself.

Moore occupies a distinctive position in contemporary American short fiction. Recognized by critics as one of the most formally inventive prose writers to emerge from the 1980s, her work is characterized by what Chodat has described as a persistent tension between comic surface and serious artistic purpose (Chodat, 2006: 42). *Self-Help*, her debut collection, announced these concerns with particular force, establishing Moore's signature use of second-person narration as a means of implicating the reader in experiences of loss, failure, and emotional disorientation. As Kelly notes, the collection deploys the "you" address not merely as a stylistic experiment but as a mode of exploring the instability of female subjectivity under pressure (Kelly, 2009: 23). Weekes further situates the collection within a tradition of formally self-conscious short story cycles in which identity is constituted – and simultaneously undermined – through narrative (Weekes, 2002: 116).

How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes) intensifies these concerns by adding a second, equally disorienting formal device: the story unfolds in strict reverse chronological order, moving backwards from 1982 to the narrator's birth in 1939, tracing the gradual decline of the mother-daughter relationship through a series of dated, journal-like entries. Together, the second-person address and the inverted timeline have attracted critical commentary, though most scholarship on *Self-Help* has tended to examine these features separately, or to subordinate formal analysis to thematic concerns – feminism, irony, the comic mode. What remains underexplored is the way in which these two formal choices work in concert to produce a structural argument of philosophical consequence.

This article argues that in *How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes)*, Lorrie Moore transforms formal experimentation into philosophical statement: the story's reverse chronology and second-person narration work together not merely as stylistic innovation but as a structural argument about the nature of grief, memory, and the limits of narrative as a tool for processing loss. Where conventional narrative promises meaning through sequence and closure, Moore's inverted form deliberately withholds both.

To develop this argument, the article draws on two complementary theoretical frameworks. The first is Gérard Genette's narratological framework – specifically his concepts of narrative order and anachrony – which provides precise analytical vocabulary for describing what Moore does with time (Genette, 1980: 33-85). The second is Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of narrative, particularly his account of emplotment and narrative time in *Time and Narrative* (Ricoeur, 1984), which allows us to understand the philosophical stakes of Moore's formal

choices: if narrative is the cultural means by which human beings humanize time and constitute their identity, then a narrative that refuses forward movement is not only unusual – it is a refusal of consolation itself. The article proceeds as follows: after establishing the theoretical framework, it examines the philosophical implications of Moore's second-person narration, before turning to a close analysis of her deployment of reverse chronology. A final synthesis section argues that in this story, form and content are inseparable – the structure does not simply illustrate Moore's thematic concerns but enacts them.

Theoretical Framework

The analytical approach adopted in this article brings together two complementary theoretical frameworks: Gérard Genette's structural narratology and Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of narrative time. While both thinkers study the relationship between time and narrative, they do so from different but mutually illuminating angles – Genette from a formal, descriptive perspective, and Ricoeur from a phenomenological and philosophical one. Together they provide the conceptual tools necessary to demonstrate that Moore's formal choices in *How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes)* are not merely aesthetic decisions, but constitute a structural philosophical argument.

Genette and the Order of Narrative

Genette's *Narrative Discourse* (1980) offers a systematic theory of how narrative structures time at the level of discourse. Central to his framework is the distinction between *story* – the chronological order in which events occur – and *narrative discourse* – the order in which those events are presented to the reader. Genette identifies the relationship between these two temporal levels as one of *order*, considering that discordances between story time and narrative time are among the most significant tools available to narrative. He employs the general term *anachrony* to designate all such forms of temporal discordance, classifying them primarily as *analepsis* – the retrospective narration of events that occurred prior to the present moment of the story – and *prolepsis*, the anticipatory narration of approaching events (Genette, 1980: 35-40).

What makes Moore's story formally exceptional is that it enacts neither analepsis nor prolepsis in the conventional sense. Rather, the entire narrative is structured as a systematic and unrelenting reversal of chronological order – a radical anachrony that does not merely interrupt forward movement but replaces it entirely. In Genettian terms, the *fabula* (the chronological sequence of events from 1939 to 1982) is inverted to produce a narrative discourse that runs from 1982 to 1939. This is not a flashback rooted within a forward-moving narrative; it is a narrative in

which regression is the only available direction. As such, Moore's story pushes Genette's framework to its limit, exposing an anachrony so complete that it calls into question the assumption that narrative discourse organizes events toward a meaningful conclusion.

Ricoeur: Emplotment, Time, and the Crisis of Identity

If Genette provides the formal vocabulary to describe what Moore does, Ricoeur provides the philosophical vocabulary to explain why it matters. In *Time and Narrative*, volume 1 (1984), Ricoeur argues that narrative is the primary cultural means by which human beings humanize time – that is, transform the raw, elusive experience of temporal existence into something livable and meaningful. At the heart of this argument is the concept of *emplotment* (*mise en intrigue*), which Ricoeur, following Aristotle, defines as the operation through which a narrative draws a configuration out of a mere succession of events, producing what he calls a *concordant discordance* – a dynamic unity that reconciles the disorder of lived experience with the ordering demands of plot (Ricoeur, 1984: 65-66). Emplotment, in this sense, is not merely a literary technique but an act of meaning-making: it transforms temporal chaos into intelligible human experience.

Ricoeur's framework is further grounded in his reading of Augustine's *Confessions*, where the soul's experience of time is characterized by *distentio animi* – a painful stretching of consciousness between an irretrievable past and an unreachable future. For Augustine, this distension is a source of anguish; for Ricoeur, narrative emplotment is the cultural response to that anguish, the means by which the human mind imposes coherence on temporal experience (Ricoeur, 1984: 19-22). A narrative that refuses emplotment – or that undermines its forward-moving, concordance-building logic – therefore does something philosophically significant: it denies the reader, and the narrator, the consolation that narrative is culturally expected to provide.

This refusal has direct consequences for what Ricoeur, developing ideas introduced in *Time and Narrative* and elaborated in *Oneself as Another*, calls *narrative identity* – the notion that the self is constituted through the stories it tells about itself (Ricoeur, 1992: 113-140). As Laitinen observes, for Ricoeur, emplotted narratives have the potential to bring concordance to temporal discordance by organizing events into a coherent and organized whole (Laitinen, 2002: 66). Narrative identity is therefore not a static property of the self but a dynamic achievement, requiring the ongoing work of emplotment. When that work is denied – when the narrative refuses to move forward – the self it might have constituted remains dispersed, fragmented, and unresolved.

It is precisely this denial that Moore stages in *How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes)*. Read through the combined lens of Genette and Ricoeur, the story's inverted chronology is not a stylistic flourish but a formal enactment of the impossibility of integrating loss into a coherent selfhood. The following sections examine in detail how Moore's two key formal devices – the second-person address and the reverse timeline – collaborate to produce this philosophical statement.

Second-Person Narration as Formal Estrangement

Among the formal choices available to a fiction writer, few are as immediately disorienting as the second-person address. As Rembowska-Pluciennik observes, an effect of estrangement is produced by the very ambiguity of the relationship between narrator and narratee that second-person narration generates – the reader cannot take for granted who is speaking to whom, or indeed who the narrative “you” ultimately designates (Rembowska-Pluciennik, 2018: 2). This instability, far from being an incidental feature of the mode, is constitutive of its philosophical and emotional potential. In *How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes)*, Moore exploits this potential with sustained purpose, using the second-person address not as a stylistic experiment but as a structural enactment of a self in the process of losing itself to grief.

The foundational challenge of second-person narration lies in what Rembowska-Pluciennik identifies as its resistance to stable models of narrative agency. Unlike first- or third-person narration, which assigns relatively fixed roles to the narrator, the protagonist and the reader, the “you” form generates what Graesser describes as “an amalgamation of four agents: character, narrator, narratee and reader” (Graesser et al., 1997: 419). No other pronoun can produce this effect. In Moore's story, this amalgamation is not merely a cognitive puzzle for the reader to resolve; it is a philosophically loaded condition that mirrors the narrator's own inability to locate herself as a stable, unified subject. The story's opening entry, dated 1982, captures this condition with particular force. The narrator, now alone after her mother's death, is described murmuring at the defrosting refrigerator – “What?” “Huh?” “Shush now” (Moore, 1985: 87) – as if still in conversation with an absent presence. The “you” that pervades the narrative is thus established from the outset as a voice that speaks into a void, addressing both itself and someone who is no longer there.

Phelan's rhetorical analysis of Moore's use of the second person in *Self-Help* remains foundational here. Phelan demonstrates that Moore's “you” operates through a dual referentiality – it designates both the narrator-protagonist inscribed within the text and the actual reader receiving the address (Phelan, 1994: 352). This collapse of the boundary between inside and outside the text is not a confusion but a structural

feature. The reader is not invited to observe the narrator's grief from a position of safety; she is grammatically conscripted into it, made to inhabit a subjectivity that is simultaneously intimate and alien. This effect is most pronounced in the story's imperative constructions, which reach their most intense concentration in the 1977 entry, where the narrator instructs herself how to care for her ailing mother: "Make her stand up./ Lean her against you./ Slap her lightly on the curved mound of her back./ Ask her for chrissakes to stop smoking" (Moore, 1985: 89). The imperative mode, combined with the second-person pronoun, creates what Demjén, drawing on Fludernik, calls the "present-future temporal orientation" of second-person narration – a mode characterized by urgency, direct self-address and the absence of retrospective distance, which "ensures that the sense of inner conflict or split dominates" (Demjén, 2011: 18). Here the narrator both issues and receives commands, staging an internal dialogue in which one part of the self directs another, as though the "you" has split into instructor and instructed, caregiver and grieving child simultaneously.

Richardson's account of the oscillatory logic of second-person narration further illuminates this effect: such texts produce an irreducible movement between the first and third person, simultaneously inviting and prohibiting identification with the pronominal voice (Richardson, 1991: 313). In Moore's story this oscillation is not resolved but intensified across the decades the story traverses – there is no resting point, no stable pronoun to which either narrator or reader can retreat. The 1967 entry makes this condition explicit in its characteristic compression: "Your mother is sick and comes to live with you. There is no place else for her to go. You feel many different emptinesses" (Moore, 1985: 92). The laconic final sentence is remarkable: the use of "emptinesses" in the plural refuses to specify or resolve the narrator's emotional state into a single, nameable feeling. The "you" holds these multiple, unnamed emptinesses together without integrating them – the pronoun itself becomes a container for what cannot be coherently expressed in the first person.

The philosophical implications of this grammatical instability become clearer when considered alongside Rembowska-Płuciennik's concept of the "cognitive me-and-you dyad". For Rembowska-Płuciennik, the narrator's "I" does not pre-exist the act of narration but emerges only through the act of voicing another's – or in this case, one's own – experience in the second person (Rembowska-Płuciennik, 2018: 6-7). Hantzis's formulation, cited in the same study, captures the consequence of this with particular force: "There is no 'I' that pre-exists in order to speak the other. Therefore, alternate means of constituting self, through or along with, the constitution of Other must be developed" (Hantzis, cited in Rembowska-Płuciennik, 2018: 6). In Moore's story

these alternate means are precisely what grief has rendered unavailable. The 1972 entry articulates this failure of self-constitution in simple terms: “Learn to repeat things. Learn that you have a way of knowing each other which somehow slips out and beyond the ways you have of not knowing each other at all” (Moore, 1985: 91). The instruction to “learn” – addressed by the self to the self – both mimics the pedagogical tone implied by the story’s subtitle “(Notes)” and exposes its inadequacy: what is described here is not a skill that can be acquired but an irreducible paradox at the heart of the mother-daughter relationship, a knowing that perpetually escapes the structures built to contain it.

This paradox reaches its most philosophically concentrated expression in the 1968 entry, where the narrator reflects: “Think about the situation, for instance, when you take the last trash bag from its box: you must throw out the box by putting it in that very trash bag. What was once contained, now must contain. The container, then, becomes the contained, the enveloped, the held” (Moore, 1985: 92). The meditation is trivial – a domestic observation – but its philosophical resonance is considerable. Moore is staging, through the second-person address, a structural homology between the story’s formal situation and its thematic preoccupation: the narrator who has been shaped by, contained within, the mother’s world is now asked to contain the mother herself in her decline, just as the story’s reversed chronology will ultimately arrive at the moment of the narrator’s own birth. The “you” enacts precisely this paradox – a self that is simultaneously container and contained, shaper and shaped, subject and object of address.

This reading is further supported by Demjén’s interdisciplinary account, which demonstrates that second-person narration correlates with states of inner split and self-alienation in contexts of emotional crisis (Demjén, 2011: 5-6). What emerges from Moore’s sustained deployment of the “you” address is, as Ratcliffe and Byrne argue in a broader philosophical context, a self that has lost its “practical identity” – the structure of commitments and relationships through which a person finds her life coherent and worth living (Ratcliffe and Byrne, 2022: 322-323). The narrator of *How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes)* is a subject suspended in the indeterminate realm that grief produces: neither fully inhabiting the first person, which would presuppose a coherent, self-possessing subject, nor able to adopt the third person, which would imply a completed distance from experience. The “you” holds her in between – grammatically, emotionally, and ontologically – and it is in this suspension that Moore’s formal choice achieves its fullest philosophical resonance.

This formal condition prepares the ground for the story’s second and equally radical device: the systematic reversal of chronological order. If the second-person address enacts a self unable to say “I”, the reversed

timeline enacts a narrative unable to move forward – and it is in the conjunction of these two refusals that Moore’s philosophical argument achieves its full force.

Reverse Chronology and the Subversion of Narrative Logic

If the second-person address destabilizes the self at the grammatical level, the reversed chronological structure of *How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes)* destabilizes it at the architectural level, enacting a temporal logic that is equally – and deliberately – irresolvable. The story moves backwards from 1982 to 1939, through forty-three years of the narrator’s life, dismantling in reverse the relationship it traces. To understand the philosophical force of this formal choice, it is necessary to be precise about what Moore does with narrative time, and what she refuses to do.

Genette’s structural framework provides the vocabulary for this precision. In *Narrative Discourse*, Genette distinguishes between *story* – the chronological sequence of events as they occurred – and *narrative discourse* – the order in which those events are presented to the reader. Discordances between these two temporal levels constitute what Genette calls *anachrony*, which he classifies primarily into *analepsis* – retrospective narration of prior events – and *prolepsis* – anticipatory narration of events yet to come (Genette, 1980: 35-40). What makes Moore’s story formally exceptional, however, is that it enacts neither of these in the conventional sense. The reversed timeline is not a flashback embedded within a forward-moving narrative, nor a momentary anticipation. It is a systematic and total inversion of chronological order – an anachrony so complete and so unrelenting that it calls into question the very assumption upon which both analepsis and prolepsis depend: namely, that there is a stable narrative present from which the past can be recalled or the future anticipated. In Moore’s story there is no such present. The narrative begins in 1982 with the mother already dead and moves steadily backward, stripping away not only the mother but the entire accumulated structure of the narrator’s adult life, arriving finally at the moment before selfhood itself has properly begun.

This formal radicalism becomes philosophically legible through Ricoeur’s account of emplotment in *Time and Narrative*. For Ricoeur, emplotment – the act of constructing a plot – is the operation through which narrative transforms a mere chronological succession of events into a meaningful configuration, what he calls a *concordant discordance*: a dynamic unity that reconciles the disorder of lived experience with the ordering demands of coherent form (Ricoeur, 1984: 65-66). Emplotment humanizes time by giving it direction, shape and, crucially, a telos – a sense that the sequence of events is moving toward something, that the story’s forward movement is meaningful rather than arbitrary. It is

precisely this teleological promise that Moore's reversed structure refuses. The story's movement is not toward resolution but toward dissolution – not toward the consolidation of meaning but toward its systematic unravelling. Each entry does not build upon the previous one but undoes it, retreating further from the present moment of loss and deeper into a past that the reader already knows, from the story's opening, to have been irrevocably ended.

The consequences of this refusal are most powerfully felt in the juxtaposition of the story's first and last entries. The opening entry, dated 1982, establishes with almost clinical precision the condition of the narrator's life after her mother's death: murmuring at the defrosting refrigerator, dreaming of babies with the personalities of dachshunds, registering the implantation of the first permanent polyurethane heart as a public event shadowing her private one. The world of the 1982 entry is a world of substitutions and displacements – the refrigerator that speaks back in the mother's absence, the synthetic heart that replaces the organic one – in which the narrator's grief is rendered not through direct statement but through the accumulation of uncanny details. Against this opening, the story's final entry, dated 1939, operates with an entirely different register and an entirely different kind of knowledge:

As through a helix, as through an ear, it is here you are nearer the dream flashes, the other lives./ There is a tent of legs, a sundering of selves, as you both gasp blindly for breath. Across the bright and cold, she knows it when you try to talk to her, though this is something you never really manage to understand. (Moore, 1985: 96)

This is the moment of the narrator's birth – or rather the moment just before it, the instant at which the two selves, mother and daughter, are still physiologically conjoined and not yet fully separated. The image is remarkable in its formal precision: the “helix”, the “ear”, the “tent of legs”, the “sundering of selves” – all of these figure the entry into the world as simultaneously a separation and an attempt at communication, a gasp for breath that is also, already, a failure of understanding. “She knows it when you try to talk to her, though this is something you never really manage to understand” (Moore, 1985: 96). The story's title – *How to Talk to Your Mother* – is thus revealed at its conclusion, or rather at its origin, to be deeply ironic: the communication it promises is one that the narrator, across forty-three years of the text we have just read backwards, has never successfully achieved.

Read in Ricoeurian terms, the journey from 1982 to 1939 performs what might be called a *discordant discordance* – a reversal that does not merely disorder narrative sequence but actively dismantles the very mechanism by which narrative imposes meaning on temporal experience. Ricoeur argues, drawing on Augustine's *Confessions*, that the

raw experience of time is one of *distentio animi* – a painful stretching of consciousness between an irretrievable past and an unreachable future – and that narrative emplotment is the cultural response to this anguish, the means by which the human mind imposes coherence on temporal chaos (Ricoeur, 1984: 19-22). Moore’s reversed chronology denies this response. Rather than moving forward toward integration, the story moves backward towards the originary moment of separation, exposing the *distentio* at the heart of the mother-daughter relationship and refusing to resolve it. The reader who has begun at 1982, in the silence of the mother’s absence, arrives at 1939 not with any sense of restored connection but with a deeper understanding of why that connection was always already incomplete.

This structural argument is reinforced throughout the story by the quality of the individual entries themselves, many of which resist the teleological logic of conventional narrative even at the local level. The 1978 entry – the mother’s burial – is one of the story’s most sustained passages, and its emotional restraint is characteristic of Moore’s method. The narrator watches a wedge of wrens moving south through the November sky, marvelling at “the lines of their formation, the very sides and vertices mysteriously choreographed, shifting, flowing, crossing like a skater’s legs”, until her niece’s practical question – “Aunt Ginnie, are we going to the restaurant with the others?” (Moore, 1985: 88) – breaks the spell. The entry does not mourn; it observes. It does not offer the expected emotional release of a burial scene but instead deflects grief into natural description. Yet, the detail of the wrens – moving south, instinctively, in a formation whose logic the narrator marvels at but does not fully understand – figures the story’s own structural condition: a movement governed by a mysterious internal choreography, shifting and flowing in patterns that resist simple comprehension.

The 1975 entry performs a similar deflection, but with greater philosophical transparency. Attending poetry readings alone, the narrator finds she does not really listen: “Think about your mother. Sometimes you confuse her with the first man you ever loved, who ever loved you, who buried his head in the pills of your sweater and said magnificent things like ‘Oh god, oh god’, who loved you unconditionally, terrifically, like a mother” (Moore, 1985: 90). The simile that closes this passage – “like a mother” – performs a characteristic Moorian turn: the narrator’s attempt to understand her relationship to her mother leads her, through the logic of association, back to the mother herself, as though all routes of thought terminate at the same point. In Ricoeurian terms, this is the mark of a narrative identity that cannot move forward because its emplotment is incomplete – the story of the self keeps circling back to its unresolved origin rather than integrating that origin into a coherent forward-moving account. Ratcliffe and Byrne’s description of the grieving self as

inhabiting a tension “between a world that endures and the explicit acknowledgement that someone has died, with all that the death entails” (Ratcliffe and Byrne, 2022: 323) maps precisely onto this circularity: the narrator of 1975 is neither in the world of before, nor in the world of after, but suspended between them, her thought looping back rather than progressing.

It is finally in the 1940 entry – four words, the shortest in the story – that Moore’s reversed chronology reaches its most concentrated formal and philosophical statement: “Clutch her hair in your fist. Rub it against your cheek” (Moore, 1985: 96). The imperative mode returns here, but now it addresses not an adult caregiver but a toddler performing the instinctive, wordless gesture of a child seeking comfort in the mother’s physical presence. Read against the grain of the story’s movement, the entry is devastating: the reader who has traversed the entire text backward arrives here knowing everything that will follow – the decades of partial understanding, the confusions, the absences, the slow decline, the death, the murmuring at empty refrigerators – and encounters, at the point closest to the narrator’s origin, nothing but a fist full of hair, a cheek seeking warmth. No words. No understanding. Only the body’s mute, unanswerable need.

This is the philosophical statement that Moore’s reversed chronology delivers: that grief, carried to its logical formal conclusion, does not lead backward to origin and consolation but to the irreducible materiality of a bond that language – and narrative – were never adequate to contain. As Ratcliffe and Byrne observe, certain experiences of grief involve “a breakdown of narrative capacity, due to an altered sense of time and consequent disruption of narrative structure” (Ratcliffe and Byrne, 2022: 321). Moore does not merely describe this breakdown; she formally enacts it – and it is in that enactment that the story’s deepest claim lies.

Form as Philosophical Statement

The two preceding sections have examined Moore’s second-person narration and reversed chronology as separate formal devices, tracing the philosophical implications of each in turn. What the present section argues is that these two devices are not merely complementary but mutually constitutive – that the story’s deepest meaning emerges precisely from their conjunction, and that this conjunction amounts to what can only be called a structural philosophical argument: one that does not describe the inadequacy of narrative for processing grief but performs it, inscribing that inadequacy into the architecture of the text.

This distinction between description and performance is crucial. A great many works of fiction address the theme of grief, and a great many explore the difficulty of articulating loss in language. What

distinguishes *How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes)* is that Moore does not allow the formal apparatus of her story to remain at a safe distance from its thematic concerns. The form is not a vehicle for the content; the form is the content. As Rembowska-Pluciennik observes of second-person narration more broadly, this mode places “the capacities of declarative pointing, social referring and adopting another’s viewpoint at the very core of the transmission and processing of narrative information” (Rembowska-Pluciennik, 2018: 9). In Moore’s story this is not merely a cognitive operation but a philosophical one: the “you” that cannot stabilize into “I”, combined with the timeline that cannot move forward, together enact a mode of being in time and in language that conventional narrative form is structurally incapable of producing.

The story’s subtitle – “(Notes)” – is itself a formal statement of this kind. Notes are, by definition, preliminary, incomplete, preparatory: they gesture toward a text that has not yet been written, a coherence that has not yet been achieved. To title a finished story “(Notes)” is to inscribe incompleteness into the work’s identity from the outset, to mark it as perpetually provisional, never arriving at the fully emplotted narrative that Ricoeur’s account of meaningful temporal experience would require. In Ricoeurian terms, the subtitle announces in advance what the reversed chronology and the second-person address will together enact: this is a narrative that refuses to become what narrative, culturally and formally, is supposed to be. It is, to use Ricoeur’s vocabulary, a deliberate failure of *concordant discordance* – a text that offers discord without the compensating movement toward concordance that emplotment promises (Ricoeur, 1984: 65-66).

This refusal has consequences not only for the narrator but for the reader, and it is here that Rembowska-Pluciennik’s distinction between participation and immersion becomes particularly productive. Conventional narrative, she argues, draws the reader into a state of immersion – a willing suspension of critical distance in which the reader inhabits the fictional world from within. Second-person narration, by contrast, produces participation: a mode of involvement that is more uncomfortable, more cognitively demanding, and more philosophically exposed, because it refuses the reader the protection of a stable spectatorial position (Rembowska-Pluciennik, 2018: 1-4). In *How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes)*, this participatory dynamic is intensified by the reversed chronology, which denies the reader the forward-moving narrative momentum that ordinarily sustains immersion. The reader cannot lose herself in the story because the story’s structure perpetually interrupts the consoling logic of temporal progression. She is instead held in a state of uncomfortable co-presence with the narrator’s grief – implicated in it by the “you” address, unable to move beyond it by the reversal of time.

This double refusal – of the first person and of forward movement – has a precise philosophical correlate in the story’s treatment of the relationship between language and loss. Moore’s entries are notable throughout for what they do not say as much as for what they do. The 1967 entry – “Your mother is sick and comes to live with you. There is no place else for her to go. You feel many different emptinesses” (Moore, 1985: 92) – performs a characteristic compression: three sentences that gesture toward vast emotional territory while refusing to map it. The plural “emptinesses” is paradigmatic of Moore’s method: where a conventional narrative might specify, Moore multiplies and withholds. Similarly, the 1972 entry’s quiet observation – “Learn to repeat things. Learn that you have a way of knowing each other which somehow slips out and beyond the ways you have of not knowing each other at all” (Moore, 1985: 91) – renders the mother-daughter relationship as a perpetual oscillation between knowing and not knowing, one that language can gesture toward but never fully contain. This is precisely what Ratcliffe and Byrne identify as one of the deepest challenges of grief: not simply the loss of the person but the loss of the particular, irreplaceable mode of knowing that the relationship sustained – a mode that “is not restricted to category membership” but extends to the entire structure of significance through which the self orients itself in the world (Ratcliffe and Byrne, 2022: 322).

Moore’s form enacts this loss structurally. If the mother was, for the narrator, the original container of significance – the first relationship through which the world acquired meaning – then the story’s reversed movement toward the moment of birth is also a movement toward the dissolution of all subsequently constructed meaning, back to the point at which the “you” of the narrator and the “you” of her address were not yet fully distinct. The 1939 entry’s image of “a sundering of selves” and the attempt to communicate that “this is something you never really manage to understand” does not only describe the moment of birth; it retroactively illuminates every entry that has preceded it in the reader’s experience of the text. The failure of communication announced at the story’s chronological origin is the source of every subsequent partial understanding, every deflected grief, every imperative addressed by the self to the self instead of the direct expression that remains perpetually out of reach.

This structural argument places Moore in dialogue with a broader tradition of philosophical reflection on the limits of narrative as a tool for processing experience. Ratcliffe and Byrne, drawing on Merleau-Ponty, observe that language does not merely express pre-formed experiences and thoughts but sometimes completes them – rendering them more determinate, resolving their content, stabilizing their emotional register (Ratcliffe and Byrne, 2022: 329). Moore’s story works in the opposite

direction: its language consistently introduces indeterminacy rather than resolving it, opening emotional and philosophical questions rather than closing them. The entries accumulate not into a coherent narrative of grief and its negotiation but into what might be called an archaeology of incompleteness – a layered excavation of all the moments at which understanding was attempted and fell short, rendered in reverse so that the reader moves not toward resolution but toward the irreducible, pre-linguistic gesture of the 1940 entry: “Clutch her hair in your fist. Rub it against your cheek” (Moore, 1985: 96).

It is worth noting, as a final point of synthesis, what this argument suggests about the specific contribution of the short story form to Moore’s philosophical project. Ratcliffe and Byrne observe that the roles narrative plays in grief “fall into two broad and potentially complementary categories – narrative pins some things down and stirs other things up” (Ratcliffe and Byrne, 2022: 330). Moore’s story does neither: it refuses both the pinning-down function of conventional narrative and the productive disruption that Ratcliffe and Byrne associate with ongoing narration. Instead, Boddy’s account of Moore’s relationship to language is instructive here: for Moore, she observes, “the problem with language is not so much that it is inadequate or coercive as that it won’t hold still” – and it is precisely this instability that the story’s formal choices exploit rather than resist (Boddy, 2010: 147). Human vulnerability, as Boddy further notes, “does not conform to self-help’s optimistically linear narrative” (Boddy, 2010: 148) – and Moore’s reversed chronology enacts this non-conformity at the structural level. The brevity of the individual entries, their tonal unevenness, their refusal to accumulate into a continuous emotional arc – all of these are not limitations of the form but deployments of it, formal choices through which Moore insists that some experiences exceed the narrative structures culture has developed to accommodate them.

The conjunction of second-person narration and reversed chronology in *How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes)* is therefore not ornamental but argumentative. Together these devices produce a text that is, in the fullest sense, philosophically serious: one that does not merely represent the difficulty of mourning but instantiates it, that does not describe the failure of narrative identity but formally enacts it, and that refuses, in its structure, the consolation it might otherwise be expected to provide. It is a story that knows what it cannot do – and makes that knowledge its most powerful statement.

Conclusion

This article has argued that in *How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes)*, Lorrie Moore transforms formal experimentation into philosophical statement: the story’s reverse chronology and second-

person narration work together not merely as stylistic innovation but as a structural argument about the nature of grief, memory, and the limits of narrative as a tool for processing loss. Where conventional narrative promises meaning through sequence and closure, Moore's inverted form deliberately withholds both. What the preceding analysis has demonstrated is that this withholding is not a failure of narrative – not an artistic shortcoming or a postmodern gesture toward meaninglessness – but a rigorous and philosophically coherent act of formal refusal, one that takes seriously the possibility that some experiences exceed the structures culture has developed to accommodate them.

The narratological framework drawn from Genette has allowed us to describe with precision what Moore does with time: the complete inversion of chronological order produces an anachrony so radical that it dismantles the very narrative present from which conventional anachrony departs and to which it returns. The philosophical framework drawn from Ricoeur has allowed us to understand why this matters: if emplotment is the cultural means by which human beings transform temporal chaos into livable, meaningful experience, then a narrative that systematically refuses emplotment's forward-moving logic is not merely formally unusual – it is a refusal of the consolation that narrative is culturally expected to provide. Together these frameworks have shown that Moore's formal choices are not separable from her thematic concerns: the story does not describe the failure of narrative identity under grief; it enacts that failure at the structural level, inscribing it into the very architecture of the text.

The close reading of the story's second-person address has further demonstrated that this enactment operates at every level of the prose. The "you" that cannot stabilize into "I" – that splits the narrator into instructor and instructed, caregiver and grieving child, container and contained – grammatically performs the ontological crisis that Ratcliffe and Byrne identify as central to profound bereavement: the loss of practical identity, the dissolution of the self's sense of who it is and what its life means (Ratcliffe and Byrne, 2022: 322-323). The imperative constructions, the plural "emptinesses", the loops of thought that circle back always to the mother – all of these are formal symptoms of a subjectivity that has lost the narrative thread by which it once oriented itself in time. And the story's final entry – the wordless, pre-linguistic gesture of clutching the mother's hair – reveals, with the compression that is Moore's most characteristic achievement, that this thread was always already incomplete: that the communication the story's title promises is one that was never, from the very beginning, fully possible.

What does this suggest beyond the boundaries of Moore's story? The implications extend, in the first instance, to the question of what short fiction can do that longer narrative forms cannot. The compression

of the individual entries, the radical ellipsis of the spaces between them, the refusal to provide the connective tissue of explanation and emotional transition – these are formal properties specific to the short story, and they are deployed here not as constraints but as resources. It is precisely because Moore’s entries are so brief, so tonally uneven, so resistant to accumulation into a continuous emotional arc, that the story achieves what a novel, with its greater space and momentum, would be more likely to resolve. The short story’s structural incompleteness – its generic tendency toward the fragment, the glimpse, the unfinished – becomes, in Moore’s hands, the formal correlate of the experience it describes. Moore’s formal choices are, as Boddy argues, rooted in the recognition that language “won’t hold still” – and that this instability, far from being a limitation, is also “its great liberating power” (Boddy, 2010: 147). *How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes)* is perhaps the most philosophically rigorous instantiation of this tendency in Moore’s work.

The implications extend, in the second instance, to the broader question of the relationship between formal experimentation and philosophical argument in contemporary fiction. One of the persistent assumptions in the reception of formally innovative writing is that its difficulty is primarily aesthetic – that the pleasure it offers is the pleasure of technique, of craft for its own sake. What this reading of Moore suggests is that formal experimentation, at its most serious, is not aesthetic but epistemological: it is a means of knowing things that conventional form cannot know, of staging cognitive and emotional experiences that realist narrative’s implicit commitments to sequence, causality and resolution would smooth away. Moore’s reversed chronology and second-person address do not decorate her meditation on grief and loss; they constitute it, making available to the reader a mode of understanding that no paraphrase, no summary, no conventionally plotted narrative could replicate.

This, finally, is what makes *How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes)* a story worth returning to – and worth theorizing. In an era in which short fiction is sometimes too readily celebrated for its emotional accessibility and its capacity to produce what Demjén, following Fludernik, calls the “empathetic potential” of the second-person address (Demjén, 2011: 5), Moore reminds us that empathy, at its most honest, is not comfort but exposure: not the reassurance that grief can be narrativized and therefore survived, but the more austere and more truthful acknowledgement that some losses resist the structures we bring to bear upon them, leaving us, in the end, with nothing more – and nothing less – than a fist full of hair, and the unreachable warmth of a cheek.

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