

ARTHUR RANSOME THE STYLIST: A STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF *COOT CLUB* (1934)

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ABSTRACT

This paper breaks new ground in the field of Ransome criticism and presents new findings. It is the first to examine Arthur Ransome's use of signals in his novels for children, here *Coot Club* (1934). Structural analysis of the novel has revealed a carefully concealed three-tier structure, and shows Arthur Ransome to be a consummate stylist.

NOTES

Coot Club is the Bird Protection Society formed by a group of children, the eldest of whom is Tom Dudgeon, age twelve, skipper of the dinghy *Titmouse*. They live in the village of Horning and the surrounding villages of Ludham, Acle, and Potter Heigham on the Norfolk Broads, East Anglia, U.K.

Characters whose names require explanation:

Coots: collective name of members of the Coot Club.

Ds in the novel: Dick and Dorothea Callum, brother and sister, are on holiday with Mrs Barrable, aboard the hired yacht *Teasel*, a four-berth craft. She is a retired teacher and water-colourist, a family friend.

Port and Starboard: twin girls, experienced sailors, who crew a racing yacht for their widowed father, Mr Farland.

Captain Nancy: Nancy Blackett, one of the Amazons in the Lakeland novels.

The Admiral: a.k.a. Mrs Barrable; she and her brother had chartered the yacht *Teasel*.

Brother Richard: Mrs Barrable's brother, a famous portrait painter.

William: Mrs Barrable's pug dog.

Hullabaloo: a noisy party aboard the hired cruiser, *Margoletta*.

Joe: Coot Club member. He and his friends, **Bill and Pete** ("Horning boys" and self-styled pirates) have built the *Death and Glory* themselves. It is 'powered' with oars and a tattered old sail.

Robin: member of the Coot Club, lives in the village of Acle where he is a look-out on the bridge there. He spends the fourpence, intended for a telephone call to report a sighting of the *Margoletta*, on "dud

bananas”, which he scoffed. That had consequences, hence the remark, “fourpenny stomach-ache.”¹

Mrs McGinty: cook housekeeper in the Farland household.

Working boats:

Welcome of Rochester: a Thames barge;

Sir Garnet: a trading wherry;

Come Along: a motor tug skippered by Old Bob.

1 INTRODUCTION

Before turning to the detailed examination of the structure of *Coot Club*, it is perhaps useful to first draw attention to a feature of *Coot Club* that forms a corollary to the results of the structural analysis, namely that so many incidents and observations in *Coot Club* mirror Ransome’s lived experience – mostly, but not exclusively, his cruises and fishing trips on the Broads in the early 1930s – that it may fairly be regarded as a type of palimpsest, where the original text has been overwritten by a newer one. There are, for example, his attack of appendicitis; the crack on the head; Dr Bennett of Wroxham who treated him; taking a hot bath at Oulton Broad Yacht Station, Lowestoft; a meal at the Wherry Hotel nearby; shopping at Roy’s, that wonderful emporium at Wroxham; seeing ‘a proud boy sailing an 8-foot pram dinghy’, a possible model for Tom Dudgeon; the profound psychological effect on Ransome of the tragedy that befell a close friend in 1932, referred to later in this paper; bird watching; eel dabbling (seen and tried); observation of the working wherries and barges on the Broads; the natural world and the noisy intrusions.²

* * *

The structure of *Coot Club* is intriguing. Professor Peter Hunt, an authority in Ransome criticism, argues that ‘Structurally, at first, [*Coot Club*] seems to be broken-backed’, but he later concedes that the novel ‘has much more coherence’ on a symbolic level because in Book One the waters are non-tidal, whereas in Book Two they are tidal and ‘are more dangerous and more challenging’.³

Of course, the waters around Great Yarmouth are subject to much stronger tides than elsewhere, but all the navigable rivers of the Norfolk Broads are subject to tidal flow and all are subject on occasion to strong gusts of wind, violent squalls, sea fog and calms, which add to the challenges faced by Ransome’s characters. So, I am not convinced that these things play a significant

¹ Ransome, Arthur, rev. ed. 1982, *Coot Club*, Jonathan Cape, 117, 214–15.

² Wardale, Roger, 2013, *Arthur Ransome on the Broads*, Amberley Publishing, 15, 31, 35.

³ Hunt, Peter, 1992, *Approaching Arthur Ransome*, Jonathan Cape, 126.

part in the search for structural coherence and, if we seek this in *Coot Club*, it is worth looking elsewhere.

Hunt's judgement, 'broken-backed', somehow suggests faulty 'joinery', but this is at odds with Ransome's established reputation as a stylist. From early in his writing career he was concerned not only with literary style, but, importantly for this paper, with the matter of construction of literary texts. As Kirsty Nichol Findlay writes in 2011:

By 1912 Ransome had begun to make a reputation for perceptive and innovative literary analysis. He was probably best known for a theory of literary expression which was first elaborated in an article entitled 'Kinetic and Potential Speech', published in the October 1911 edition of *The Oxford and Cambridge Review*. The key terms of this theory were perhaps suggested by his earlier scientific studies [*Chemistry at the Yorkshire College, later University of Leeds*]; Ransome certainly believed that something of a scientific method was needed properly to investigate and evaluate the structures, materials, and effects of literature.⁴

And Julian Lovelock, quoting Ransome, writes in a more recent critique:

... perhaps the real insight is into how Ransome saw the construction of a novel to be akin to engineering and the necessity for 'the calculations of comparative weights, stresses, tensions, etc.'. His skill is that the carefully-built structure of his novels is rarely intrusive ...⁵

What, then, is the hidden 'carefully-built structure' in *Coot Club*?

In setting *Coot Club* on the Norfolk Broads, Ransome would have had to come to terms with, and overcome, the stylistic and construction difficulties of placing his novel in a markedly different topology from that of the English Lakes, where the geologic formations had provided the setting for, and even suggested, so much adventuring. Now, under wide East Anglian skies, all was flat, or seemingly so, and the rivers were subject to tidal flow, with its inherent dangers, rather than the Lakeland becks that dash and sing. The challenge became how to create and maintain interest, pace and excitement in this wetland already threatened by rapidly advancing modernity in its various forms. Ransome had the incidents, drawn from his own lived experience, and the working vessels that he was determined to include in his narrative, and he settled eventually on the characters. But a plot? This caused difficulty and was

⁴ Nichol Findlay, Kirsty, 2011, (ed) *Arthur Ransome's Long-lost Study of Robert Louis Stevenson*, Boydell Press, 28–29.

⁵ Lovelock, Julian, 2016, *Swallows, Amazons and Coots: A Reading of Arthur Ransome*. Lutterworth Press, 89. – quoting Ransome's letter to Charles and Margaret Renold, 28 December, 1933.

only resolved late in the writing process. I believe that, in addition to the use of signals, Ransome decided on two other features to provide a satisfactory structure for *Coot Club*: the rhetorical device ‘anaphora’, and a meticulously designed double narrative. The cohesive devices in *Coot Club* have not gone unnoticed, but they are neither so frequent nor so strong that they can be considered as part of the overall structure.

2 SIGNALS

Ransome had employed a number of signals in his earlier novels: notably the firing of Captain Flint’s brass cannon on the deck of his houseboat and, in *Winter Holiday*, the signals between the ‘Signal Station’ and ‘Observatory’, modelled on Ransome’s own signalling system between his house, Low Ludderburn on Cartmell Fell, Cumbria, and Lt Col. Kelsall’s barn at Barkbooth, a distance of about a mile as the crow flies. Three years later, in 1937, came the deep-throated ‘Bull Roarer’ diaphone, the air signal so strenuously worked by Roger in *We Didn’t Mean to Go to Sea*, and other maritime signals both optical and acoustic. All these have clearly defined meanings to people in a particular environment and are not, under normal circumstances, susceptible to misinterpretation. On the other hand, there are other signals that depend on context and insider knowledge for their meaning: in *Winter Holiday*, the Beckfoot ‘flag’ hoisted by Nancy and so fatefully misinterpreted by Dick, and, in *We Didn’t Mean to Go to Sea*, Roger accompanying the crew’s heavy stamping with his penny whistle in order to carry off the deception that the ship’s master is below deck, sleeping it off, while the children continue their roistering.

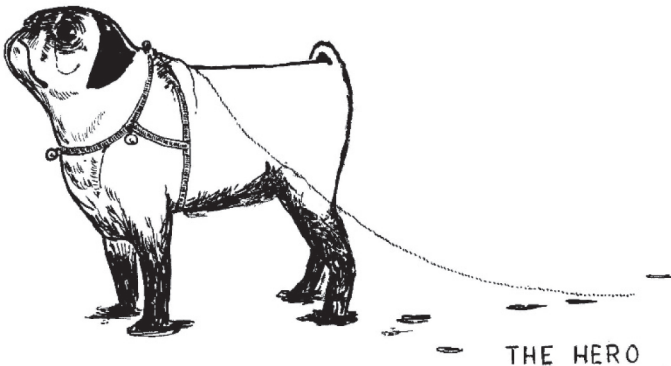
Coot Club is awash with signs and signals that are ‘hidden’ in the text. There are the various random bird calls; there are signals of intention by their originators, which are usually unambiguous; there are visual symbols and dynamic signals; there are signals that may be open to misinterpretation and that often have an evanescent quality. There are even non-signals – that is to say signals that are expected or anticipated by an individual or a group of characters but are missing – for example, causing Tom’s dilemma at the Herringfleet swing bridge:

Tom at that moment was a little worried. Just ahead of them was the Herringfleet swing bridge where the railway crosses the river, and up at the signal box by the station a red flag was flying to show that the bridge was closed, as Tom could see for himself. Had the signaller noticed the white sail of the *Teasel* coming round the bend from St. Olave’s [on the *River Waveney*]? Or was there a train coming so that he could not open the bridge?

“I think I’ll take the tiller,” said Tom, looking about him for somewhere to tie up in case they had to wait, and then deciding that he would do as he had done on the [River] Bure, and turn round and sail the other way, if

the tide were not too strong. It would never do to be swept up against the bridge . . . lose the mast that way. . . Oh, couldn't that man give them a signal if he wasn't going to open?⁶

It is possible that Virginia Woolf's *Flush: A Biography*, published in 1933, influenced or confirmed Ransome's authorial decision to introduce in *Coot Club* his first non-human character, William. Mrs Barrable's pug dog is as capable as his human companions of producing signals with various intended meanings (*polysemy*), and his own responses to external signals are intense and uniquely his to understand and interpret. William's card issued by the automatic weighing machine carries a prescient message: 'You are a Hard Worker and Should Become Successful'⁷. It is emphasised by Mrs Barrable in her elliptical remark that is equally prescient: 'Perhaps he's going to, some day'. There are two aspects here: a signal to the characters in the novel and a signal to the reader that success is within William's grasp, but by no means certain. Later, who would immediately identify chocolate, the actual article and its verbal representation in the text, as having multiple meanings (a *polyseme*)? But to our canine friend William, it certainly does, and Ransome makes this very clear: chocolate (Fry's Five Boys Chocolate Cream) is not only a reward for William, but to his mind a welcome return to 'sweet-shops and civilisation' after the confines of the yacht.⁸ And chocolate signals a reward not only to William, but also to Bill and his crew after the successful salvage of the *Margoletta*.⁹



Signals of intention are of the unambiguous variety and generally understood by those in the cultural context: here, the established signalling systems in the bye-laws of two Authorities, the London and North Eastern Railway (LNER) and the Great Yarmouth Port Authority for Breydon Water

⁶ Ransome, Arthur, rev. ed. 1982, *Coot Club*, Jonathan Cape, 247.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 321.

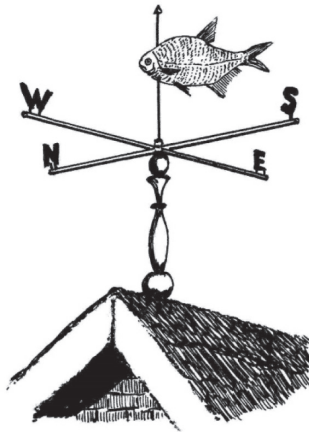
⁹ *Ibid.*, 214, 350–51.

(today, the Broads Authority). The first two railway platform signals of the LNER are acoustic and visual;¹⁰ the second are navigational markers or beacon posts on Breydon Water marking the channel of navigable water.

Other visual signals in the text include pictograms, which are capable of correct interpretation in a given cultural context regardless of language or social group, and here Ransome's pictogram of choice is the most complex: the Golden Bream weathervane swinging on the rooftop of Dr Dudgeon's residence, which first appears in chapter 2.¹¹ It is at once sign, symbol, and signal. With its multiple meanings and functions, it is a prime example of polysemy. At a surface level, the weathervane signals wind direction only, and to the village community and the boating fraternity it confirms their pre-existing knowledge that the owner of the house is a keen fisherman, not a sailor:

'He's a fisherman, Dr Dudgeon,' said the boatman, with a chuckle. 'Put up that old bream himself. No much time for sailin', I s'pose, bein' a doctor, but you often see him fishin' off his garden end when the season comes on'.¹²

But then there are other possible interpretations dependent on the knowledge and experience ('cultural capital') of the viewer, whether a character in the novel or the reader, and any one or more of the following interpretations or meanings may come to mind. To the keen angler or historian, Dr Dudgeon's Golden Bream evokes the Sea Bream of Ancient Greece, which is indeed golden (*Dorado* in French) and was devoted to the goddess Aphrodite. To others it may suggest that Dr Dudgeon is wealthy (a weathervane of gilded copper or bronze has a higher monetary value relative to steel and cast iron), or that he is educated in the Classics and has possibly travelled in Europe. Others still may see the fish as an early Christian symbol, or even as an *hommage* to Dr Dudgeon's wife who has recently produced an addition to the family after a long gap.



¹⁰ Ibid., 16.

¹¹ Ibid., 28.

¹² Ibid.

Dynamic signals belong in the moment and are often improvised. They include vocalisations (pitched and un-pitched, human and animal in origin) and hand signals of various kinds, with or without a duster! Crucially, these signals are a powerful tool because if they are seen by the characters in the novel they are open to misinterpretation, and if unseen can create suspense in the mind of the reader. The dynamic signals employed by Ransome are of considerable variety, have different purposes, and occur throughout the text: some are random; some are unintended; some are misinterpreted. Some are subject to multiple meanings or interpretations (*polysemes*), and some are missed altogether – like life itself, rather a mess. And all this in the context of the state of communications in a corner of East Anglia in the 1930s, when a postcard posted in the morning to a local village address was delivered the same day; and to make a phone call in the countryside, before trunk dialling came into general use in the 1970s, one went to a hotel or inn, or indeed to a shop that provided a public telephone – ‘tuppence’ (2d) in the slot and, when connected by the Operator, press Button A.

Two examples of dynamic signals are seen in the everyday actions by two minor characters, namely Mrs McGinty waving her duster out of the window as the twins set sail on *Sir Garnet*,¹³ and the telegram boy at Beccles staithe.¹⁴ The first is not an intentional signal and the adult reader, at least, knows it for what it is, but Starboard interprets it as such. The second is a signal to those aboard the departing craft – turn about, return to the staithe, and take the telegram. But only Dorothea sees the telegram boy riding to the water’s edge on his red post office bicycle and waving to the departing craft. Her understandable lack of ‘cultural capital’ due to her youth causes her to misinterpret the signal. ‘Thinking it was rather nice of him,’ she simply waves back. These signals demonstrate variability of intention and interpretation and enable Ransome to play with the reader’s expectations, as does Starboard’s vocal signal: “‘It’s a jolly big one [*a motor cruiser*],” said Starboard’.¹⁵ Her utterance is spontaneous, its tonality carries the weight of danger, and together with the reaction of those that hear it, and the one who misses it altogether, tunes up the effect and prepares the reader for the climax of the adventure.

3 THE ANAPHORA

In the riverine landscape of the Norfolk Broads, where nothing of any significance seems to happen, the anaphora engages the reader and provides tonal variety and achieves artistic effects – rhythm, emphasis, increasing the tension, heightening the drama. Ransome was referring obliquely to anaphora

¹³ *Ibid.*, 230.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 278.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 330.

when he instanced in his 1911 article ‘the repetition of particular effects’, and our objective here is to study his creative and stylistic use of anaphora.

There are, I believe, twenty-seven instances of anaphora in *Coot Club* (but others may find more): fifteen in Book One, twelve in Book Two, and a selection of them is presented in this paper. As to their relative distribution in the text, there is no discernible overall pattern in Book One, but the following features contribute to the structure of the novel:

The first example occurs in chapter two, ‘The huge flags ... Little flags, ...’, when Dick and Dorothea Callum, the Ds, arrive in Wroxham, is a tentative start compared to the next, chapter three, which describes the Coot Club’s headquarters and is positively emphatic with its four repetitions of ‘Here’ and internal change of pace:

[1] **The huge flags** of the boat-letters were flying from their tall flagstuffs. **Little flags**, copies of the big ones, were fluttering at the mastheads of the hired yachts.¹⁶

[2] On the north side, leaning against the doctor’s house, was a low wooden shed. **Here** the doctor kept his fishing tackle, bait-cans and mooring poles, and the old fishing boat that lived under a low roof at the end of the dyke by the road. **Here** Tom did his carpentering work. **Here** were the doors for the lockers that were being fixed under the bow thwart and stern sheets of the *Titmouse*, waiting for the screws and hinges Tom had brought from Norwich. **Here** the Coot Club held its meetings, and Tom and the twins met on most days whether engaged in Coot Club business or not.¹⁷



In chapter 11, ‘Tom in Danger’, the following anaphora, Dorothea’s interior monologue, has her confirming to herself the reality of the features of this

¹⁶ Ibid., 22.

¹⁷ Ibid., 35.

unfamiliar watery environment, one she knows only at second-hand from Mrs Barrable, whereas Tom's interior monologue early in Book Two, see below, confirms to himself his own familiar, secure, environment. The first expresses wonderment; the second the joy of the sailor setting out on a voyage; unfamiliarity contrasted with familiarity. I propose that these contrasting anaphora are yet another means by which Ransome builds his structure, and they serve with others, as will be shown, to bind the two Books or sections of the novel together:

There was the golden bream swimming in the blue sky above the old thatched gable. **That was** the doctor's house. **That** clump of tall reeds must be the opening to Tom's dyke. And **there** on the doctor's lawn **was** Mrs. Dudgeon sitting on a chair and knitting, with the baby's perambulator close beside her.¹⁸

In chapter 12, 'Under the Enemy's Nose', four examples of anaphora occur in close proximity with the obvious intention of tightening the structure, increasing the tension:

[1] **Somewhere up there** were Port and Starboard racing against time. **Somewhere up there** was Tom in the *Titmouse* sailing down from Wroxham, knowing nothing of the danger than was thundering to meet him.¹⁹

Perhaps the most interesting of the four is the following one (number [2]), which has an internal form of anaphora, and ends with the rhythmic pattern of three pulses:

[2] **On and on** they rowed, past the notice that tells you to go slow through Horning, past the eelman's little houseboat, up the long reach to the windmill and the houseboat moored beside it, **on and on and on.**²⁰

[3] **They passed** the private Broad with the house reflected in the water. **They passed** the entrance to Salhouse [*Broad*] where, on any other day, they would have looked in to see the swan's nest and the crested grebe's. And then they heard it,²¹

[4] **No other** boat on all the river would try to deafen everybody else with a loudspeaker. **No other** had an engine with that peculiar droning roar.²²

The last anaphora in Book One, occurs when Dick and Dorothea have been trained to sail by Port and Starboard. It has five plain repetitions that match

¹⁸ Ibid., 132.

¹⁹ Ibid., 137.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 138.

²² Ibid.

the technical nature of the narrative, the basics of sailing: ‘They knew ...’, four repetitions of ‘They had ...’ and a variant of the previous anaphora: ‘They had ...’: ‘Already they had been seen comparing hands’. The reference to ‘hands’ is a cohesive device and is combined with an allusion, an exophora, to Ransome’s Lakeland novel published the previous year, *Winter Holiday* (1933). In chapter one, on first acquaintance Dorothea had noticed Tom Dudgeon’s hands and marked him for a sailor. (It is worth mentioning here that a fair number of exophora occur in *Coot Club*, which it clearly pleased Ransome to include, for they often take the form of ‘in-jokes’, but they do not contribute to the structure of the novel.) Here is the passage in full:

They knew the names of all the ropes and could find the right one if not too desperately hurried. **They had** begun in Ranworth [*Broad*] learning to handle the little sail of the *Titmouse*. **They had** gone on to dealing with the big mainsail of the *Teasel*. **They had** hauled on rope after rope in the actual business of sailing. **They had** hauled down halyards again and again, trying to learn the trick of getting the same length of rope into each round of a coil. Already they had been seen comparing hands. “What are you doing?” the Admiral asked. “Only wishing Captain Nancy and the others could see our hands,” said Dorothea. “They are so beautifully horny.”²³

From the point of view of anaphora, Book One ends in style.

As we might expect, there are slightly fewer instances of anaphora in Book Two, because here the environment and the plot provide more dramatic incident, more weather, more everything — the effect of the strong tidal flow in the southern waters, especially around Great Yarmouth, is just one instance. But they are noticeably closer together in response to the rising tension and include the most dramatic in the novel.

In Book Two, Ransome’s mastery of balance and contrast is shown in the design of his pairs of markedly different anaphora placed at close proximity. The second of this pair is the variant of the anaphora in Book One, already mentioned.

Placed at four pages from the beginning of Book Two these anaphora are separated by only four lines. The first serves to reflect the movement of the *Teasel* away from the staithe [*Norfolk for a quay*] as seen and experienced joyfully by Tom at the helm. The second of the pair plays with the syntax, ‘There’ as adverb and pronoun, and includes an ellipsis. An interior monologue, it brings the reader close to Tom’s viewpoint, thoughts, and emotions as *Teasel* begins to get under way. A couple of extra sentences are included to provide context:

²³ Ibid., 183, and 17.

‘But she’s making a beautiful noise,’ said Dick hurrying aft along the sidedeck and stepping quietly down into the well.

She certainly was. **The water** was creaming under her forefoot. **The wind** exactly suited her. Tom said nothing, but that noise was a song in his ears.²⁴

There was the entrance to his dyke, between willows and brown reeds. **There**, behind bushes, farther back from the river front, was the twins’ house. He looked at the windows. . . . No. . . . **There** was not a sign of them. Everybody was still asleep.²⁵

In our second pair we see a strong contrast: one is mechanical and the other is lyrical. One portrays the three Coots reefing hurriedly during a sudden squall on Oulton Broad, a synchronised, rhythmic activity:

Tom [...] was aboard again and busy at the mast. Port ran forward to help. **The jib was** coming down, **the boom was** lifting, **the peak was** dipping, and all at once. **The mainsail** came quickly down. **The boom was** lowered into the crutches that Starboard had fished up out of the *Titmouse*.²⁶

The other – ‘It was a gorgeous sight’, repeated four times – is complex. It is an ecstatic response which the omniscient author appears to share with Mrs Barrable: a thrilling electrical storm and rain-squall over grazing marshland seen from the *Teasel*. There are four viewpoints: their own, that of the two sections of the crew, and lastly, that of William the pug dog. Objective and subjective, effect and affect, all mixed up. Here is the full passage, with a few sentences over to provide context:

“Look out, Tom, you’ll have her over.

“Sit down, you two [*the Ds*]. On the floor,” said the Admiral. “My word,” she murmured, “Brother Richard ought to see this.”

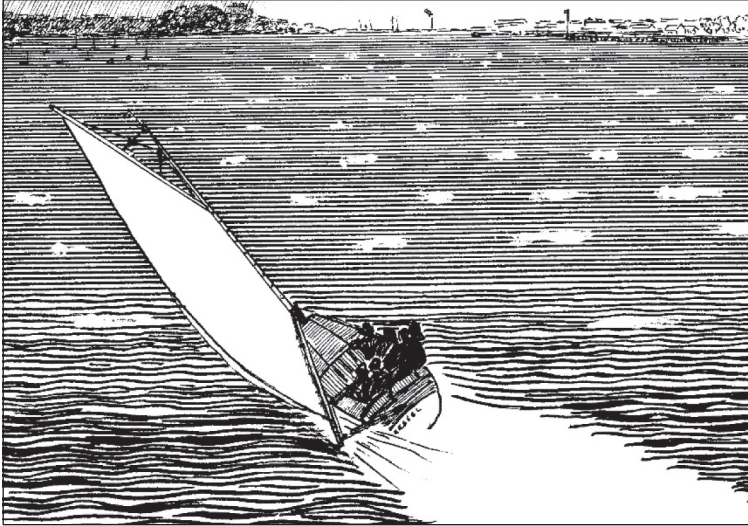
It was a gorgeous sight. There was that purple wall of cloud, with a bright line along the foot of it, and against this startling background, yacht and cruisers afloat at their moorings in the Broad shone as if they had been lit up by some strange artificial light. The green of the trees and gardens looked too vivid to be real, wherever it was not veiled by a rain-squall. **It was a gorgeous sight**, but not for the Coots, who were finding it was all they could do to keep the yacht sailing and yet not lying over on her beam-ends. **It was a gorgeous sight**, but not for Dick and Dorothea, who began to think that they had not yet learnt much about sailing after

²⁴ Ibid. 196.

²⁵ Ibid. 196–97.

²⁶ Ibid., 280.

all. And **it was not at all a gorgeous sight**, for poor William, who was thrown from one side to the other whenever the *Teasel* went about, and was shivering miserably on the floor of the cabin, sliding this way and that with the sandshoes that had been thrown in to keep dry.²⁷



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The third pair of anaphora, at the end of chapter 27 and the beginning of chapter 28, when *Teasel* and *Titmouse* find themselves aground on Breydon Water, have only a three-line paragraph between them, which in itself has the effect of raising the tension. Here there are three repetitions: ‘They were aground ... They had missed ... They had lost ...’: two short sentences followed by a longer one, a rhythmic design at a pivot-point in the narrative, which leads directly to the denouement. It consists of two bars or measures of five beats each, followed by a long phrase of ten beats. It is significant that this motif <5 – 5 – 10> also occurs in the design of Ransome’s double narrative, but in reverse order – see below:

They were aground on the mud. **They had missed** their tide. **They had lost** their chance of getting through Yarmouth that day.²⁸

The other consists of two sentences – ‘Water rose ... Water crept ...’ – and is hooked to the preceding sentence, which ends ‘... filled with water.’ Now the construction is languid by comparison, and reflects the slow tempo of the rising water:

²⁷ Ibid., 283–84.

²⁸ Ibid., 327.

The shallow creek through which the *Teasel* must have sailed before she stuck, filled with water. **Water rose** slowly round the big black posts that marked the deep-water channel. **Water crept** over the mud, nearer and nearer to the *Titmouse*.²⁹

The final anaphora occurs in one long sentence, a monologue, a stream of regrets: 'If only ..., if he had not ..., if only ...':

:

They [*the Hullabaloos*] had lost their ship [*the hired cruiser Margoletta*]. And, in a way, Tom felt it was his fault.

If only he had not been there in the *Titmouse*, **if he had not** let William get loose and bark, indeed, **if only he had not** managed to dodge them [*the Hullabaloos*] for so long, they never would have sent their vessel crashing into a Breydon beacon.

Tom began to think how awful he would have felt if he had wrecked the *Teasel* in such a way ... or the little *Titmouse*. The thought was so upsetting that he gave the *Teasel* a sudden sheer that surprised young Joe in the *Death and Glory*, and made Old Bob in the *Come Along* look reprovingly over his shoulder.³⁰

As usual, and as observed by the authorities on Ransome, he shows the reader rather than describes the strength of feeling experienced by Tom as *Teasel* and the *Death and Glory* are under tow by the *Come Along*:

We propose that this is Ransome lamenting his part, as he saw it, in the drowning of Ted Scott in Lake Windermere in April 1932, not long after Ransome had introduced him to sailing.³¹ It is a litany of self-recrimination, psychologically more profound than the state of mind of a twelve-year-old carefree boy such as Tom, whom we know to be resourceful, resilient, and steady.

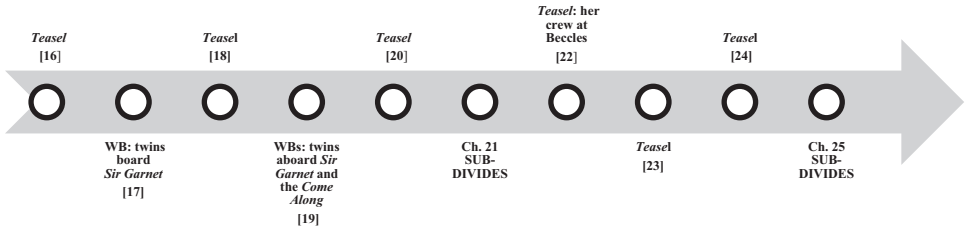
4 THE DOUBLE NARRATIVE

Concerning Ransome's double narrative in Book Two (chapters 16–25), close examination shows that there is, in fact, an overall scheme. Here is Ransome's plan uncovered by analysis for this paper and shown as a time-line – WB(s) stands for working boat(s); chapter numbers in square brackets:

²⁹ Ibid., 328.

³⁰ Ibid., 344 and 346.

³¹ Wardale, 19. Ted Scott: a close friend and editor of the *Manchester Guardian*.



It can readily be seen that the ten chapters are divided equally into two distinct patterns, each with its own internal symmetry. Here is the recapitulation of the motif <5 – 5 – 10> already noted, but this time as a retrograde <10 – 5 – 5>: this is deep-level construction and brackets together the two structures, anaphora and the double narrative). Chapters 16–20 alternate scenes on the *Teasel* with scenes on *Sir Garnet* and the *Come Along*, while chapters 21 and 25, sub-divided respectively when Port and Starboard transfer from *Come Along* to *Welcome of Rochester*, and when Tom sets off in the *Titmouse* to buy stores, sandwich three separate scenes on the *Teasel*. These features amount to literary ‘engineering’, and together with the other two structures (signals and anaphora) provides the structural coherence of *Coot Club*. Ransome searched for such coherence in the work of other authors and achieved it in his own.

5 CONCLUSION

So far from being a linear narrative set in a linear landscape, as Hunt argues, my contention is that *Coot Club* is constructed on three levels, as we have shown, in descending order: signals, anaphora, and at base, the double narrative. In terms of Ransome’s three-tier construction, here there is also a musical analogy with a piano or string trio.

Coot Club is deeply personal, containing many elegiac passages reflective of Ransome’s life-long attachment to nature and to quiet places, regret at their passing, and events in his own life. Ransome was touched from boyhood by loss: his father, his brother (in World War I), his estranged daughter, in all likelihood by regret at the lack of offspring with his second wife, Evgenia, and Ted Scott. Ransome missed his publisher’s deadline for submission of his final typescript, but even so, it is no wonder that he despatched his ‘finished typescript direct to the printers in Edinburgh’ for type-setting, and in so doing, avoided the inevitable hand of the publisher’s copy editor.³² *Coot Club* was too personal a text to be subjected to the blue pencil. It is meticulously crafted and, concealed beneath episodes of adventure, suspense, tension, and gentle humour, are depths of feeling and variety of expression executed with a characteristic lightness of touch.

³² Ibid., 55. Ransome travelled to Edinburgh in early November to check the proof. After sending his typescript in September he had been rushing to complete the illustrations.

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