The Chain of Chance Short Guide

The Chain of Chance by Stanisław Lem

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Characters

The only character central to the investigation and thus to the novel is the protagonist. The Chain of Chance purports to be a book written by the hero as a post facto record of the events (as we find out on the very last page). Considering his focal position in this first-person narrative, it is striking that in many ways the hero remains an enigma even when the book has ended. Of course, we know something of his physical characteristics since he is chosen for the "simulation" mission precisely because he matches the victims in appearance. His composite portrait, assembled during the interview with Professor Barth, is as follows: single, male, in his fifties, tall, athletically built, does not have diabetes, and suffers from allergies.

But even in this very incomplete picture some blank spots linger. The precise age of the protagonist seems difficult to determine, since at the two points when it is explicitly mentioned, it is inconsistent: first he is said to be fifty-five years old and, eighty-five pages later, only fifty.

Moreover, throughout the story he remains nameless if one does not count his first name, John, which is not even revealed until two thirds into the book.

Lem's reticence about endowing John with a full name is unusual enough to have confounded some critics. For example in his monograph on Lem, J. Madison Davis erroneously attributes to the hero the name Torcelli. In fact, the Italian name Torcelli belongs to one of the Rome airport security experts who introduces himself by his last name, before proceeding with questions about the bombing.

What else do we know about John? He is Canadian by birth; he has parachuted into Normandy during the Allied landing in the Second War; he is an ex-astronaut from the Mars mission; has undergone a thorough training at NASA; is given to introspection and, like every Lem hero, is essentially a loner. He has many traits typical of an action hero: He is smart, resourceful, strong, courageous, and able to function in moments of intense stress and danger, as when he saves a girl's life during the terrorist attack. But he is untypical in his scientific knowledge and scientific point of view which lie behind his self-effacing claim of being only a lucky victim of chance in solving the mystery.

In one sense, John's fate does hinge on pure luck. When he tries to kill himself while under the spell of the psychedelic compound, he does not plunge to his death only because the radiator to which he had handcuffed himself is made of solid cast iron. But are we to believe that the mission succeeds thanks to pure chance or, worse even, to the radiator?

Not quite. Among many elements of chance which plague his mission, John demonstrates a solid pattern of design and forethought. His selection for the task owes, for example, to his rare abilities, such as training to function under duress and experience with the effects of psychedelic drugs. When he cuffs himself to the radiator so as not to jump out of the window, John's action is a deliberate, even if not

premeditated, result of his special training. Moreover, throughout the psychotic blackout he struggles to "surface" in order to leave vital clues about the constituents of the lethal compound.

The book does not resolve the ambiguity of whether John is a hero by accident or by design. In one sense he clearly owes his success (and life) to a string of coincidences which simply converge on his person during the mission. On the other he is an exceptionally able investigator who, before he solves the mystery, survives a terrorist bombing, a brush with death on the streets of Paris, and a near fatal encounter with Compound X. Lem magnifies the intricate web of chance and design by a key detail reminiscent of The Invincible (1964; see separate entry). In this earlier novel the human frailty responsible for the original disaster is eventually called upon to help in the rescue effort.

In The Chain of Chance, we see a similar interplay between an apparent shortcoming and eventual success. (It is even more evident in the original Polish title of the novel which could be rendered as Catarrh, or even Runny Nose or Allergy.) John's allergy to pollen which plagues him with a runny nose and fits of sneezing is his Achilles's heel responsible for the greatest setback in his astronaut career—exclusion from the Mars mission. Yet the fact that he is, by his own admission, "'allergic'—in other words, defective," is an important link in the chain of chance which leads him to the solution of the bizarre deaths.

Other characters in the novel never evolve beyond the minimum dictated by its philosophical parameters. Randy, John's "monitor" during the mission; Anabelle, the girl whose life he saves; Barth, the computer expert whose help he solicits in Paris; several scientists at Barth's party who are Lem's spokesmen for philosophical points of view rather than fleshed-out individuals-—all are described with great aptness, but even greater sparsity. In fact, in a somewhat macabre twist, the "characters" that we learn about the most are the corpses.

During the exhaustive conference with Barth John unveils so many aspects of the dead men's backgrounds that theirs become the most thoroughly developed "life stories" in the book. Not that this wealth of information fosters a feeling of sympathy or identification with the victims. As a matter of fact, only Dieudonne Proque, the victim of the "French connection," emerges as more than just a relevant case study. The difference is significant for, while all others are victims of chance, Proque is exposed to the chemical weapon by its ruthless inventor who hopes to perfect its lethal properties even at the cost of a premeditated killing.

Social Concerns

Towards the end of the 1960s, Stanislaw Lem's fiction underwent a dramatic change. Previously, he would unveil his philosophical and scientific narratives using relatively conventional characters and linear plots. Now his protagonists would undergo a transformation according to one of two variants: They would become "maximized," so that at the center of the story would be the fate of the entire humanity, or "minimized," in completely hero-less narratives in which the spotlight would go to an idea or a theory. The plots, too, would diverge on either side of conventional, becoming baroquely playful, or radically thinned out, sometimes straight into nonexistence.

The Chain of Chance, although in some ways stunningly innovative, is not as experimental as other of Lem's works from the 1970s. This short novel boasts a well defined plot, a resonant conflict, a linear structure which builds up to a cliff-hanging climax, and a clear resolution. It features a conventional (if not typical) hero who, in the course of events, distinguishes himself with feats of courage, perseverance, and self-sacrifice. It has a strong central theme which, albeit unconventional, brings the elements of a mystery thriller into a nailbiting focus. On the surface, The Chain of Chance is engaged in conventional social critique only to the extent that it reflects Lem's broader socio-philosophical concerns. Artfully weaving statistics and probability into the structure of the plot, the writer takes up the questions of randomness, chance, and the categorically different ways in which they affect our society at the brink of the twenty-first century. Yet at the same time he dwells on some aspects of our social life with enough intensity to underscore his more direct concerns.

The action of the book takes place in the present, roughly around the time of its publication (1976), with only four minor discrepancies to indicate that it is an alternative present. The Eiffel Tower, amid a wall of high-rises, is about to be scrapped; Paris has notably less of its old architecture; Americans have successfully sent manned missions to Mars; and the Rome airport boasts a state-of-the-art antiterrorist system. Even if the first three elements get little play in the book, the Rome bombing stands apart: This episode takes up an entire chapter in the novel that has only three. Lem is dismayed that, far from dying out, terrorism is becoming more and more bloody, media-tailored and wanton, and he fears that there is no quick "fix" to its menace.

He disputes the facile view of terrorism as a "hardware" problem which will vanish as soon as more money is pumped into security measures. As widespread as this type of thinking may be in some political circles, the latest technology put into Rome's airport security proves totally inadequate to prevent mayhem.

Terrorism will always inflict terrible casualties as long as there are people willing to die for a political cause, and Rome's suicide attack is no different.

In our nonfictional world, rocked increasingly often by terrorist explosions, it is taken for granted that there must exist a connection between the target and the cause for the attack. Lem anticipates that the matter may not remain so clearcut and that violence

may turn towards even greater wantonness and indiscriminacy. Following the law of diminishing returns, every strike must surpass the last in violence in order to outrage the public and secure media coverage. Nobody, for example, claims responsibility for the Rome bombing, and it seems that the Japanese suicide has no rational motive for striking at this particular airport. In the world of The Chain of Chance, much as in our own, anybody can be made to pay for anything, as in the example of a "New Zealand tourist [who] had tried to protest the kidnapping of an Australian diplomat in Bolivia by hijacking a charter plane in Helsinki that was carrying pilgrims bound for the Vatican." This fictional chain of events could be tomorrow's sensational newsreel, as headline-grabbing violence, fanned by the victim mentality of its perpetrators, continues to spin out of control. Lem warns that the rapidly growing culture of victimization, which manifests itself across the social spectrum from crass terrorism to militant political correctness, may be one of the chronic ills of our times.

Social malfunctions can be a deliberate result of a terrorist rip in the fabric of the society. But they can also assume other forms—more insidious because chronic in nature—which can be equally hard to remedy. Society can be threatened as much by spectacular acts like terrorist attacks as by cumulative and synergistic effects of everyday phenomena which often go almost unnoticed. In this sense, Lem is concerned about forms of social behavior—including but not limited to terrorist pathology—which emerge when civilization reaches a certain stage of complexity. Specifically he concentrates on what may happen when society exceeds a certain quantitative threshold.

The simple rise in numbers of people living in cities, countries, and on the planet at large, can produce phenomena that transcend specific geographical location, or ideological and economic systems.

The rise in complexity is accompanied by a parallel rise in the potential for breakdown of the social "machine." Lem is aware that a change in quantity may dramatically affect its quality. Unobtrusively our civilization may be entering a stage where traditional strategies of coping with its ills and problems may prove impotent. In several subtle but powerful scenes the author describes, for example, the wretched results of urban development, deplored by all and controlled by none. Short, urgent news flashes to which the hero listens on the Rome-bound road mirror the chaos in the society at large.

Pollution, deregulated climate, chaos on highways, bumper-to-bumper traffic, strikes at the Rome and Paris airports, accompany the steady diet of violence on the radio: fierce demonstrations, buildings set on fire, terrorist proclamations, and the feminist underground's vows of more organized protests. We can detect a hint of Lem's views in his protagonist's reaction: "I shut off the radio as if slamming shut a garbage chute."

The specter of war and military research is never far from any of Lem's books and The Chain of Chance is no different. It is true that most of the victims in the novel perish as a result of a purely chance combination of various chemical substances. Yet the latter's lethal synergy is revealed to the reader through the testimony about secret chemical weapons research. France and, as we are given to understand, other peace-loving

nations continue to pursue such research armed with the pious hypocrisy of, "It's a wellknown fact that every nation loves peace and makes plans for war." The macabre characteristics of Compound X, which propel its victims towards gruesome suicides, are a symbol of Lem's horror at the means of mass-murder cooked up daily in weapon research laboratories. We do not usually refer to wartime killings as murder only because nationalistic propaganda justifies the taking of human lives a patriotic necessity. Yet the example of Dr. Dunant, a French researcher who works on Compound X, highlights Lem's concern about the moral responsibility of scientists in this process. As a police report makes apparent, Dunant kills an innocent man in cold blood in order to obtain a million times more deadly form of the drug.

Techniques

For an avid aficionado of mysteries there must be something odd about a whodunit in which probability replaces the butler. Knowing the rules of the genre the reader expects that, no matter how inventive the plot line and the resolution, the standard features of the story will remain unaffected. The central of these inviolable rules is that the investigation must lead to the apprehension of the criminal. "Justice must be done," is the tacit moral imperative of the crime story, faithfully observed by its practitioners.

Even the so-called police procedural, by far the most realistic in their treatment of criminal investigations, do not let perpetrators go free at the end of the day.

Although the reality of police work is often different, even the most accomplished writers of police procedural, such as Ed McBain or Maj Sjowall and Per Wahloo (the authors of the brilliant Martin Beck series), operate within this tacit convention.

Lem's decision to employ the standard features of a police procedural, only to subvert them in the end, is designed to surprise the reader and provoke him to reflection. The choice of the detective story must have been determined by the demands of Lem's narrative thought experiment. An introduction of elements of chance and unpredictability into the ossified structure of a crime story is a masterful way to enhance his theme.

Where more conventional writers aim to surprise the reader by proving the least suspected character to be the perpetrator, Lem dispenses with the criminal altogether. In the same way he subverts the moral and didactic prerequisite of crime fiction: the meting out of justice. There is no criminal justice to be administered when the dead men are shown to be victims of chance, rather than foul play.

In one fell swoop Lem puts the whole detective genre (of which he confesses to be an avid reader) in perspective by turning its time-honored traditions inside out and upside down.

Hard as it is to classify The Chain of Chance as a crime story—or, at least, as a typical crime story—it is even more difficult to treat it as science fiction.

Considering Lem's celebrated status as a science fiction writer, a certain inertia may have prompted critics to lump The Chain of Chance with the genre even though it displays few of its traditional elements. There is, of course, the lingering link in the person of the ex-astronaut who on several occasions reminisces about his participation in the Mars mission. But for the most part Lem's book is thoroughly realistic and contemporary; as a matter of fact he finds its naturalism and plausibility so compelling that he is "himself ready to believe in it."

Lem's originality of technique becomes equally apparent if we consider his book as a thriller or a philosophical conte. The Chain of Chance is an action thriller full of menace, terror, and spectacular violence, but it is a thriller unlike any other in the history of the

genre. Its theme is a bold socio-scientific thesis which describes how society begins to function in the manner of Brownian molecules, governed by implacable atomic laws. We now live, proposes the author, "in such a dense world of random chance, in a molecular and chaotic gas whose 'improbabilities' are amazing only to the individual human atoms. It's a world where yesterday's rarity becomes today's cliche, and where today's exception becomes tomorrow's rule." Among typical games of espionage and high-level conspiracies, Lem's novel is bound to stand out.

Compared to a typical roman philosophique, with its often anemic plot, cardboard characters, and slow narration, Lem's novel again shows its singularity. His socio-scientific hypothesis is embedded within the framework of spectacular action and suspense, featuring gruesome and bizarre deaths, drug-induced psychoses, mutilated suicide corpses, an impersonation of a dead victim, and the brewing menace of chemical warfare. The book's pace is rapid, the plotting tight, the characters believable, and the locations worthy of a tourist guide. Furthermore, the first person narration gives The Chain of Chance a feeling of immediacy uncommon in the traditional roman philosophique. Combined with the great likability of the hero, it fosters an easy and lasting involvement in the events.

The picture which emerges is that of a novel which borrows from diverse con ventions while remaining unique in the way it adapts them. The book is divided into three sections, based on locations in Naples, Rome, and Paris, of which the last is also the longest. The common thread among them is the investigation which, as it reveals more and more relevant detail, gives the plot a sense of relentless progression toward the solution.

Lem's literary mastery is at its most evident when reporting the interim results of the investigation. What in the hands of a lesser writer could become a plodding exposition inundated by apparently trivial detail, Lem turns into a thirty-page cliffhanger which makes his book gripping even on the level of pure mystery. It is clear that if for some reason he had ever decided to write crime or horror instead of science fiction, he would likely have been as successful.

Themes

Lem is a social philosopher whose vision is largely independent of ideological or economic particulars. In The Chain of Chance, he records and extrapolates trends which our civilization may display purely by virtue of having exceeded a certain numerically critical mass. His principal theme is that, at that point, certain structural regularities may begin to emerge spontaneously, in the same sense that the chaotic Brownian movements of gas molecules emerge as observable macro-properties (pressure, temperature) of gases. Lem, it may be fair to say, sets out to study the society as a Brownian system.

The writer reminds us that, as human beings, we cannot but always try to inquire into the causality behind the events that happen in our lives. The efforts to explain the world by determining answers to the question "Why?" give us an impression of understanding and control over its complexity. We seek to establish causal links both in our private and social lives as well as in all scientific theories.

After all, to understand a given phenomenon or event has always meant to account for the causes which brought it into existence. And yet, at a very recent stage in our scientific understanding of the world, this old approach had to be modified following the discovery of principles which govern the elementary structure of reality. Quantum physics, an assembly of some of the most successful theories ever formulated, reveals that at a certain level of analysis causal questions cease to be meaningful. The world is at the bottom unpredictable and indeterministic, and only our conviction that everything must conform to causal principles makes it difficult to accept this fact.

Still, Lem continues, it may seem that the world of human beings is categorically different from the world of subatomic principles, in which quantum unpredictability manifests itself so dramatically. Our scientific optimism, grounded in centuries of successful explanations in terms of causes and effects, insists that some parts of the world—for example, the human society—lie outside this type of statistical fluctuations. Lem shows in The Chain of Chance that this belief may be a relic of an old type of thinking and that human, social behavior is on many levels equally determined by chance. For a contemporary scientist or philosopher this type of inquiry has been settled when Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, the fundamental law of quantum mechanics, was shown to be a correct description of reality. But in the world of literary fiction Lem is the first writer to discuss seriously what this might mean on the scale of human actions and lives. His novel shows how our lives may be governed not just by individual decisions or laws of economics, but by the much less obvious statistical regularities.

The brilliance of Lem's literary thought experiment consists in reaching to the detective genre for a narrative framework within which to develop his theme. Since its inception the detective story has been one of the most structured and deterministic of literary forms. The perpetration of the crime always triggers an investigation which, by following the clues, leads to the discovery of causes (means and motives) and, through them, to the apprehension of the criminal. By breaking the conventions of the genre Lem draws

attention to its underlying deterministic structure and through it to the deterministic principles which govern our thinking. The world in which a series of gruesome deaths is not perpetrated by a human culprit but by a chain of coincidences is a world very different from the one to which we are habituated. Our culture, symbolized in the story by the criminal law, is simply not equipped to deal sensibly with events which are subject to laws of more fundamental nature—Nature's laws.

Key Questions

In a book and film market dominated by clones of Star Wars empires and XFiles pseudo-investigations, The Chain of Chance stands out as an example of a conceptually mature mystery. One avenue for discussion are the elements that create intrigue, suspense, and final resolution in this novel compared to American and British mysteries, especially as they have been popularized for special effects rather than mind-twisters that challenge the logical brain.

1. How would you classify The Chain of Chance: as a science fiction novel? A detective mystery? An action thriller? A socio-philosophical parable? What are the criteria for your classification?

2. Did you have any intimation of the solution to the mystery before it was revealed? Did you find Lem's solution startling?

3. The novel begins enigmatically, with John retracing the steps of a dead man.

Why does Lem place the reader in the middle of action, and only later fill in the missing background?

4. Although little is known about him or his past, the story's protagonist emerges as a sympathetic and likeable character.

Can you explain what makes him so?

5. Can you summarize the view of the human civilization which Lem takes as a starting point for The Chain of Chance?

6. Except for a few futuristic details, the novel's setting seems to be the contemporary present. What are the author's reasons behind this appeal both to the future and the present?

7. What elements in the story did you find most gripping or suspenseful? The "simulation" of the dead man? The airport bombing? The investigation of the bizarre suicides? The hero's hallucinatory experience?

8. How do you assess Lem's literary skills in evoking mood and imagery, plotting the action, or getting inside the characters' psyche?

9. Why is the protagonist almost nameless (even his first name is not revealed until two thirds into the story)? How does this fit into the novel's overall theme?

10. What are your feelings about the platitude, "every nation loves peace and makes plans for war," and the scientist Dunant's role in the chemical weapons research?

Literary Precedents/Related Titles

"The first version does not satisfy me completely, even though it is quite well constructed and generates a great deal of suspense . . . The Chain of Chance is better because it is plausible." With these words Lem described to Stanislaw Beres one of the more remarkable literary experiments of his career. After many years of reflection, the author returns to a familiar philosophical problem in order to frame a second novel around it. Over the years Lem avowed in numerous interviews that, as a rule, he does not prepare an outline before sitting down to write a book. In Solaris (1961), for example, he wrote the opening scene not knowing in advance what mystery his hero would face on board of the space station. But, like in many other respects, The Chain of Chance does not fit this pattern.

Commenting on the genesis of this novel in a 1979 Foundation interview, Lem revealed: "I knew from the beginning precisely what I wanted to achieve: a 'rational' variant of The Investigation." It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the writer regards The Chain of Chance and The Investigation (1959) as two variants of the same underlying problem, albeit separated by seventeen years and a score of fictional and discursive works. The impression is borne out by the multiple parallels between these two novels. Their common theme is the intrusion of chance and its unsettling statistical aspects into the orderly running of human lives. The similarity is continued in the choice of literary genre. Like its later incarnation, and true to its title The Investigation is a crime/detective story. It follows Lieutenant Gregory of Scotland Yard as he tries to unravel the mystery of corpses which appear to come back to life. Ultimately, in a break with the convention of the crime story which will be echoed in the variant from 1976, the police's efforts end in failure.

The solitary protagonist, the detective routine and the investigative organization behind it, the consultations with sometimes eccentric scientists, the atmosphere of incomprehension and menace, the red herrings, and the humanless "crime"—all these elements return in The Chain of Chance. In fact, if one disregards superficial differences in plotting, characterization and style, there is only one significant difference between these companion works. The later novel is a rational variant of The Investigation inasmuch as its apparently failed investigation is eventually brought to a triumphant resolution.

Lem's readiness to take the narrative risk in plotting mysteries which defy common sense rationality has few precedents in literature. On the surface the structure of Lem's twin mysteries may resemble the famous "locked room" category. The apparent similarity stems from the structure of the plot: an initial presentation of the mystery in a way which suggests that it may have no rational solution, and an eventual reconstruction of how the murder may, indeed, have been effected. But this superficial resemblance obscures at least two big differences.

For one, Lem surprises the reader not by tinkering with the tired conventions of the mystery genre but by subverting them altogether. Where other writers crack their heads

to spirit a human culprit out of the locked chamber, Lem unlocks the chamber with the aid of chance and probability. Even more crucial, where other writers limit themselves to entertaining their readers, Lem designs his mysteries in the spirit of entertainment and education. His goal is not to create a clever but ultimately forgettable variant of the crime mystery, but to shock and confuse the reader with an apparently insoluble enigma in order to make him think. Other mainstream writers, notably John Fowles in his remarkable short story "The Enigma" (in his 1974 collection The Ebony Tower), have been equally drawn to mystery of the apparently insoluble type.

But none even approach the breathtaking sweep and scientific precision of Lem's literary "double take," in which probability and its statistical macro-effects forge a macabre chain of chance.

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