

All things in their proper time and place: A causal analysis of A Confederacy of Dunces

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Abstract

This article analyzes Toole's novel from a causal perspective, focusing on the cause-effect dynamics that make the plot advance, from the initial event at D.H. Holmes until the outcome in the Night of Joy. A combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies has been applied to identify a series of 47 causal events that summarize all actions with an impact on plot development. Our research shows that the causal study of the novel is a useful approach that can reinforce or modify qualitative assessments of previous studies. The relevance of "Night of Joy" plot within the whole narrative and its key role in the rest of the subplots are verified in numerical terms. Besides, we have expanded and quantified the causal chains operating in the novel; and we have made sure, as well, that every subplot is essential in order to reach the final outcome (with the only exception of Dr. Talc's story). Finally, we have formulated an alternative outline of secondary plots than the ones supported by preceding research by using numeric metrics, demonstrating that "Paradise Vendors" and "Dorian Greene", previously considered secondary storylines, exert a high impact on *Confederacy's* finale, and are, perhaps, not so secondary plots after all.

Keywords: A Confederacy of Dunces; Boethius; Fortune's Wheel; causal analysis

INTRODUCTION

When, around 1966, John Kennedy Toole edited *A Confederacy of Dunces*, his literary imagination was no doubt shaped by the fabric of contemporary events. We could, perhaps, remember Martin Luther King leading the Civil Rights Movement, the raging Vietnam conflict, the foundation of the National Organization for Women (NOW), Lunar Orbiter 1 spacecraft launch, *Batman's* premiere on ABC TV, or actor Ronald Reagan being elected Governor of California.

Those years witnessed American society becoming more affluent than ever before, representing thus a nation of progress and success. Toole's novel is a product of such progress and a

critical review of it. His peculiar inventory of characters seems to be the parody of American life in those years, and its quintessential expression at the same time. In *Confederacy*, readers find a glimpse over the shadows of modern U.S. while the certainty of American achievements and greatness is also reaffirmed. The central character, Ignatius Reilly, embodies the peak of the American Dream, but also the bottomless hardships and cruelty that come with it. *Confederacy* offers a reading of a society absorbed in notions of progress, consumerism, identity, and success, also casting a prophetic lens on the future outcomes of that civilization. Reilly incarnates the ambiguities and contradictions of that momentum: judgmental, but stuck to big

screens in movie theaters, he embodies the childhood of a world where reality has grown into a screen. The readers of our 21st century might see him as a forerunner of our performance world, in his love for movies and comics, compulsive fast-food consumption, faulty reading practices, a quick impulse towards activism, and most particularly his nostalgic drive for a supposedly better, tasteful, and decent past.

The literary universe of *A Confederacy of Dunces* is unmistakably contemporary, in its double-faced set of resonances, the ambiguous parade of imperfect human types, and failed human institutions. As such, the text seems to embrace ideas of individuality and freedom as a byproduct of cause/effect mechanics, while putting them to the stand at the same time. In doing so, the novel has continued to engage a solid readership that is a testimony to its conceptual complexity and ability to produce actualized meaning in new readers.

DUNCES AND DANCES: A SINGULAR NOVEL AND A SINGULAR CHARACTER

Confederacy is, in a way, a book on a book, and a book about the role this book should play in contemporary life: Boethius' *On Consolation of Philosophy*. There has been fruitful debate regarding Toole's familiarity with the Roman philosopher's work. It is true that Ignatius, as the novel's main character, shows a superficial knowledge about it, given that "[h]is complaints over the fickleness of Fortune do correspond with the laments of the imprisoned Boethius at the beginning of *The Consolation*, but the words of Lady Philosophy gradually reveal to Boethius that the world is hardly subject to happenstance" (Clark, 1987: 273). Perhaps more relevant to this topic is to what extent did Toole possess an in-depth knowledge of Boethius' work and whether his views influenced the novel's shaping. In this regard, Robert Byrne claimed that Toole's average comprehension of Boethius philosophy was not consistent with an intentional Boethian

design for his novel (Leighton, 2012b). The analysis of *Toole's Papers*, undertaken by Leighton, has made possible a different assessment: while agreeing that there is no certainty that Toole had indeed read the philosopher (Leighton, 2011), Leighton (2012a) concludes that "Toole clearly understood the Boethian idea that an apparently malevolent, worldly Fortune could be under the control of Destiny, the temporal agent of God's beneficent Providence", and this idea could have reached Toole via Chaucer (Leighton, 2011: 8).

We believe, like Leighton, that the idea of order within fate is the novel's core. As we shall attempt to show in the following pages, *A Confederacy of Dunces* (Toole, 2007[1980]) can be read as a highly complex net of intertextual relationships. This net, woven by its omniscient narrator, is the result of the causal dynamics of plot and subplot interaction. In this fictional net, most subplots play a critical role, more relevant than had been previously acknowledged, since most incidents are indispensable to reaching the outcome. Boethius' philosophy, thus, serves rather as a structural palimpsest of Toole's novel, if not as a step-by-step scheme. We have combined literary analysis and quantitative tools, to reproduce the causality journey in the novel that ends up in the "Night of Joy" result. Causal assessment of *A Confederacy of Dunces* shows that Toole's novel is exemplary of Boethius' philosophy, for in its fictional world, "The order of the universe [...] emanates from its source, which is Providence, and disposes all things in their proper time and place." (Boethius, 2009[524]: 61–62).

A Confederacy of Dunces is a resonant tale, inhabited by several literary influences (Leighton, 2011). Simmons (1989: 33) points out that "[a] discussion of the novel and its central character hardly seem possible without mention [...] creations as Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Shakespeare's Falstaff in *Henry IV: Part I*, and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and *A Tale of a Tub*", adding to these titles such as "*Joseph Andrews*, *Tristram Shandy*, *The Picture of*

Dorian Gray, A Streetcar Named Desire, and Gone with the Wind." (Simon, 1994: 99–100). The map of literary influences also becomes the cartography of *Confederacy's* dialogues with each of the works.

The variety of literary resonances results, logically, in a likewise diversity of global interpretations. The novel has, thus, been labeled in an assortment of so contradictory ways, that "one wonders whether so many different things can be accomplished in a single text." (Freese, 2014: 359). Clark (1987), for instance, argues in favor of child abuse as a constant theme of the novel; Leighton (2012b) claims that the book is "a critique of competing definitions of humanism and their associated worldviews" (201) that "rejects both the Modernist Paradigm and Ficinian philosophy and points toward a dialectical synthesis of the two." (210); Bell (1988: 17) specifies that, at a metaphorical level, Ignatius "becomes the embodiment of the conflict between pragmatic reality as the contemporary world sees it and a more mystic one as the medievalists saw it."; AL.Din (1995: 69) suggests that "this novel is concerned with the basic social and moral problems which characterize modern American society [including] the issue of race identity, exploitation, the failure of the American dream and the deteriorating moral and spiritual values."; and Pugh (2020: 39) contends that the novel is centered "around two so-called 'crusades' to rescue humanity from its modern-day ills. The first involves an insurrection of the underpaid Black employees of Levy Pants; the second entails a conspiracy to infiltrate the government with gay White men"¹.

¹McIntyre (2020) argues that *A Confederacy of Dunces* "is a novel and not a moral or political treatise, and, thus, should be understood in terms of aesthetic categories and not in terms of 'good' or 'evil', or 'truth' or 'falsehood'" (38). As a consequence, Ignatius' "thoughts about 'Negroes' and 'perverts'" should be interpreted from an aesthetic point of view: "these are not real human beings with actual problems. Instead, they are the raw material out of which he [Ignatius] constructs the world" (47)

Abhijit Pal (2013) has contributed with a reading of *Confederacy* from the perspective of Psychiatry: he identifies symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia and depression, as well as some genetic traits of mental illness within the family in Toole (468). According to Pal, "Ignatius sees psychiatric illness as a social construct [...] and psychiatric treatment as being invasive, coercive and, in the case of psychoanalysis, simply ineffective. These criticisms overlap with many of the ideas regarding psychiatry being introduced at the time [...] by Michel Foucault" (Pal 2013: 469). Indeed, the French philosopher contrasted the freedom of medieval errant fools or madmen and the moralizing process of reclusion that took place around the 17th century. Foucault locates in the Baroque the association of madness and laziness, that is, "in the world of production and commerce" (1988: 57). We think that Ignatius might be the representation of that medieval fool/madman who abhors work and that Toole's knowledge of Medieval and Renaissance literature could have prompted that trait for his novel's main character.

Criticism around Toole's novel has grown and evolved so much that it is safe to say that *Confederacy* requires more than one "big narrative" to be contended with, literary or otherwise. Its richness and power of resonance call indeed for different approaches, as every one of them contributes to unearthing its many layers. Gibbs (1989) identifies it as a reverse satire; Britton (1995) presents it as a reconciliation of medievalism and determinism that reconciles Toole with Mark Twain's worldview; Rowland (2000) reads it as an updated, modern picaresque; Kline (1999) characterizes the novel as an in-depth elaboration of the grotesque, while McCluskey (2009) sees it as a demolishing reflection on the power of capitalism. Freese (2014) thinks that the novel is picaresque, but only on the surface; Wilson (2020) takes Ignatius as a reader who misreads Boethius's *Consolation*, and McIntyre (2020: 164) establishes both the novel and Ignatius as a clearly modern response to neomedieval nostalgia, for "he is a very modern

character and his animadversions against the inadequacies of the modern world are not best understood as an expression of a neomedieval worldview, but as the expression of a modern aesthetic individual”.

Marsh (2020: 207) introduces a suggestive idea and identifies sociopolitical or aesthetic ideologies as substitutes for practical activity and experience in Ignatius’s “activism”. In his opinion, this style of politics is a sign of the emergence of kitsch in the wake of industrial culture. We, following Calinescu, think it might not be too farfetched to look at Ignatius as a kitsch character itself. Calinescu (1987: 259) has defined the kitsch-man as “one who tends to experience as kitsch even non kitsch works or situations, one who involuntarily makes a parody of aesthetic response”. Ignatius’s response to Burma Jones’s plight or Levy workers’ predicament and his creative efforts (the Cross, the filling system, his Journal entries) are indicators of kitsch sensitivity. How can Ignatius, a supposed neo-medievalist character, represent kitsch culture, we might ask ourselves. Reader’s response theory may shed a light: was Toole writing for the more conservative constituency of readers (Status Quo believers), presenting them with a literally conceived character (as a neo-medievalist), while also addressing new age readers with a parodic character, taken symbolically this time? (Status Quo opposition).

Several scholars have linked the appeal to satire in the novel with the critique of modernity. Daigrepoint has focused on *Confederacy* as a “keen satire of modern existence” (1982: 74) and Mackethan affirms Toole’s use “of religious allegory in the exploration of modern ills” (1994: 29). Admittedly, the novel targets materialism as the American religion of Modern Times (Patteson & Sauret, 1983), hence economy related comments are made by more than one character. For example, in one of his Journal entries, Ignatius writes: “With the breakdown of the Medieval system, the gods of Chaos, Lunacy, and Bad Taste gained ascendancy. [...] What had once been dedicated to the soul was now

dedicated to the sale.” (Toole, 2007[1980]:18). Later, we read the narrator’s take on Lana’s worshipping of money, like the imprecations of a priestess, over the bills that the boy had given her. [...] Her fine body, itself a profitable investment through the years, bent reverently over the Formica-top altar. Smoke, like incense, rose from the cigarette in the ashtray at her elbow, curling upward with her prayers, up above the host which she was elevated in order to study the date of its minting, the single silver dollar that lay among the offerings. Her bracelet tinkled, calling communicants to the altar, but the only one in the temple had been excommunicated from the Faith because of his parentage and continued mopping. (Toole, 2007[1980]: 44)

Ignatius himself becomes as peculiar a priest as Lana, in his offering at Levy Pants: “By one-thirty, the cross was almost finished. It lacked only the little gold leaf letters that spelled GOD AND COMMERCE which Ignatius had ready to apply across the bottom of the cross.” (Toole, 2007[1980]: 67). McCluskey (2009: 11) reads it as “an attempt to reconcile the tension between soul and sale, between the spiritual and the material”, a clash that in his opinion is, together with the corruption of the innocents and modern slavery, a recurring motif in the novel. When the three motifs are seen in combination, they produce a well-rounded reflection on American mercantile identity. McCluskey believes with this “God and Commerce” Cross Ignatius tries to fill his void upon being forced into entering the workforce to serve a soulless enterprise. We think Toole’s irony is clearly at work in this respect, for he highlights the symbolic bond of religion and economy in America’s bedrock which the very Dollar bills show (In God We Trust).

Ignatius Reilly lashes out against the materialistic concept of modern society, although he is paradigmatic of that very consumerism system: Dr. Nut and trash food lover, compulsive watcher of television programs and mainstream movies, and addicted to buying useless objects. The greatest contradiction of the character is

precisely that: his being a product of the society he so much loathes, as Ruppensburg (1986: 124) has pointed out regarding Ignatius's medievalism. Nevertheless, in our opinion, through his behavior, Ignatius manages surprisingly to exemplify the fears of the medieval man. It is worth noting, in this instance, how the main character becomes the grotesque flagbearer of almost every capital sin, as if in a Bosch painting: sloth and gluttony are a regular practice for Ignatius, as "When he had finished the first hot dog, Ignatius prepared and consumed another, contemplating other kindnesses that might postpone his having to go to work again." (Toole, 2007[1980]: 93), or the confession in his Journal about "the perversion of having to GO TO WORK" (Toole, 2007[1980]: 19). Pride is usually his default attitude, since he proclaims to "mingle with my peers or no one, and since I have no peers, I mingle with no one. (Toole, 2007[1980]: 71)". Lust is also pervasive in his daily life; especially disturbing because of his disruptive onanism, as we shall comment on later. As to wrath, we believe it is also Ignatius's "trademark", not only with his mother but with Mancuso, and other characters. Greed makes him hide money from his mom, and envy is clearly at work in his relationship with Mirna Minkoff, as his reactions to her letters clearly attest. The difference between Ignatius the medieval sinner and Ignatius the modern sinner is fear: there is no uneasiness in the latter, while the former should have felt dread and remorse. That is why Ignatius's medievalism is more like a "prop" whose function is to highlight the character's contemporary meaning, in a world devoid of pre-Enlightenment sacralty.

This contrast between endorsements of medieval values and 20th-century behaviors has prompted a great deal of research. Scholars have seen in Ignatius the incarnation of two conflicting worldviews that "touches upon crucial philosophical questions through a wide range of both direct and implied allusions to writers from Boethius and John Lyly to Mark Twain and Walker Percy" (Freese, 2014: 385).

Percy has, perhaps, praised him in a somewhat contradictory manner, introducing him as "Ignatius Reilly, without progenitor in any literature I know of—slob extraordinary, a mad Oliver Hardy, a fat Don Quixote, a perverse Thomas Aquinas" (Percy, 2007, Foreword: 1), that is, with three significant progenitors indeed. The apparent discrepancy, we believe, points towards Ignatius's nature as a cartoon, a parody within the parody: a meta parody, we might conclude. Ignatius's self-awareness of his grotesqueness originates most probably as a defense strategy to overcome the side effects of a difficult childhood. We readers get but a quick glimpse of it, in a short analepsis towards the end of the novel:

Ignatius felt as alone as he had felt on that dark day in high school when in a chemistry laboratory his experiment had exploded, burning his eyebrows off and frightening him. The shock and terror had made him wet his pants, and no one in the laboratory would notice him, not even the instructor, who hated him sincerely for similar explosions in the past. For the remainder of that day, as he walked soggily around the school, everyone had pretended that he was invisible. (Toole, 2007[1980]: 83)

Nevertheless, some of his peculiar traits seem to be real, and not just part of a defense mechanism. Ignatius's sexuality has been rendered as ambiguous and disturbing sometimes, according to some scholars (see Hardin, 2007):

Bouncing up and down on his side vigorously, Ignatius sensed a belch rising in his throat, but when he expectantly opened his mouth he emitted only a small burp. Still, the bouncing had some physiological effect. Ignatius touched the small erection that was pointing downward into the sheet, held it, and lay still trying to decide what to do. [...] Ignatius manipulated and concentrated. At last a vision appeared, the familiar figure of the large and devoted collie that had been his pet when he was in high school. "Woof!" Ignatius almost heard Rex say once again. "Woof! Woof! Arf!" Rex looked so lifelike. One ear dropped. He panted. The

apparition jumped over a fence and chased a stick that somehow landed in the middle of Ignatius' quilt. As the tan and white fur grew closer, Ignatius' eyes dilated, crossed, and closed, and he lay wanly back among his four pillows, hoping that he had some Kleenex in his room. (Toole, 2007[1980]: 20)

Clark (1987: 269) understands this fragment as “a shockingly funny perversion of one of the most perennially appealing of sentimental clichés: the love between a boy and his dog. [...] [And] it can be said to serve as an emblem for one of the novel's central concerns: the corruption of childish innocence.” Regardless of how the scene is interpreted, disruption and grotesqueness end up as a constituting traits of Ignatius which we believe are related to his construction as an essentially grotesque character. But it might also have to do with the construction of Ignatius as an essentially grotesque character. As Bakhtin puts it, “The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract” (Bakhtin, 1984: 19). The Russian philosopher relates the expression of carnivalesque laughter, or popular laughter, with the evolution of parodic genres from Latin literature: the grotesque, the degraded then, becomes a critical aspect of the parody. The assessment of the parodic nature of the novel demands special attention about the genre, if only because the parody is always the parody of something, so something needs to emerge.

Some scholars have placed *A Confederacy of Dunces* within the picaresque genre or rather the “new American picaresque” (Sherrill, 2000). Ignatius is, therefore, seen as “[in some ways] a latter-day picaresque hero. [...] The picaro, who like Ignatius is inherently anti-social, deals with society by being clever and adaptable [...]. Ignatius' adventures parody this aspect of the picaresque. He tries almost everything [...] but he fails abysmally at each venture” (Patteson & Sauret, 1983: 11–12). The parallel with the picaresque novel arises precisely, we believe, from its parodic mood, a parodic nature that the Spanish

development of the genre shares with Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. Both *Lazarillo de Tormes* (the book which inaugurates the picaresque genre in Europe) and *Don Quixote* depart from the established, idealistic, valued, epic-like genres (lives of saints, pastoral romance, chivalric literature, and courtly love to name only a few), to present a different worldview in which perspective takes front and center, and it does so precisely through the parody of dominant discourses of the time. Or, to put it differently: what are the values, genres, or established discourses that *A Confederacy of Dunces* might be aiming to subvert or challenge?

We believe that Ignatius certainly partakes of the antiheroic nature of the rogue, but an important difference appears when compared with the pioneers of the genre: the rascal tries to assimilate himself into society, and not to be different from it. The picaresque hero wants to be admitted by society, but he does not want to reform society, whereas Ignatius presents a keenness for activism and reform (Crusades), although not very efficient. Don Quixote, on the other hand, sets out his adventures precisely to “right the wrongdoings” of the world. Cervantes's *Don Quixote* is born with the explicit aim of putting on the stand the “false books” of chivalry, by making Don Quixote a mock, a parody, of the chivalric values as an anachronic reality. It is quite evident that parallels between Don Quixote and Ignatius exist. (Ciochină, 2014a and 2014b; Carasevici, 2017), and that Ignatius “becomes a modern-day Don Quixote with his surrealistic tilting at windmills during the New Orleans Sodomites' peace movement to Save the World through Degeneracy, and during his crusade for ‘Moorish dignity’ at the Levy pants factory” (Wyatt-Brown, 1986: 1004). Just as Don Quixote was driven towards being a character novel, Ignatius shares this performative anxiety. His “journal of a working boy, or, up from sloth” (Toole, 2007[1980]: 59) suggests it so: “Darryl, Your Working Boy” (60), “Gary, Your Militant Working Boy” (74), “Lance, Your

Besieged Working Boy” (133) or “Tab, Your Pacifist Working Boy” (154). These heteronyms show Ignatius as a character, to Ignatius himself.

However, recognizing the parodic nature of Toole’s novel only takes us halfway. The other half would be, in our view, to identify what genres, discourses, or cultural products of the 20th century America wanted Toole to satirize. Who were the saints and knights of Toole’s times? A quick and in no way exhaustive review of cultural references throughout the novel shows Doris Day movies (with Cary Grant, David Niven, or Rock Hudson as regular male companions of the actress); advertisements in magazines like *Life*, such as the Yardley advertisement “for the man who won’t settle for average”; or the Academic discourse, a parody of which is made through two narrative moments: the first one is by Ignatius himself, who in a brief but devastating reference in chapter two, quotes himself while writing one of his essays:

Merchants and charlatans gained control of Europe, calling their insidious gospel “The Enlightenment.” The day of the locust was at hand, but from the ashes of humanity there arose no Phoenix. The humble and pious peasant, Piers Plowman, went to town to sell his children to the lords of the New Order for purposes that we may call questionable at best. (See Reilly, Ignatius J., *Blood on Their Hands: The Crime of It All, A study of some selected abuses in sixteenth-century Europe*, a Monograph, 2 pages, 1950, Rare Book Room, Left Corridor, Third Floor, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University, New Orleans 18, Louisiana. Note: I mailed this singular monograph to the library as a gift; however, I am not really certain that it was ever accepted. (Toole, 2007[1980]: 25–26).

Ignatius projects himself as an authority on the matter at hand, authority gained after writing a text of two pages that he has placed in the Rare Book Collection of the Library of a major American University, among the likes of Shakespeare, Newton, Pascal, Voltaire, Rousseau, Adam Smith, and others.

The second explicit parodic instance of Academia appears with the use of El Zorro, one of the heteronyms of Ignatius, in a letter addressed to his professor, dr. Talc (pun intended through phonetics, we believe). El Zorro serves Toole to criticize both the Academic realm and its discourse which, besides having been already mocked, now appear threatened by popular culture. Other references to cultural products of the time include *Batman’s* comics and tv production, together with Walt Disney’s Mickey Mouse, Judy Garland references, or even Myrna Minkoff as a parody of Doris Day, and so on ... So, Boethius had quite a few competitors.

A *Confederacy of Dunces* is, then, a textual adventure, which explains why it has attracted so much academic (sorry, Mr. Toole!) engagement. Its complexity, as if a palimpsest with different layers, begs for more than just a reading. Our goal, however, is to complement the overall research around it with an in-depth analysis of one aspect: its causal structure. To accomplish such an aim, the novel can be factorized into 47 critical events that, in intertwining with each other, arrive at the outcome at Night of Joy.

QUALITATIVE CAUSAL ANALYSIS

The significance of causality in the novel has been remarked on by several works. Kline (1999: 288), for instance, notes that “the reader’s pleasure stems from an appreciation of the precarious balance that is generated when the unreconstructed incongruousness of the grotesque situation or description joins the dynamics of the metonymically motivated causal sequences of plot”. Kline’s vision of causality is related to the narration of the grotesque, and, in his opinion, “Toole has located within the domain of narration a rhetorical mechanism that creates humor by mediating the disparateness of the grotesque and the unifying logic of causality” (284). The rhetorical mechanism Kline refers to is metonymy, “the figure most responsible for the reader’s perception of referential relationships of

causality” (285). Metonymy, according to Kline, happens at the narrative’s “points of juncture in the story”, or “nodes”, which, “emanate omphalocentrically from the grotesque figure of Ignatius J. Reilly” (285).

Qualitative-wise, causal analysis reveals an interesting aspect of Toole’s work: many characters and key elements are presented on the first pages. Mancuso, Burma Jones, Claude Robichaux, Dorian Greene, Lana Lee, Darlene, and Mirna Minkoff appear or are mentioned in the first chapter. Ignatius’s two jobs in the future are also gliding in these first moments: hotdog vendor, “Then why don’t we stop and eat something?” Ignatius pointed to the cart at the corner. It was shaped like a hot dog on wheels. ‘I believe that they vend foot-long hot dogs” (Toole, 2007[1980]: 16–17), and manager at Levy Pants since the novel begins precisely with a criticism of clothing: “Several of the outfits, Ignatius noticed, were new enough and expensive enough to be properly considered offenses against taste and decency. Possession of anything new or expensive only reflected a person’s lack of theology and geometry; it could even cast doubts upon one’s soul.” (Toole, 2007[1980]: 3). French Quarter, Bourbon Street, the Night of Joy, and the Police station, key places in the plot, are also quickly introduced. Several of these elements will come back fully later on in the book, but it appears that Toole wanted to launch them right away as if he were a magician showing all the props before the trick is done: an overview of the threads to weave the fabric. This procedure is consistent with the fact that causality articulates the novel (all things in their proper time and place): a speedy presentation of everything allows for a speedy definition of the narrative board on which every piece will be interacting. However, this causality is a hidden one that will only be exposed at the end, showing how fate has a place for an order due to Fortune’s Wheel turn: actually, all things were in their proper time and place.

Kaylor (2001: 75) poses the structure of the work “on the turning of Fortune’s Wheel [...]”

Thus, the novel tells the story of one turn of Fortune’s Wheel. Of course, within this great turn of the Wheel, Ignatius experiences smaller ups and downs.” Certainly, looking at how the diverse subplots evolve, we can conclude that Fortune is by every character’s side. All the agents of the novel begin their narrative journeys from a particular position of Fortune’s Wheel. As the story goes on, they move until the outcome places them where they should be according to providence’s plan: good ones are rewarded, bad ones punished. An “optimistic resolution [that] directly reflects Philosophy’s explanation to Boethius that ‘[...] all fortune is good” (Ruppersburg, 1986: 125). Nevertheless, we believe that this conclusion might be nuanced in two ways: on the one hand, the novel is not structured around the turning of Fortune’s Wheel, but around Providence’s plans instead. The setbacks experimented by characters are explained from a bigger scheme/framework where a complex causal events map is shaped. We will study this map in the next section. On the other hand, the “happy” final outcome of the novel, with the rewards and the punishment of the right characters, seems debatable to us. This assessment might be imprecise without a clear measuring of the goodness or wickedness of fictional beings being reached. Perhaps, it would be more useful to consider that, in Toole’s world, losers are rewarded, especially if we look into the matter from the point of view of American Culture. Ignatius’s adventures or a touch of them end up benefiting, actually, unsuccessful characters. Mancuso is a willing cop, but incompetent; Darlene is a good soul, but a talentless dancer; Irene is a respectable widow with a serious problem of alcoholism and possibly depression; Burma, the representative of the discriminated African American community through systemic racism, with no vocation skills and on the brink of mendicity; Gus Levy, apparently a winner, is emotionally abused by his wife and daughters and intimidated by his father’s legacy, unmotivated and unprepared for entrepreneurial

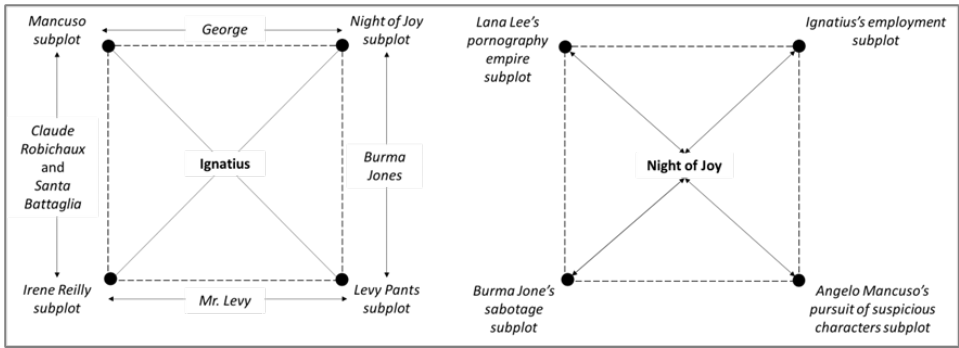


FIGURE 1. Outline of subplots proposed by Patteson & Sauret (1983) – left section of the figure, and Gibbs (1989). The latter is based on Clark (1987) - right section of the figure.

activities.² Every one of them has something in common: they are losers. The opportunity brought to them by the end of the novel is a sort of reverse epic, with losers succeeding over a “bullying fate or context”.

The causal events map shows two key incidents in the novel. The first one, in a somewhat unusual way, happens at the very beginning, when Mancuso tries to arrest Ignatius at the D.H. Holmes department store’s entrance. This situation sets in motion every following event. This foundational incident seems to initially affect only the main character, but his interactions with the rest of the cast results in his imbrication with all of them. Like a nuclear chain reaction, consequences will directly reach everyone. Burma Jones’s frequent allusions to “nuclear bum” hold the visual resonance of an explosion that touches upon everything and everyone.: “That fat freak a guarantee one hunner persen nuclear bum. Shit. Drop him on somebody, everbody gettin caught in the fallout, gettin their ass blown up” (Toole, 2007[1980]:

²As a matter of fact, Gus Levy is, to a certain degree, a lesser grotesque reflection of Ignatius, since both share a few traits: both live under a detested woman’s shadow, they are both lazy, not capable of taking responsibility and focused on living as pleasantly as possible. Possibly, this is why Mr. Levy ends up feeling sympathy for Ignatius

198). Ignatius is the spark indeed, and as if he were a mushroom cloud, he spreads his influence. The second incident happens at the end of the novel. The episode at the Night of Joy produces an unexpected twist, and this implies important changes for the rest of the characters so that the wicked are punished and the good/loser ones are rewarded.

Structurally speaking, Patteson & Sauret’s outline (1983: 3) stated that “each major subplot is connected to two others by one or more characters, and each is connected directly to Ignatius”; this assessment is confirmed by the left section of Figure 1. Gibbs (1989) suggests an alternative, inspired by Clark’s work, in which “the Night of Joy” is “the physical hub of A Confederacy of Dunces” (1987: 272), as shown in the right section of Figure 1. However, Patteson & Sauret’s proposal seems to be more fitting, since it manages to accurately reproduce the novel’s structure. However, the inclusion of other substories, apparently less relevant, might also be of interest, especially from a causal perspective. We believe those ignored subplots are key in shaping the sequence of events.

In the first place, the Paradise Vendors subplot can hardly be considered secondary for three reasons: the adventure, is 7 chapters long, it presents some of the most hilarious episodes of the story, and it does include critical events toward reaching the outcome. Should Ignatius

not be forced to seek and get another job, he could not possibly go on interacting with the rest of the characters. In our opinion, the encounters with Dorian Green and George function as interfaces while driving at the novel's conclusion. The arrival of Ignatius, dressed in a pirate's costume (fake earring included), to the French Quarter sets in motion a series of required incidents for the outcome to happen. The hot dog cart where George decides to hide the porno pictures opens the door for Ignatius's decision to attend the Night of Joy show. His work destination in the French Quarter leads to his encounter with Dorian Greene, which in turn ushers in the failed inaugural Peace Party assembly and the following persecution of Frieda, Betty, and Liz, all critical players in the fight at the Night of Joy. Additionally, Ignatius's pirate custom, and its fake earring, trigger Darlene's cockatoo incident, which starts the fight in the club. Therefore, the cart, French Quarter job, and pirate customs play a critical role in the novel's ending. Paradise Vendors gains singular importance from the point of view of its relevance in terms of causality.

Secondly, Dorian Greene's subplot contains crucial elements for the outcome as well. This character shows up very early in the novel, when he buys Irene Reilly's hat at the Night of Joy, while Irene's son explains in detail his incident with the taxi on returning home from Baton Rouge. Dorian comes back into the narrative when Ignatius begins selling hot dogs in the French Quarter. On this second occasion, this confluence sets off a series of events that, again, become key in the closure: the already mentioned inaugural Peace Party meeting, Dorian's insistence on Ignatius to dress the pirate disguise, his expulsion after and Frieda, Betty, and Liz's persecution.

Finally, we should mention two more subplots, less relevant in our view: Myrna Minkoff and dr. Talc. As a character, Myrna appears in the novel in a spatial "deferred" way, for the readers never experience her outside of the letters she writes, or the memories (few)

Ignatius keeps. Her major role in the story consists in showing up, in the end, to save Ignatius from being hospitalized and hence imprisoned at the Charity Hospital. Causality-wise her appearance is not important, since it is not required as a supporting element for other subplots, nor does her arrival at Ignatius' home seem warranted. As Clark affirms (187: 273) "the chain of apparent coincidences [...] bring the destinies of the principal characters to an eventual resolution before the Night of Joy affirms the ultimate order and rightness of the universe." Myrna Minkoff is the exception, a "Deus ex Machina" mechanism (Kline 1999: 286), and, as such, does not fit in the perfect sequence of causal events which composes the novel's architecture. Dr. Talc subplot, in terms of action development, seems to be superfluous, and his value lies in being "a satire on the tenured English professor" (McNeil, 1984: 41). However, as we have mentioned before, we believe that dr. Talc is a precise and efficient means to establish the novel's targets of parody, and American Academia is one of those, even though it is clearly outplaced and appears to be a hanging thread from the thickly knitted tapestry which is *Confederacy*.

Our research led us to the conclusion that the novel's outline could add to Pattenon & Sauret (1983)'s model a few changes, which are shown in Figure 2: we suggest the addition of two not-so-secondary-subplots since their weight in terms of causal relations is close to that of the ones considered more relevant.

There is one last consideration to be made about the apparent determinism in the novel. Certainly, the events seem to unfold in an excessively automatic or unyielding way towards a specific outcome. However, there is no inexorability, as Leighton has pointed out (2011: 33) "Ignatius creates opportunities for the other characters, but not outcomes", since "beyond Ignatius's assignment of role to them, the people he collects around himself deviate from the type and act independently of allegorical consideration. In fact, they extricate themselves from the

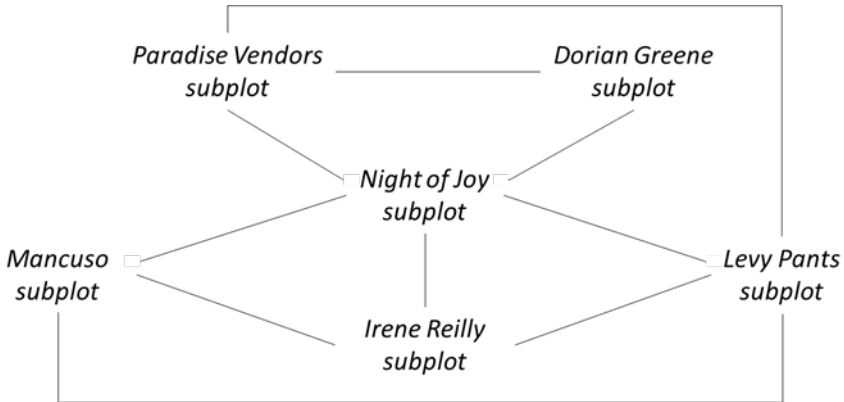


FIGURE 2. Proposed subplot scheme based on the causal analysis of the novel.

trouble he creates for them by willful actions and conscious decisions, not luck or destiny” (Bell 1988: 19). Mr. Levy might be considered a paradigmatic example of this idea; despite his awareness of the falsehood of Miss Trixie’s confession, he makes the decision to go forward and try to solve his problems.

For everyone’s sake, he thought, you will have to be declared incompetent and confess, Miss Trixie. You are being framed. Mr. Levy laughed out loud. Why had Miss Trixie confessed so sincerely? “Silence!” Miss Trixie snarled, snapping awake. That Reilly kook had really been worth saving after all. He had saved himself, Miss Trixie, and Mr. Levy, too, in his own kook way. (Toole, 2007[1980]: 214)

All and all, Confederacy’s characters get the “redeeming” opportunity via Ignatius, but they make the decision and act freely: Irene chooses to go to the bowling alley, she decides to enter into a relationship with Claude Robichaux, and, eventually she makes up her mind to lock her son up in the Charity Hospital, in spite of circumstances; Mancuso, regardless the pitiful results of his job’s performance, is settled on his profession and keeps on trying to arrest criminals, instead of quitting it; Burma resolves to collaborate with the police in arresting Lana Lee. Besides, those characters that end up being punished have made their bed, so to speak, and must sleep on it, since they had made, indeed,

their own decisions: Lana Lee approached Patrolman Mancuso, and this step yielded in her arrest; once in jail, she decides to insult Frieda, Betty, and Liz, only to make her situation worse; George chose to use Ignatius’s cart to hide the porno pictures, assuming he could control the hotdog vendor for a few dollars; and dr. Talc decides to keep silent and avoid his vindication, and this results in creating more havoc for him. Therefore, the characters’ narrative journey seems, in our opinion, to support a worldview with enough room for both ideas, and makes compatible the interaction of Fortune and free will.

QUANTITATIVE CAUSAL ANALYSIS

With the aim to carry out the quantitative analysis, 47 key events have been identified in the novel. For each one of them, preceding incidents with a cause-effect link have been also determined.

It could be argued that the “genesis” of Ignatius as the character he is when the plot begins is the death of Rex his dog, which, according to the neighbor, changed his character. Perhaps the High School accident, in chemistry lab class, would be more appropriate. However, if we remain within the explicit cause-effect links in the novel, we believe the foundational incident is Ignatius’s attempted arrest at the

D.H. Holmes department store entrance. We have listed it as “origin” in Table 1. Unfolding events start from this one, and they relate with previous ones that, in the final analysis, go back to “zero event”. For instance, Lana Lee’s decision

to change the pictures pickup schedule, which forces George to keep the problematic package for several hours until schools close (event coded as NJ6), is the consequence of two previous incidents. The first one is Jones’s suspicions of

TABLE 1. Events and causal relationships identified in the novel.

Code	Event	Precedent
Origin	Incident in D.H. Holmes Department Store	
NJ1	Ignatius and Irene come into the Night of Joy	Origin
NJ2	Ignatius e Irene are expelled from the Night of Joy	NJ1
NJ3	Jones finds a job in the Night of Joy and hears about Ignatius again	-
NJ4	Jones is suspicious of George and begins to search for proof of Lana’s illegal activities	NJ3
NJ5	Lana Lee becomes nervous upon the Police presence	M5
NJ6	Lana Lee changes the pictures pickup schedule, forcing George to keep the pack for several hours	NJ4; NJ5
NJ7	Lana Lee, persuaded by Jones, allows Darlene’s show with the cockatoo, to avoid the risks of her drink serving	NJ3; NJ5
NJ8	Jones writes in the parcels with the pictures the Night of Joy’s address	NJ4
NJ9	George decides to use Ignatius’s cart to hide the pictures	PV1; NJ6
NJ10	Ignatius finds the pictures and the address	NJ9; M7; NJ8
NJ11	Jones persuades Ignatius to attend the Night of Joy’s premiere	NJ10
NJ12	Ignatius goes to the Night of Joy	NJ11
NJ13	When the cockatoo hooks up Ignatius’s earring he goes out, faints on the streets, and ends up in the hospital	PV2; NJ7; NJ12
NJ14	Night of Joy Incident: Lana Lee is arrested; Frieda, Betty, and Liz are arrested too; George is arrested the following day; Darlene gets a job as a dancer; Patrolman Mancuso is a hero	NJ13; M8; DG4
I1	Car Accident	NJ2
I2	Irene Reilly meets Santa Battaglia through Patrolman Mancuso	I1
I3	Santa Battaglia introduces Claude Robichaux to Irene Reilly	I2
I4	Ignatius lends Mancuso “Boethius’s book, to soothe his mother	LP6
I5	Irene Reilly decides to confine Ignatius at the Charity Hospital	I3; NJ14
M1	Claude Robichaux is arrested and meets Burma Jones, who learns about Ignatius	Origin
M2	Patrolman Angelo Mancuso is penalized	M1
M3	Mancuso’s fight with Frieda, Betty, and Liz	M2
M4	Ignatius puts Patrolman Mancuso on track of Night of Joy	NJ2
M5	Mancuso’s sergeant begins investigating the Night of Joy	M4
M6	Sergeant sanctions Mancuso to work at the bus station	M3; M4
M7	George steals Mancuso Boethius’s book, in the bus station toilets	M6; I4; NJ6

(Continued)

TABLE 1. (Continued)

Code	Event	Precedent
M8	Mancuso follows Ignatius to the Night of Joy upon Irene's petition	I1; NJ12
LP1	Ignatius Reilly begins to work at Levy Pants	I1
LP2	Ignatius establishes a friendship with Miss Trixie	LP1
LP3	Burma Jones tells a worker at Levy Pants that Ignatius is under police surveillance	M1; NJ3
LP4	Ignatius writes an offensive letter to Abelman's Dry Goods	LP1
LP5	Ignatius provokes a riot at Levi Pants	LP1
LP6	Ignatius is fired	LP3; LP5
LP7	Mrs. Levy resumes her interest for Miss Trixie	LP6
LP8	Abelman's Dry Goods reports Levy Pants	LP4
LP9	Ignatius tells Gus Levy that the letter was written by Miss Trixie, and she confesses due to her friendship with "Gloria"	LP1; LP8; NJ14
LP10	Mrs. Levy accepts her responsibility; Gus decides to divorce, plan a strategic change in his business, and gets involved in it; he creates an award to concede to Jones, who also finds a job there	LP6; LP9
PV1	Ignatius begins to work for Paradise Vendors	LP6
PV2	Ignatius is assigned to the French Quarter and is dressed with a pirate's custom and an earring	PV1
DG1	Dorian Greene buys Irene Reilly her hat	NJ2
DG2	Ignatius meets Dorian Greene again and decides to found the Peace Party	DG1; PV2
DG3	Ignatius is expelled from Dorian Greenes' house	DG2
DG4	Frieda, Betty, and Liz chase Ignatius to the Night of Joy	DG3; NJ12
MM1	Ignatius writes Myrna Minkoff about his new job	PV1
MM2	Ignatius writes Myrna Minkoff about the Peace Party	DG2
MM3	Ignatius escapes with Myrna	MM1; MM2; I5

George, which makes him search for proof of Lana's illegal activities, while openly stating his doubts (event coded as NJ4). The second is the presence of cops at the Night of Joy, which significantly increases Lana's anxiety (event coded as NJ5). The table's codification corresponds to every event's subplot, as in Figure 2: NJ – Night of Joy, I-Irene Reilly, M-Mancuso, LP-Levy Pants, PV- Paradise Vendors, and DG-Dorian Greene. In addition to this, Myrna Minkoff's subplot (code MM) has also been included, despite her void in terms of narrative matter or linkage qualities towards the other

characters, as stated previously, so that Ignatius's escape can be factored in.

The table, once defined, produces a graph (Figure 3) that includes all the causal relationships that appear in the novel. In mathematical terms, it is a directed acyclic graph (dag) due to all edges being directed and there being no directed cycles, i.e. following arrows in the graph it is impossible to return to any point, which seems to be logical since we are dealing with cause-effect links. To compose the figure programming language R (R Core Team, 2013) and library igraph (Csardi and Nepusz, 2006)

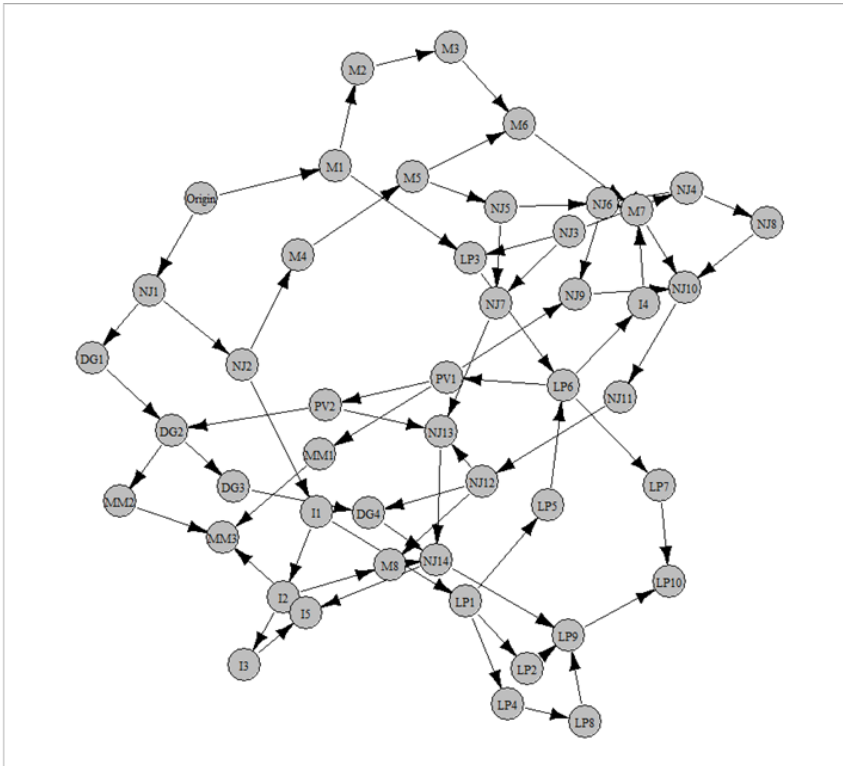


FIGURE 3. Map of causal relationships based on Table 1.

have been employed. The first visual impression is that there is clearly a very complex net of intimately related causal links. This net shows that all events are either directly or indirectly associated. As a matter of fact, we can conclude, in the first place, that a change in any of the 47 identified events would imply a different outcome for the novel.

Secondly, Ignatius participates directly in 26 out of 47 identified causal incidents, 55.3%. In other words, although it is the protagonist who sets Fortune's Wheel in motion, and has, therefore, an indirect influence in every event, his direct involvement is not as significant as could be expected. We believe this idea, on the one hand, reinforces the notion of characters' exercise of free will, and, on the other, challenges the idea of Fate as the one and only mover.

However, the use of mathematical tools for network analysis seemed useful to obtain more information from this graph. We have employed the so-called "betweenness" normalized as a centrality measure, to determine the relevance of every event. This metric can be interpreted as mediation potential, and the calculus procedure could be approximately defined as the number of shortest paths between nodes that pass through a concrete node. In this way, each event has an associated relative importance within the network, which can take values from 0 to 1.

Individually considered, the most relevant event seems to be Ignatius's Discovery of the phonographic pictures and the addressed to the Night of Joy (betweenness = 0.064), closely followed by Ignatius firing from Levi Pants (betweenness = 0.062), and Jones's persuading

Ignatius to attend the show at the Night of Joy (betweenness = 0.057). This result is consistent with the qualitative analysis, since these three events have a singular importance in the plot. If we analyze every subplot at the aggregate level, that is, taking into account the total of values of the total of events, we can confirm that the most relevant is the Night of Joy one, (aggregated betweenness = 0.34), followed at some distance by Levy Pants' (aggregated betweenness = 0.16), and Patrolman Mancuso's (aggregated betweenness = 0.13). Interestingly enough, Paradise Vendors is the fourth most important subplot (aggregated betweenness = 0.08), ahead of Irene Reilly's (aggregated betweenness = 0.06) and Dorian Greene's (aggregated betweenness = 0.05). This outcome seems to validate the structure we proposed in figure 2: from a causal relationship point of view, Paradise Vendors subplot is sensibly more relevant than has been noted until now. In fact, it is even higher than Irene Reilly's subplot, which has been considered often a principal one. Dorian Greene's subplot has a similar relevance and Myrna Minkoff's is virtually irrelevant (aggregated betweenness = 0.01): we believe that Myrna's operative's role as *Deus ex Machina* is supported, then, and its causal irrelevance is a symptom of it.

Nevertheless, analysis based on betweenness is far from being completely satisfactory, since this metric is geared especially to networks where every node represents an individual, and not a causal event. Therefore, its utility in this context could be compromised somehow. We have employed other supplementary metrics, based on previous and sequent events number. For

example, event NJ6 (Lana changes the pickup of pictures parcel Schedule, which forces George to hide the pack for several hours until schools close), presents two previous events (NJ4 and NJ5), and influences directly in two following ones: NJ9 (George decides to use Ignatius's cart to hide the photographs), and M7 (George steals Mancuso Boethius's book at the bus station toilets). Thus, it is possible to define the following metrics for this event: the impact of the specific event (NJ6) over events of the very own subplot (a measure of auto influence that we will call self-influence - SI), impact of the specific event over other subplots (external relevance - ER), and influence of other subplots over the event (external influence - EI). Regarding the given example, we would see that NJ6 shows a SI = 1 (affects an event within its own subplot, the NJ9), a ER = 1 (affects an event in a different subplot, the M7), and a EI = 0 (the two previous events belong to the same subplot). If we apply this procedure on all 47 events, it is possible to assess every subplot considered, adding up the values of all events in every subplot. However, to avoid distortion in the results, it is necessary to divide the outcome by the number of events in every subplot, since not all of them present the same. In this way, we obtain, for each subplot, the average self-influence (ASI), average external relevance (AER), and average external influence (AEI). Table 2 shows the values rendered by every subplot.

These results lead us to several conclusions. In the first place, Night of Joy and Levi Pants are clearly the most self-contained. In both cases, the causal outline depends mostly on the events

TABLE 2. Average self-influence (ASI), average external influence (AEI), and average external relevance (AER) in each subplot.

	Night of Joy	Irene Reilly	Patrolman Mancuso	Levi Pants	Paradise Vendors	Dorian Greene	Mirna Minkoff
ASI	1.07	0.60	0.75	1.10	0.50	0.75	0.67
AEI	0.43	0.60	0.63	0.40	0.50	0.75	1.00
AER	1.48	0.68	0.31	0.70	0.73	0.40	0.00

within the very own subplot (ASI near 1.1, the highest of all subplots) and the influence of other subplots is low (AEI near 0.4, the lowest of all subplots). In other words, both cases are mostly self-dependent subplots, with little influence from others. On the contrary, in the remaining subplots, the pattern is quite different: there is a balance between self-influence (ASI) and external influence (AEI). The implication is that there are other subplots with a similar causal influence degree to that of the precedent events within the same subplot. Secondly, from the perspective of external relevance (AER) Night of Joy subplot seems to function as a focal point with a great influence over the rest of the subplots (AER = 1.48), much more than any other subplot. It is an interesting outcome, for it endorses Clark's assessment of the Night of Joy as "the physical hub of *A Confederacy of Dunces*" (1987: 272). From a causal perspective, Night of Joy subplot is, without doubt, the most influential, both in terms of its impact on other subplots (AER = 1.48) and considering the number of subplots Night of Joy interacts with since it is the only one which relates to all the rest. In third place, AER values support the outline proposed in Figure 1: it is certain that Paradise Vendors subplot has significant importance (AER = 0.73), placed at the same level than Levi Pants' and Irene Reilly's (AER = 0.70 y 0.68 respectively); Dorian Greene subplot impact, although lower (AER = 0.40), is superior to

Patrolman Mancuso's (AER = 0.31). Finally, as expected, Myrna Minkoff's subplot presents an AER 0, and its direct causal influence over the rest of subplots is non-existent.

Figure 4 shows the causal outline within subplots of Figure 2, but with the addition of the three metrics aforementioned. Grey circles include ASI for each of them; incoming arrows correspond to AEI; and outgoing arrows to AER. As to Irene Reilly, Paradise Vendors, and Dorian Greene subplots', the addition of outgoing arrows values does not match AER values in table 3, since these three subplots have AER toward Myrna Minkoff's subplot, not included in the Figure due to its lower relevance.

CONCLUSION

The analysis carried out in this work seems to be in line with Boethian philosophy, for, what may appear to be chance events are actually quite carefully determined by Divine Providence. In this context, Ignatius might be seen as Fortune's embodiment (Simon, 1994: 113), a representation of Fortune's wheel (Leighton, 2012b: 201), or maybe just a tool to make possible "to dispose all things in their proper time and place" (Boethius, 2009[524], p. 62), as "an agent of Fortuna" and "fulfills a role occupied by the planetary god Saturn in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*." (Leighton, 2011: 2). Only Myrna Minkoff's appearance, as *Deus ex Machina*, does not

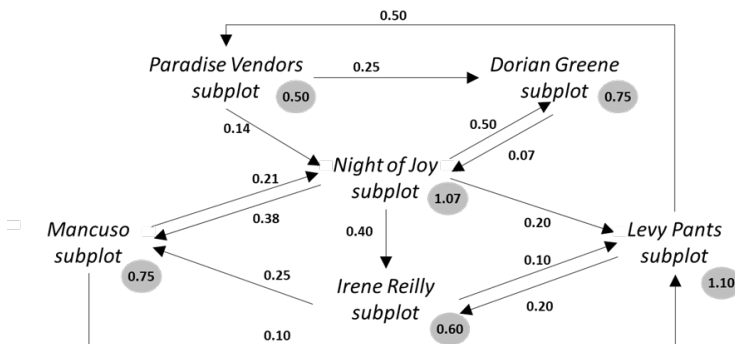


FIGURE 4. SUBPLOT OUTLINE PROPOSED, BASED ON THE NOVEL'S CAUSAL ANALYSIS, QUANTITATIVE METRICS INCLUDED.

completely fit in a perfectly measured/choreographed sequence of causal events. The novel's global framework simultaneously allows the interaction of chance and the characters' free will: all of them enjoy the possibility of choice within the apparent chaos created by Ignatius; all of them decide whether to take the opportunity or not.

The chain reaction initiated with Ignatius attempted arrest at the D.H. Holmes department store spreads out to a wide range of characters until almost every micro event converges at the macro-occasion of the Night of Joy. There is a sort of big bang–big crunch cycle, where Fortune's Wheel spins around every character; only at the end of the novel the reader understands that, in fact, every event had its *raison d'être*. Fortune rewards the good ones, the losers according to American culture of efficiency and productivity; Fortune punishes the wicked, usually winners, as a result of a series of more than improbable events. Of course, this is not the end, since there is no assurance that “[a]ll of these lucky beneficiaries of Ignatius's chaos may see their fates spin down again. They will have to take their good fortune and make something of it.” (Leighton, 2011: 34). Therefore, this is not a truly optimistic ending, but rather “the novel's conclusion is optimistic, *though guardedly*” (Daigrepont, 1982: 80. Emphasis added). Gus Levy's plans for his company and his life are ambitious, but his professional and emotional background provide no cause for great expectations. Irene Reilly has the opportunity of reassembling her life, although her life did not ever look truly “assembled”. The same caution could be geared toward the rest of the characters, especially the protagonist. Ignatius's conflict, his anachronic outlook on the world, is not resolved (Brown & Ward, 2009). However, the last sequence of events in the novel suggests a “beyond-the-novel” possibility, that of a hopeful future for Ignatius:

The marker flew past. He rolled down the window an inch or two and breathed the salt air blowing in over the marshes from the Gulf. As

if the air were a purgative, his valve opened. He breathed again, this time more deeply. The dull headache was lifting. He stared gratefully at the back of Myrna's head, at the pigtail that swung innocently at his knee. Gratefully. How ironic, Ignatius thought. Taking the pigtail in one of his paws, he pressed it warmly to his wet moustache. (Toole, 2007[1980]: 223–224)

The novel's ending seems like a tribute to ambiguity: on the one hand, it is possible that Ignatius, such an expert on transforming reality in fiction, may be deceiving himself, and circumstances in Manhattan will reproduce New Orleans developments. In this case, Toole has chosen an open ending, one with the characters doomed to repeat in the future, as grotesque Sisyphus, their past actions, but at present filled with uncertainty. On the other, Bell (1988:21) has cunningly pointed that, the ending of the novel provides Ignatius with the possibility of a better life, but only if he abandons his own medieval worldview and embraces that of the contemporary reader. Thus, the novel hypothesizes the salvation of the individual in an inherently hostile world, but ironically at the cost of Ignatius's concept of reality.

We would like to expand on Bell's insight, and propose that the novel's ending might also be read as an endorsement of the very idea highlighted in the causal analysis: the fact that Ignatius has to escape in such a way is simply the result of his past choices, and not so much a projection of his future ones. Let us mention again the question of the literary fatherhood of Ignatius, and recall its kinship with Don Quixote. In this regard, we come to realize that the comparison with Cervantes's work might be too far-fetched, if only because Ignatius lacks a Sancho Panza. And Sancho, together with Don Quixote, proclaims “each of us is the son of his own works”³, and it is he who takes distance from the concept of chance. The novel's end, by itself, and without hypothetical future

³<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/996/996-h/996-h.htm#ch47>; I, chapter 47.

developments, would present Ignatius as an incarnation of self-fulfilling prophecy, and by doing that, the novel becomes an act of advocacy for free will. At any rate, the end of *A Confederacy of Dunces* is, in its ambivalence, a challenge to that best-selling American narrative of success or punishment, and a tribute to second opportunities at the same time.

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