

# **Losing the Plot: Tragedy in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

Kieron O'Hara

School of Electronics and Computer Science

University of Southampton

United Kingdom

[kmo@ecs.soton.ac.uk](mailto:kmo@ecs.soton.ac.uk)





# Tragedy in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

- Shift in focus from tragic *events* to tragic *condition*
- Decline of the supernatural
  - From the Gods to impersonal nature
- The process of decline is less interesting
- Tragedy becomes democratised
  - Tragedy becomes *personal*
  - Effects become localised
- The end of the grand narrative
- Potential for electronic forms of art/communication
  - Characters explore a space
  - Discover failures





# Non-Linearity in Tragedy: Some

- Joseph Conrad, 'Heart of Darkness' (1899)
  - Film version: Coppola, *Apocalypse Now* (1979)
  - The tragedy (of the ivory trader Kurtz) takes place offstage
  - The narrative concerns Marlow, travelling up-river to find Kurtz
  - Our engagement with the tragedy is the contrast between Kurtz' ambition and the reality of his creation



# Examples

- John Cheever, 'The Swimmer' (1964)
  - Film version: Perry, *The Swimmer* (1968)
  - The tragedy of Neddy Merrill is only inferred from his alienation and isolation. He has no memory of his fall from grace.
  - All we see is Neddy's attempt to 'swim' home
  - He fails in his attempt to create a symbol of his own success





# Examples

- Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano* (1947)
  - Film: Huston, *Under the Volcano* (1984)
  - (In)significance of the artist – Lowry wrote a novel about writing *Under the Volcano*
  - Interplay of texts and poems and Lowry's biography
  - *The Voyage That Never Ends*





# Examples

- B.S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates* (1969)
  - A set of random reflections upon a friend's death, interrupted by events from the outside
  - Johnson wanted to capture fundamentally non-linear mental states
  - Chapters unbound, to be read in any order
  - The resonances of the different events and situations vary from reading to reading



# Examples

- Samuel Beckett, *passim*
- Characters try to make sense of their meaninglessness and impotence
- *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958)
  - Krapp reacts to his own audio diary





# The Visual Arts





