

Introduction: The Story Behind the Essay behind the Story

LEXIAS	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Semes	♩	♩	♩			♩	♩	♩	♩	♩	♩	♩	♩
Cultural codes		♩				♩	♩	♩	♩	♩	♩	♩	
Antithesis		♩		♩		♩	♩	♩	♩	♩	♩	♩	
Enigma 1	♩	♩											
“Deep in”	♩	♩											
“Hidden”				♩									

There is a half-smoked cigarette on my basement floor. Is that a narrative? There is a flat tire in the back of my car. Is that a narrative? There were no injuries and only minor damage in the blast at the building’s main entrance, which police say occurred sometime between 3:30 and 5:45 a.m. local time. Is that a narrative? And another one of my feminist friends is getting married. That’s a narrative, right? Augusto Monterroso wrote a short story entitled “The Dinosaur” which reads, in its entirety: “When I woke up, the dinosaur was still there.” (42) Is that a narrative? Italo Calvino seems to think so (VIII). “Roses are red/Violets are blue/Sugar is sweet/And so are you.” Is that a narrative? Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan doesn’t think so (1). But I do.¹ “Water boils at one hundred degrees Celsius.” Is that? Gerard Genette seems unsure (*Story and Discourse* 212). What is narrative? Answering this question, for me, has become the process of choosing the narratologist whose writing I like the most. After months of research, I have to admit that I don’t know where or whether narrative ends.

But I know that narrative is the basic unit of experience. I know I use it to reason morally. I know that narratives are cultural, but I suspect that narrative is a cognitive process as basic as metaphor.² I suspect it is as important as (though not necessarily analogous to) language. But I don’t know what it is.

On the other hand, written narratives—stories—I think I know pretty well. This is an essay about a story and a story about an essay. It all began with the diagram opposite.

When Roland Barthes rewrites the opening of Balzac’s “Sarrasine” as a musical score, he raises a number of questions (29). For example, can this be performed? It is unlikely that anyone could read this score as “I was deep in one of those daydreams which overtake even the shallowest of men...” Is it possible, however, that another writer (having studied Barthes but not Balzac) could take this score and write the beginning of “Sarrasine” with different characters, a different plot, a different setting, but the same music? Can the various structural analyses of narratology be used to structure new, different narratives? What will this process reveal about the analyses themselves?

The separation between narratologists and fiction writers baffles me. Why would Barthes rather write a book-length study of another author’s short story than write a novel? Conversely, why isn’t *S/Z* used as a textbook in creative writing classes? Why would one transcribe music by ear if not to learn to perform it?³ The aim of my project is to turn to the abundant resources of narratology back into stories, making the descriptive prescriptive, turning the model into a score. My attempts to translate narrative theory into instructions on how to write a story are part of a larger process of turning the world into instructions on how to write a story.

1 RS—This would be more compelling if you told us *why* you believe it to be a narrative. Professions of faith don’t carry one too far in a theoretical argument.

2 RS—“as basic as metaphor” is an interesting phrase because it suggests that cognitive “experience” is always mediated by a literary trope; which thus poses the question of whether there exists such a thing as “immediacy.” WG—No. My wording means that metaphor *is* a cognitive experience, not a “literary trope.”

3 RS—These are excellent questions, and, in fact, I wish you worked out some answers to them.

I begin the story with the following score:

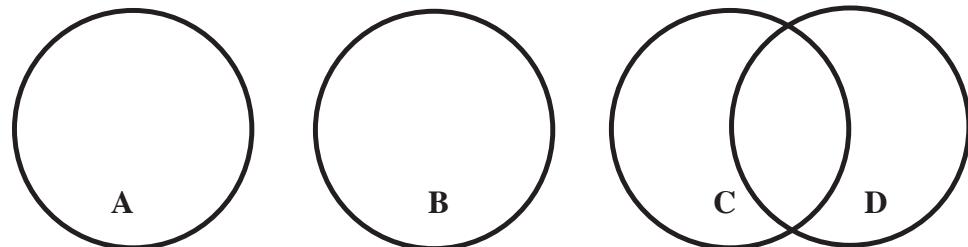


DIAGRAM 1.

This diagram represents four characters as four circles. The chronology of the story runs from left to right. The diagram shows that the story will concern, in order, four characters. The overlap between character C and D indicates that part of the story will be told from two simultaneous points of view.

Story / Essay Contents

A1. Genette: Iterative

A2. Lakoff: Character and Metaphor

A3. Genette: Proust

A4. De Certeau: Hammel

A5. Genette: Geographic achrony

B1-13. Barthes: S/Z

C1. Cohn: Narrated Monologue

C2. Chatman: Voice

C3. Mazza: Point of View

C4. Thornton: Showing

C5. Lakoff: Narrative and Society

C6. Todorov: Narrator > Character

C7. Mazza: Allen

C8. Reagan et al.: Person

D1. Chynoweth: Gender

D2. Lakoff: E-mail

A1.

Every day at work Amy would go through the same routine. For the first five hours she would attend diligently and cheerfully to the tasks at hand: answering phones, making calls, and keeping her boss's appointment book updated. During the sixth hour, her pace would decelerate, unfinished projects would reach stopping places, dockets would go back into filing cabinets, and the stapler would return to the drawer. Then for the next half hour she would continue to answer the phone while she made notes to herself of images, metaphors, puns, rhymes, palindromes, the unusual spelling of a client's name—anything that had occurred to her throughout the day. Then came 4:15—afternoon breaktime and the single Eve Light 120 cigarette her perfectly flawed discipline allowed, savored at a concrete breakroom table beside humming vending machines in a gigantic warehouse filled with palettes and stacks of magazines. Amy would spend the final half hour of work, during which her boss talked on the phone with her husband and child, using the company's computer to write and laser-print the following poem:

the inefficient appearance of efficiency

when the expeditor smiles
and gently reels in her leash
her assistant scatters files
and drops a stack of microfiche

when the coordinator happens by
the conversation freezes
we all twitch busily under her eye
and wait until breaktime for sneezes

when the director stalks the halls
the directed speed to a frenzied blur
when the supervisor calls
everyone races to answer her

when the hour is five at night
the sun expires in citrus light
we slip on our coats and file our fright
it's quite a quite a sight

when the hour is eight you see
us boast goodmorning pointedly
though nobody smiles we all agree
it's something to something to see

She would understand that this poem suffered from the fact that she spent so little time on it ("Ballad of the Copyright Clearance Coordinator"—a full page—had been typed in a minute) but she didn't want to get fired. She wondered whether Dominique would consider that a "constraint" and briefly imagined saying something direct to Dominique about art, tongue like a whip, cracking the frosted glass between them.

A1. Genette: Iterative

My score implies that events in my story will happen sequentially. Gerard Genette suggests only alternatives:

- I. Order: sequence of events
 - A. story: the events as they are told
 - B. history: the events (of the story) before they were told¹
 - C. anachronism: discrepancy between story and historical sequence
 - 1. external anachronisms: scenes which refer to events outside (before or after) the history
 - 2. internal anachronisms: scenes which refer (out of sequence) to events inside (during) the history
 - a) compleutive anachronisms: scenes which fill in a previous or later ellipses in the story
 - b) repetitive anachronisms: scenes which repeat a historical period
 - (1) announcements (anticipations): foreshadowing, a scene which refers to a scene that hasn't happened yet
 - (2) recalls (retrospections): flashbacks, scenes which refer to a scene that happened earlier
 - (3) anticipations within retrospections: flashback within flashback
 - c) retrospections within anticipations: flashback within flashback
 - D. achronism: scenes which are organized without chronology
 - II. Duration: length of scenes relative to the amount of historical time
 - A. summary: short scene narrating long period of history
 - B. scene: when story and historical time are supposed to be nearly equal
 - C. stasis: when the story progresses although historical time is at a standstill
 - D. ellipsis: historical time omitted from the story
 - III. Frequency: "relative frequency of the narrated events and the narrative sections that report them" (6)
 - A. singulative: one scene narrates one historical period
 - B. repetitive: "story-repetitions exceed in number the number of events"
 - C. iterative: one scene narrates "several recurrences of the same event or, to be more precise, of several analogical events considered only by respect to what they have in common" (7)
 - 1. internal iteration: an iteration within a singulative scene summarizing things which repeat within the historical period narrated by the scene
 - 2. external iteration: an iteration within a singulative scene summarizing repetitions from outside the historical period narrated by the scene
 - D. pseudoiteration: an iteration whose precision makes its repetition implausible ("Order")

1. It is worth stressing here that "history" does not mean history. "History" refers to a bounded segment of fictional time, the segment of time the story is concerned with. There are many events outside "history," including fictional experiences the characters had before and after the period of time bounded by the story and its "history."

At 4:45, remembering Dominique's enthusiasm for her "minimum wage poetry," she would consider calling her thesis advisor and leaving a voice mail message saying that she had changed her mind: her thesis was going to be a collection of poetry entitled "Steal Poetry from Work." But it seemed as though this semester there was an unusually high number of Master's candidates writing books of poetry for their final theses.

Dominique was working on a collection of poetry entitled "Table of Forms" that Amy didn't have the nerve to ask her about. Afraid of being evaluated on poetry (whose rules were unclear (even proper grammar was unnecessary) and whose conventions (or lack thereof) were flexible (why is prose poetry poetry?))—she ended up forgetting the call, her degree, and her thesis, which was due in a month, for which she had written a hasty proposal—something her advisor had suggested about the panopticon and *Don Quixote*. She realized she had burned out and could no longer read through the smoke.

She found herself picking up more and more hours. What was supposed to be a parttime assistantship photocopying course materials had turned into a fifty-or-so-hour-a-week commitment to an office she wasn't even sure could run without her. She reminded her boss of this around five. They agreed she should take some time off.

Iteration struck me as a useful technique to narrate a routine day at a tedious job.²

Pseudoiteration is iteration carried to its illogical extreme: it is implied that Amy writes exactly the same poem every day.³

2 RS—Representation of tedium through the iterative is, incidentally, a favorite device of Flaubert. I also notice interesting things going on with the duration of A1: a radical slowing down from 5 hours that pass in a sentence to a half hour that takes the rest of the page.

3 For examples of internal, external, and pseudo-iterations, consider the following three sentences from R.M. Berry's "Metempsychosis": "And so Dougherty won't play for us after all, won't practice the Chaccone this evening, won't feel his thumb cramp, won't ever become anything more than he is despite the accumulated momentum of this rage, his restless nights, all the unplayed music he has somehow managed to hear. Or maybe because of those things. He slumps down into his chair and tries hard not to imagine what he'll be forced to say before this episode mercifully concludes, all the grim faces he'll have to forget, the sweaty rooms he'll pass through, for he's about to realize what he's been trying not to know for the length of this whole story, for twenty-two years now, for as long as you and I have been struggling to protect the last remnants of our own childhood, about to realize that standing beside the chiffonier staring up at the stars that make no music, that rising like this each night believing the sounds in his head were so massive they had long since crushed his heart, that all this time he's never once heard repeated what Segovia played for fifteen-year-old him and five thousand others, what Bach wrote and Mendelssohn, Schumann, Willhelm, Hermann, Brahms, Raff, Busoni rearranged, what Anaheim had tried to teach him not to mangle beyond recognition, that the reason he never sharpens the C every afternoon is because he never hears it sharp, because he doesn't want to hear it sharp, because what if he did and it was just music? about to confront this most perverse species of human folly, the plain fact that nothing makes him hornier than the possibility of his own death, and so will end up here with his left elbow hooked over the bed, his legs spread out over a scramble of sheet music and guitar chords, surrounded by strangers who want to hurt him, having been given the chance to love the world or be crushed by it and furiously, achingly, terrifyingly conscious now that he chose the latter because he found annihilation imaginable whereas love has become for him something infinitely strange." (66–67) [RS—This is a fascinating example, but needs analysis.]