

Narratology: A Living Semiosphere

Abstract

This paper is a crash-course in narratology. It defines narratology, relates its history and people, and uses sign-theory to provide varying methods of textual analysis. Although I rely on the textual analysis of others and the history of narratology itself, there are sections where I provide my own take on narratological methods and theories. Through this, I hope to not only define what narratology is, but provide my own contributions to its growth.

Introduction

In this paper, I discuss the semiotics of narratology. My goal is for the reader to understand what a narrative [[30]] is and how the narrative relates to the myth [[29]] ((02, 06)). Furthermore, I will define concepts such as grammar [[18]], image schema [[21]], diachronic [[11]] and synchronic [[60]], and icon [[20]] (among others) ((03)); some of these will be from a denotative [[09]] perspective, and some from the perspective of a narrative – i.e. how the broad definition can be focused onto the narrative in order to derive meaning from these elements.

To accomplish this, I will first discuss narratology from a “big picture” perspective. This will involve generally defining the term, identifying its core ideas, and naming those who contributed to its conception and development (people like Vladimir Propp, Algirdas Greimas, Tzvetan Todorov, Mikhail Bakhtin and Robert Bathes). I will discuss these progenitors in the briefest of terms so that the reader may begin to accumulate history and building blocks upon which further explorations can be mounted ((03, 04, 07, 09)).

Next, I will discuss the Monomyth ((02)). As with narratology, I will broadly define what the Monomyth is and how it relates to the narrative. I will examine it from a classical standpoint (which will include ideas from Propp), and from a modernist perspective ((05, 06, 11)). I hope to immerse the reader within the semiosphere [[48]] that arises within a narrative and gives context to the vessels of ideas that compose a narrative. By identifying these vessels, I hope to show the reader the langue [[26]] of narratology. When this system has been identified, it will be easier for the reader to draw connections between narratology, language, and semiotics as a whole.

To ground the reader in the real (and to give the reader tangible examples upon which to build their understanding), I will devote a section to the discussion of narrative mediums ((01, 11)). I will show that the semiosphere of different mediums gives rise to unique icons, indices [[23]], and symbols [[58]]. However, this semiosphere also consists of familiar elements, which given meaning by structuralism [[57]].

Once these key concepts have been thoroughly interrogated, I will dive a little further into Propp's ideas ((07)). Through this, I want to give my reader a deeper sense of what composes a narrative. I want the reader to see that there is a "deep-structure" of narrative, just as there is a deep-structure to language. I also want to dispel the myth that structuralism and storytelling are exclusive.

By exploring Propp's ideas, I set the stage to dive deeper into the idea of the Actantial Model ((06, 08)). I will expand Propp's ideas and relate them to Greimas' ideas of narratology, as well as the semiotic square. Through this, I will show the basic signs of which a narrative is composed create a semiosphere of contrasting meaning – just like every other semiotic system.

After this, I will return once more to the general idea of structuralism and storytelling. I want to show that, by understanding how Sign Theory and Narratology interact ((03, 10)), we can derive metatextual and metalingual [[27]] meanings from narratives. Furthermore, by mastering the structure of a narrative, you can begin to deconstruct it – either for critical analysis, meaning derivation, or to create something entirely new. Identifying the structure so the creator knows which parts to break and why to break them is a key component of deconstruction [[10]].

Finally, I will provide practical uses for narratology ((01, 05 11)). I will show that narratology can be used like any other tool within semiotics – to provide insights into individuals, culture, and long-term trends within society. We can use this to better understand other societies, our own societies, and our own selves.

What Narratology Is

In this section, I discuss the history of narratology. First, I define what it is. Then, I describe the history by writing about the scholars who formulated or rallied around the ideas that would later fall under the umbrella of narratology.

Narratology is "the branch of knowledge of literary criticism that deals with the structure and function of narrative and its themes, conventions, and symbols." This definition is derived from Oxford Languages. Narratology is a decidedly structuralist [[57]] and modernist [[28]] view of the narrative [[30]]. That is, narratology is the idea that there is a specific structure within all narratives, and that structure and its composite parcels encode specific types of information, in much the same way that grammatical categories and phrasal units encode types of information in language. This means that there are syntagmatic [[62]] elements to narratology as well as paradigmatic [[35]]. There is meaning in the order (syntagmatic) of narrative elements (as referenced by Juliet and Keith Giglio as the "Defining Action" followed by the "Inciting Incident" followed by the "Refusal of the Call" followed by the "Entering the New World" and so on ((05))), and there is meaning in what archetypes and plot movements are chosen from a general "pool" of available elements (paradigmatic). On the whole, every idea circles back to Joseph Campbell's broader work on the idea of the monomyth ((02)), which is the belief that *all* narratives have a familiar movement to them, and that such movement is compulsive to those who create and consume narratives.

Vladimir Propp was a Russian scholar who was one of the first writers to analyze narration from a metalingual [[27]] perspective. That is, he concerned himself not with analyzing the meaning of a specific narration, but the meaning of narration as a whole. He derived this study from the botanical concept of “morphology” ((07)), which (in those days) was the study of component parts of a plant and their relationship to each other. Today, morphology applies to multiple fields, including narratology and linguistics, but the meaning is always the same: the study the constituent parts of a whole and their relationship to one another. Through this relationship, meaning can be found. This method of analysis is also known as *deconstruction* [[10]].

While Propp may have pioneered ideas and techniques, it can be argued that it was Tzvetan Todorov, a French-Bulgarian author and polymath, who formalized narratology. The term itself was proposed by him ((03)), and he made many forays into the description, exploration, and analysis of the field. Todorov directly interrogated narratives from a linguistic perspective ((09)). He asserted that each narrative component of a given plot can be generally analogous to a linguistic component, creating an image schema [[21]] similar to grammatical systems. That is, the patterns of a narrative that can be mapped to linguistics create a constellation of meaning that can be used to mine for deeper understandings of a text [[63]]. It is important to note that these patterns are not usually a conscious choice by the creator of a given text. Authorial intent is not usually a factor when analyzing text from this perspective.

Yet another builder in the field of narratology is Roland Barthes. He argued that all narratives follow a limited number of organizational structures ((10)). Barthes states that the limitation of these structures are what give rise to maximum creative potential for the creator and audience. He draws directly on ideas from semiotics ((47)), most notable infinite semiosis ((24)), in which meaning is not only nested, but without beginning and without end. Each element within a narrative consists of “a nebulae of signifieds” ((10)) [[55]]. As such, there is no reason to consider a narration strictly as a linear sequence of events. Narrations can be divided into *lexias*, or “units of reading” similar to the linguistic division of grammatical categories, phrasal constituents, and independent clauses (among others).

Algridas Greimas was a literary scientist who developed another important milestone in the field of narratology – that of the actantial model. According to Greimas, there are “six actants based on syntactic category” which are partially positioned “within three relational categories: sender vs. receiver, subject vs. object, and helper vs. opponent” ((08)). Through these positions, the actantial model can be thought of breaking down narrative roles into substantive units of information. This information can be embodied by one or more actants, or a single actant can represent multiple units of information.

The Monomyth

The section describes the monomyth. It is described from a classical standpoint and a modern standpoint. It is then analyzed from a linguistic perspective, speaking to our impulse to order things similarly in narratives that we do in linguistics.

The monomyth (also known as “The Hero’s Journey”) is an idea that there is a single story that society tells itself, over and over again. This story varies only superficially (characters,

organization, etc). In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell asks: “What is the secret of the timeless vision? From what profundity of the mind does it derive? Why is mythology everywhere the same, beneath its varieties of costume? And what does it teach?” Under the hood of all narratives, there is only one story ((02)). In Chapter IV, Campbell divides the Hero’s Journey into 10 components:

Example 1:

1. Call to Adventure
2. Helper
3. Crossing the Threshold of Adventure
4. Tests
5. Helpers
6. General Midpoint
7. Flight
8. Revisiting the Threshold of Adventure
9. Elixir

Each of these represent a significant moment of transformation for the hero, the journey, the hero’s companions, and us (the audience). Campbell draws on mythical elements to illustrate the most accessible incarnation of these elements. For instance, in Example 1, 3. Crossing the Threshold of Adventure, can manifest as “Dragon Battle,” “Abduction,” “Night-Sea Journey,” “Whale’s Belly,” and so on. Each of these elements is named after key occurrence in a variety of classical myths and legends, and always occur at the exact same spot: the point where the Hero’s truly begins – their journey into the Other World/The World of Adventure. It marks the moment where the status quo of their life ends, and a series of transformative events is initiated. While Campbell’s breakdown of the monomyth is invaluable for storytellers, it is sometimes overly specific, and does not speak for the structure of timing – a component necessary in both language and narration (I speak specifically about this language element after the following paragraph). It also assumes a certain degree of exposure to classical mythological tropes.

Juliet and Keith Giglio’s book, *Proof of Concept* ((05)), provides a less specific and more accessible breakdown of the monomyth – something that might be considered a more modern take. Their model makes use of a 40-point storyboard in order to evoke both event and timing within a narration. Because the 40-point storyboard speaks from the perspective of a ~100 minute screenplay, each point can be roughly divided into an equivalent percent within the narrative framework. For example, at minute 25 within a screenplay, or roughly 1/4 through the narrative, the main character must begin their journey into a new world (what the Giglios call “Entering the New World”). Comparing this to Campbell’s “Hero’s Journey,” you will notice that his corresponds generally with “3. Crossing the Threshold of Adventure.” You can test this by calculating the total time of a movie, fast-forwarding to roughly to the 25% mark, and you will notice that the hero’s world transitions into something new. A similar phenomenon can be found within fiction books. Flip to the 25% mark of a book, and there the hero’s journey will begin. It should be noted that this is not an exact placement, but very rough (though close enough to be within a few percentiles up or down). This means that, within a narrative structure, we do not only expect certain things to happen (the hero’s world changing, for example), but we expect it to happen at a certain amount of time. We don’t want it to happen too early, nor do we want to wait too long. By and large, this means that there are syntagmatic functions occurring within narratology – and so the structural elements of a narrative framework are crucial to its meaning.

Furthermore, it is evidence of a langue [[26]] within the signifying system of narratology. There is a system at play, and there is a way to use the system in order to create meaning.

There is a similar phenomenon in linguistics. To use “our” Standard American English as an example, we have what is called an “SVO” (subject, verb, object) obligation. This means that most clauses generally have a subject phrase, followed by a verb phrase, followed by an object phrase. Observe:

Example 2:

John went to the store.

Example 2 consists of [John] (the subject phrase) followed by [went to] (the verb phrase), and concluded with [the store] (the object phrase). The sentence is simple, predictable, and easy to parse. As with a narrative framework, there are always exceptions, but I will not belabor my point by listing them. As a general rule, Standard American English adheres to SVO structure. When we do not follow this rule, the sentence seems out of place and difficult to parse. Observe:

Example 3:

*went to John the store.

In Example 3, each phrasal constituent is placed in a non-SVO order. First, I state the verb phrase [went to], then the subject phrase [John], then the object phrase [the store]. I have violated the SVO obligation of SAE by creating a sentence that follows VSO structure (which is valid for some languages, but not usually English dialects). As a result, the sentence is borderline gibberish. Now, imagine this structure exploded into entire paragraphs and pages. As in narratology, we see a syntagmatic impulse within linguistics and sentence structure. There is a desire to place certain elements before others, and the order of those elements provide meaning. Aside from this order, there is also an expectation of timing. SAE speakers abhor “run on” sentences, and become weary when a speaker doesn’t “get to the point.” That is to say, we expect certain linguistic information packets to be delivered within a certain amount of time.

Compare linguistics to narrative structure. Evidenced in the preceding paragraphs, there is a correlative relationship between the two. This indicates an even larger semiotic phenomenon and the presence of a robust semiosphere [[48]]. Both sentences and narratives are composed of presentational symbols [[41]] that feed into the larger text. Within a sentence, those presentational symbols take on the role of grammatical categories (such as a noun). The whole of the text is not needed to understand what a “store” is. Likewise, a presentational symbol within the narrative is something like “the main character.” We don’t need the context of the entire narrative to understand what a “main character” is. What I mean is, we immediately recognize the main character within the first few minutes of a narration – we do not need to know the whole story to know who the main character is, although some playful texts might subvert this idea, such as the movie *Big Trouble in Little China*, which the supposed main character played by Kurt Russell is later interpreted to be a side-kick of the *real* hero, played by Dennis Dun). To speak even more generally, both sentences and narrative are composed of elements that encode specific piece of information. Presentational symbols do not require the context of a larger body to understand them, but the larger body needs to be composed of presentational symbols. The order and timing of these elements create meaning within the whole of the text.

 How We Tell Stories

I will now beat a dead horse. Multiple methods of storytelling are examined here in order to belabor the idea of the monomyth and narratology. How we engage in a text can determine the finer points of the narratological elements. In *The Complete Handbook of Novel Writing*, Orson Scott Card states that stories are composed 4 elements: milieu (the world), the idea (the question/theme), the character, and the event (what is wrong in the world) ((11)).

The novel is the most robust form of storytelling for engaging narratological elements from multiple angles. What this means is those previously referenced packets of information can be more thoroughly unpacked in order to provide meaning to the text. The most overt example of this is in the form of character background and character metaphor layer within the text. Like other elements of language and narration, there is an order in which this must occur. Typically, these metaphors are “broken out” from mainline narration and dialogue in order of occurrence. That is, as referenced by Greimas, there is a “generative trajectory” in which these packets of information are unpacked. One example is from the graphic novel *The Watchmen*, by Alan Moore. Within this graphic novel, there is a *second* graphic novel read by a minor character. This story-within-a-story is called *The Black Freighter*, and ostensibly tells the story about a sailor who loses his mind and murders his wife and child, thinking that he’s protecting them from the demons aboard the mythical Black Freighter. As the events of *Watchmen* unfold, we are treated to chapters from *The Black Freighter*. Soon, the story of *The Black Freighter* (and the savior-complex of its sailor hero), parallels *The Watchmen* and the insanity of its hero-turned-villain, Adrian “Ozymandias” Veidt. When *The Watchmen* was turned into a movie, the theatrical release did not feature this story-within-a-story, mostly due to the difficulty of transcribing its significance to a viewing audience. The takeaway here is that something that is read (be it a novel, a graphic novel, a poem) can have certain packets of information unpacked at specific times, but if that same story is told through another medium, those packets cannot be included for fear of losing their meaning – and therefore unraveling the meaning of the greater text.

What is “seen” presents its own narratological advantages. The circus, for example, can encode information within increasingly complex tricks and body movement within acts. This is exactly how a circus is structured – multiple acts with increasingly mesmerizing and fantastic spectacles. These same sorts of encoding cannot be transcribed to something like a novel or an audio drama without losing a significant degree of meaning. This is because we derive meaning from the movement of bodies. In semiotics, this idea is called kinesics [[25]], and within something like a circus, this idea of body language encoding meaning is magnified to a feverish intent. The body *is* the language, it is a sign – a complete package of both signifier and signified, and bodies work together to create unity and discord between spectacles – and it is here that meaning is found. The intensity of these movements grows within each act of the circus, and pulls downward to a calm at the beginning of the next act (though slightly more intense than the beginning of the previous act), building once more to a fervor at the climax. This speaks to the timing structure, which mirrors novels, movies, and spoken language, but consists entirely of its own encoding. Such body language can be found to lesser degrees in plays. Due to the aesthetic distance of the audience, kinesics is often amplified or exaggerated. Contrast this with a movie, in which

extremely subtle movements can be magnified through the use of zoom functions and lingering shots – forcing our eyes to study a single element of a scene for prolonged periods of time (exemplified in most of Andrei Tarkovsky’s films such as *Solaris* and *Stalker*, where he lingers for exceptionally long periods of time on a character’s face, hands, or entire body throughout a scene).

There is a subgenre within the general field of storytelling called “Concept Albums.” These are typically musical albums consisting of multiple tracks which tell a complete story when listened to in order (once again, evoking the syntagmatic nature of narratology). These differ from traditional musicals in that each song is intended to stand separate from the album and still be understood as a complete experience. However, like a musical, there are certain consistent musical elements. A certain refrain might be repeated throughout every song on the album, part of a melody from one song might manifest instead as a baseline in another, or an arpeggiation, or a bridge. The timing and order of these elements creates meaning of its own. A refrain may encode thematic questions central to the story of the album, while the melody itself may act as an intensifier or pacifier, depending on its structure and location within the song and overall album. But always, without exception, it follows the typically structure outline by Campbell, et al, of the hero’s journey. Orchestras follow a similar structural principle. Take Ding Shan-de’s *The Long March* symphony. The symphony is split into 5 movements, with each movement consisting of various instrumental refrains. There are also crescendos at sections comparable to what would be intense sections within a story – the 25%, 50%, and 75% mark, with the 75% mark of each movement its most climactic. For instance, at the 8:28 mark (out of a total 11:52) of the Second Movement, the time signature abruptly shifts to something far quicker. The brass section takes control of the melody, and the percussive elements charge in on every subdivision of the main beat (compared to every other backbeat in the preceding few minutes). This is, undoubtedly, the climax of the movement, and occurs at nearly the exact same time that a climax within a novel or other narrative framework. In this way, it isn’t just the musical notes that act as a signifier [[56]], but the *timing of when those notes occur* is the signifier, pointing towards what is meant to be signified (to take a Saussurean view). The timing is a complete unit of information. Unlike presentational symbols, it is entirely depending on the whole for its meaning, and the whole itself is dependent on this signifier. The [when and where] are themselves a complete sign within a climax, which itself is a signifier within the sign of that particular act, which is a signifier of the movement...and so on.

Finally, we have games, such as video games and tabletop RPGs (think *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Shadowrun*, *Mothership*, or *Traveller*). These are the most difficult of all to analyze from a structuralist standpoint. For instance, many modern video games adhere to an “open world” design principle. This means that players have agency to engage in the game’s plot *whenever* they want. For instance, in the 2000 game *Deus Ex*, players are provided with voluminous amounts of notes and books that describe the future-history of the dystopian United States of 2052. These notes are added to the player’s portable data pad to reference whenever they want. This means that backstory, which is traditionally forced during the first half of a narrative, can instead be experienced whenever the players wants to engage in the backstory, including much later in the game – all the way up to the final moments. Additionally, due to the “open world” nature, players are able to engage in boss-battles (a manifestation of a typical story structure’s final climax with the antagonistic forces) however they please. With the “open world” design of

Deus Ex and other games, this creates a situation in which a player can set a number of traps and explosives, then sit behind them reading excerpts from G. K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*, waiting for the villain to approach them to begin their end-of-section/end-of-game monologue, and instead be blown to smithereens without a word and without a single moment of intensity – subverting the entire idea of a narrative climax. Tabletop RPGs experience similar narrative phenomena. Players will often chase down irrelevant narrative threads, for which the gamemaster must then improvise and invent, only to trivialize the game's boss. This speaks, by and large, to a far more interesting signifying phenomenon on stories that can be acted upon. Namely, for players, the signifier-signified relationship is defined by them, despite attempts to be defined by the creator. The players choose to investigate and analyze clues that are significant to them, that signify or point to something that triggers elements of meaning within themselves. I theorize that, within narratives that can be acted upon, there is a very intense degree of firstness [[14]], because a player experiences narrative elements directly. They feel particular elements within the plot because it is *them* acting on those elements, rather than watching or reading someone else's experience. This creates an important bond between signifier and signified. More so than with any other medium, the player is placed squarely within the feedback loop of infinite semiosis, and experiences that semiosis at each level every time they choose to engage.

Vladimir Propp

The section explains Vladimir Propp's ideas, which speak towards a monomythic structure in the form of *dramatis personae* – i.e., the characters that compose a narrative. These characters are analyzed from a denotative perspective and a connotative perspective.

Vladimir Propp's take on the monomyth differs from Campbell's in that Propp places emphasis not on the journey taken by the hero, but on the characters that comprise the hero's journey. While Propp does present a sort of "Hero's Journey" in Chapter III of *Morphology of the Folktale* ((07)), the journey is chiefly concerned with the characters involved in the journey. He calls these characters, *dramatis personae* and has this to say about them: "The names of *dramatis personae* change (as well as the attributes of each), but neither their actions nor functions change. From this we can draw the inference that a tale often attributes identical actions to various parsonages. This makes possible the study of the tale *according to the function of its dramatis personae*" ((07)). In other words, the *dramatis personae* serves as a parcel of meaning. All superficial characteristics of the *dramatis personae* may change (names, who they are, what they look like, where they are from, etc.) but their function to the story does not change. Their functions cannot change, because their function gives meaning to the story. So what are these *dramatis personae*?

There are 7 *dramatis personae*. Here, I describe their denotation [[09]], that is, what they are objectively. In the next paragraph, I discuss the connotation of some of them [[6]], or the ideas that they evoke in the story and how they act as units of information.

1. The Villain: The antagonist forces, opposition to the hero. The Villain performs an action that sets the story in motion.

2. The Donor: "The preparation for the transmission of a magical agent; provision of the hero with a magical agent."

3. The Helper: Any agent that helps the hero along their journey (even inadvertently, such as with the Witch) to overcome a difficult task, to escape antagonistic forces, to transform the hero into what they need to be to defeat antagonistic forces, etc.

4. The Princess: “A sought-for person.” The aim of the hero’s quest.

5. The Dispatcher: Sometimes known as the Princess’s Father. The one who sends the hero on his quest.

6. The Hero: The center of the story – seeker of the sought-for person.

7. The False Hero: Forces that hold the hero back (often internal to the hero, but can be external).

It should be noted that there can be several characters in each *dramatis personae* category (two heroes, two villains, etc). Being acquainted with the denotative characteristics of the *dramatis personae* will help to understand the connotation of each of them, and their role in narratology.

For the sake of space, I cannot list the connotation of each *dramatis personae* – that kind of task would stretch the already-stretched definition of “paragraph.” And so, I will only examine 3: the villain, the donor, and the hero – who they are as signifiers and their relationship to one another with the semiosphere of narratology. This section primarily concerns my own conclusions based on Propp’s insight into fairy-tales, current-day narratives, and abstract connections between the elements of plot and their underlying representations.

1. The Villain: A disruption to the status quo. The villain is a unit of information that encodes anything that destabilizes the world as it is known to the hero (and, therefore, the audience).

2. The Donor: A helping unit subordinate to the stabilizing forces. This parcel of information typically appears near the beginning of the narrative, but the measure of their aid is not actualized until after the mid-point of the narrative. Imagine Q from the *James Bond* series. He provides aid (in the form of gadgets) to James Bond just prior to Bond “Entering the New World” or “Crossing the Threshold of Adventure.” Propp elaborates further on the many forms that a donor can take, but all of them concern the bestowment of a talisman (even if that talisman is advice) which aids the hero against their adversary. The relationship between the hero, the donor, and the method of bestowment is charted on page 47 of *Morphology of the Folktale* if further reference is wanted. The most conspicuous method of bestowment is that it can take the form of challenge or adversarial interaction (i.e., fighting the donor for their aid, as Neo fought Morpheus in exchange for wisdom in the movie *The Matrix*).

3. The Hero: A unit of information that signifies a stabilizing force. May also encode what the audience “knows” and “sees” about the world. Modernism [[28]] narratives would encode this as “goodness” or “the way things should be” struggling to emerge in the narrative. Postmodernism [[39]] narratives typically do not subscribe to the idea that there is a “right way” for the world to be, and so use the hero as a signifier of meaning – that is, some significant knowledge about life or the world asserting itself onto the characters. It is important to note that, according to Propp, and still by modern-day standards, the hero is *destabilized* on the outset of the journey. The hero is searching for something and must attain it in order to complete their journey. As such, the hero is a unit

whose meaning changes throughout the narrative, though what they signify does not change.

It is the interplay of the *dramatis personae* with one another that creates meaning. For instance, the villain and the hero represent parcels of information that contrast one another, and so a direct confrontation between the villain and the hero is the representation of varying units of information merging. To say it less generally: what meaning is created between two pieces of differing information? Do not think of it as conflicting facts, but units of meaning that each hold something significant. Meaning is created by the comparison of this information, the merging of it, the contrasting of it, and so on. There is a constellation of associations that can be formed when information is combined, and each *dramatis personae* is a sign that represents a parcel of information that can be mixed and matched to create significant meanings through association.

That Propp can break down Russian fairy tales into signifiers and place them syntagmatically within a narrative, and that same method of analysis can then be applied to modern-day movies such as *The Matrix* or *The Dark Knight* structure speaks to a “deep structure” within all narratives ((04)). That is, there is a subconscious drive to order narratives a certain way, to have specific units of information present within that narrative, to have signifiers and the signified overtly expressed through characters and events that those characters experience.

The Actantial Model

Here, the actantial model is defined and examples of its use are provided. It is my intent to show linguistic similarities between narration and linguistics, and show methods of textual analysis based on these similarities.

While Propp wrote extensively about the roles of the *dramatis personae*, Algirdas Greimas proposed the idea of the actant. This actant is an overt acknowledgement that a character represents information in the exact same way that a word or grammatical category also represents information ((08)). There is a syntactic significance (therefore, a syntagmatic significance) in the *dramatis personae*, and there is a paradigmatic significance. What is used to represent information and where that information is placed in the narrative is structurally significant and directly relatable to sentence composition. Greimas lists 6 actants:

1. **Subject:** Hero – desires the object.
2. **Object:** Princess – the sought-for object
3. **Opponent:** Villain/False Hero – direct contrast to the hero
4. **Helper:** Donor – subordinate role to the hero
5. **Sender:** Dispatcher – what propels the hero on their journey
6. **Receiver:** Dispatcher/Society/The World/The Audience

If we want to consider this from a linguistic perspective, Greimas does not consider it literally comparable to a sentence. That is, there is no 1:1 transference. While the subject *can* be analogous to the noun of a sentence, or the topic of the sentence, it is more accurate to say that narratives present the “*situation* of linguistic activity” ((08)). For example, the helper in a narrative appears at a certain point within the story, and their role is subordinate to the

subject/hero, just as an adjective occurs within a certain point in a sentence, with its role subordinate to the noun it describes.

To relate this back to Propp, I examine 2 *dramatis personae* (villain and donor) from an actantial view:

1. The Villain: In the actantial model, the villain does not need to be any person or object, or anything singular (and rarely is). The villain can just as easily be a force of nature as it is a person, and indeed the villain is often a natural force personified. It is a representation of *destabilization*, and like the donor, is subordinate to the hero (the destabilization is only destabilizing when contrasted to the hero's desire for the object), and so there is a semiotic relationship between the hero and the villain (each is a signifier of the other).

2. The Donor: As mentioned in the previous section, the donor typically provides aid to the hero near the story's outset. Q providing Bond with gadgets before "Entering the New World" was the example used. However, those tools are not used until Bond finds himself in a dire predicament (facilitated by the villain) well after the transition into the New World. In this way, the donor can be considered a delayed-helping unit. That is, the donor's help is *structure-oriented*, not *meaning-oriented*. This speaks to the syntagmatic nature of the actant. The donor does not provide direct meaning to what the subject/actant is, but provides aid which ensures that the subject's transformation is able to occur at the appropriate place within the narrative. This is comparable to the *linguistic situation* of a noun-helper (adjective, adjectival phrase, subordinate clause, etc) helping to clarify the meaning of the noun by placing the noun-helper at a specific place within the sentence/clause (typically, adjacent to the noun it helps).

It should be noted that Greimas' view of the actant is not meant to be a phenomenal correlation, but rather, a new method of interrogation and critical analysis to compare and deconstruct elements within a narrative. As such, rules and interpretation are flexible. Because we can subconsciously relate to linguistic elements, even when we cannot name them, it becomes easier to understand the semiosphere of the narrative by comparing it to linguistic situations with which we are more familiar (if not consciously, certainly instinctively).

I previously spoke on the interplay between *dramatis personae*. I now expand on how the actantial model creates meaning with this interplay. There is a (non-Proppian) theory within narrative structure that the conflict between the subject/opponent represents which "ideal" will triumph over the other, but in the semiosphere of narratology, there is no "triumph" of one sign over another. Meaning is created by the differences between signs, and as such, the conflict of these to actants should be seen as a method of contrast between linguistic elements within a narrative. The literal confrontation in a story serves to make those linguistic elements tangible. To illustrate this point, consider the final confrontation between Neo and Agent Smith in *Matrix: Revolutions*. In the previous movie, it is directly stated by the Architect that Neo (the subject) signifies freewill. Smith (the opponent) is a signifier of control (aside from his ideology, there are paradigmatic [[35]] signs by way of his attire – a plain business suit that remains immaculate at all times). And so, during the final conflict, the subject and opponent each state what they signify (also occurs in the fight between Batman and Joker in *The Dark Knight*), even as they

pummel one another with their fists (this, itself, a signifier of the contrast between signs). Smith constantly makes remarks toward control, while Neo comments on choices and humanity's free will. In the end, Neo and Smith *merge*, an overt acknowledgement of the idea that new meaning is created by the differences between signs. From an actantial standpoint, this is similar to the *linguistic situation* of a number of linguistic phenomena – variation, allophony, allomorphy, minimum pairs – where meaning is gained through differences (or lack thereof).

As a footnote, I would like to note that the linguistic similarity within narratology is only a single aspect of narratology, it is not the whole of it.

Sign Theory and Narratology

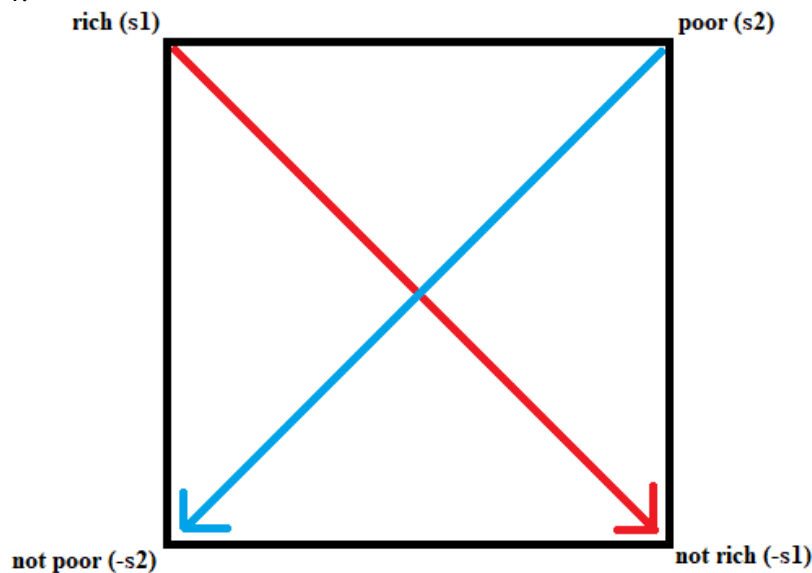
I have spoken at length of *dramatis personae*, actants, and so forth. I will quickly list various methods of sign-theory in order to form a vocabulary for the reader in order to discuss how these various sign-theories can be used within the narrative structure. At the end of this section, I hope my readers are able to see how sign theory relates to narratology, how it can be used to form interesting narrative, and how it can be used to interrogate existing texts.

The first and simplest (as far as “moving parts” is concerned) is Saussure sign theory. This is a binary sign structure composed of the signifier (the part of the signs that refers to something else) and the signified (the part of the sign that is referred to).

The next method of sign theory is the Peircean model. This sign consists of three parts. One part of a sign is the representamen [[44]]. This is the physical part of the sign, or its structure. A second part of the sign is the object [[33]]. This is what a sign refers to. The third part of a sign is the interpretant [[22]]. This is the meaning derived from a sign. Note that, as with Saussurean sign theory, there is no “order” that the sign occurs in (except, perhaps, the interpretant). Each part of the sign points to another part of the sign.

The final method discussed here is the semiotic square, developed by Greimas. This is a more complex method of sign, and involves mapping a given sign (s1) to the contradictory (-s1) of that sign, the contrary (s2) of the sign, and the contrary's contradiction (-s2). An example from *The Quest for Meaning* would serve us well here. Taken from page 56 of the second edition:

Example 4:



The important difference with the semiotic square is that it overtly shows that meaning is derived through differences in concepts. While Saussure and Pierce sign theory both rely on the differences between signs, signifier, and signified to generate meaning, Greimas' semiotic square is a method of directly mapping that relationship.

We can use sign structure to derive meaning from the various signs present in narratives. For example, using the Peircean model, we can compare and contrast a hero and a helper. I use the novel *Neuromancer* as an example. Note that this is a superficial analysis and not meant to serve as an in-depth interrogation of sign structure within *Neuromancer*, only how the Peircean model can be used to derive meaning from a text.

Example 5:

A. Subject/Hero: Henry Case.

Representamen: Skinny, drug addict, suicidal, thief, exiled.

Object: Social stratification, dependency, identity.

Interpretant: When our identity is dependent on extrinsic objects, we can be manipulated.

B. Helper: Wintermute.

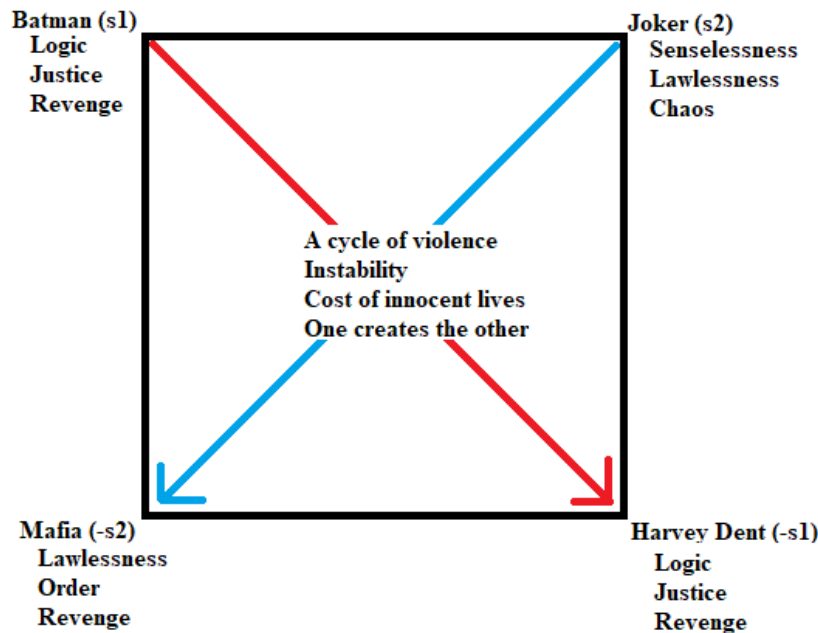
Representamen: Vast artificial intelligence, "impossibly dense" bright white lattice cube, mechanical voice.

Object: Inability to control technology, inability to properly perceive consequences of technology.

Interpretant: Our technology outstrips our moral capabilities, reality is not defined by perception but by our lack of perception.

To further illustrate my point, consider the semiotic square by Greimas. For this, I use *The Dark Knight* to compare and contrast actants present within the narrative.

Example 6:



By placing these actants in contrary and contrasting positions, we can find parcels of meaning. Thought not prescribed by Greimas, in the middle of the square I have extracted some thematic observations based on the differences derived through the semiotic square. Using the semiotic square, we can find actants which are similar and represent identical parcels of meaning within the text, then derive further meaning through their differences.

The Importance of Narratology

Narratology encompasses more than just inner-text interpretation. We can use narratology to find culturally significant artifacts. One such method is using markedness theory. Markedness theory places import on “marked” objects or ideas. For instance, *on-time* versus *late*. In US culture, it is the expectation that people will arrive on time, and so special emphasis is placed on those who are late. It is abnormal and socially unacceptable. Markedness theory extends this idea to narratology. One such way is the paradigmatic elements of an actant. For example, we may wonder why, in *The Dark Knight*, the “hero” is a vigilante operating outside the bounds of the law. That Batman doesn’t follow the law but still provides justice for the citizens of Gotham, is marked. Using markedness theory, we find significance in this, and can draw conclusions about the values of the society that relates to the fiction of *The Dark Knight*, and consequently sees Batman as a hero and not a villain.

Synchronic [[60]] narratology analyzes a narration from a single moment in time. Namely, what is the author telling us right now? Manfred Jahn’s *A Guide to the Theory of Narrative* ((06)) dedicates a section to narrative communication, which one of the most important considerations is that between the reader and the author at that moment in time. In this interpretation, the age of the story is irrelevant. It doesn’t matter if *Heart of Darkness* was written in the late 1800s, what matters is the message now. In a synchronic approach, authorial message as well as the previously mentioned methods of analysis present a timeless message. A synchronic approach

can show us what is meaningful to us now, personally and as a society. That we value works such as *Heart of Darkness* and analyze them from a present perspective speaks to degrees of markedness within the synchronic approach. There is something timeless about the work that speaks to our current-day values.

Diachronic [[11]] narratology analyzes narration across time. This places special emphasis on when the narrative was created and/or its effects across time. In *Storytelling: A Culture Studies Approach* ((01)), Lindsay Brown analyzes the significance of revivals within certain narrative techniques. For example, what was the significance of oral storytelling millennia ago, why did it fall out of favor, and why is it re-emerging? Diachronic methods can also be used to analyze the content of the narration itself. For instance, why is it significant that *Heart of Darkness* was written during the 1800s? And why is it significant that its message remains universal across time? Why have other classical works, such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, that were once iconic, faced criticism? What has changed socially and culturally since it was written?

What other instances can we draw upon to find cultural significant meanings in narratives? From the synchronic approach, we can look at *The Da Vinci Code* and draw conclusions that speak towards a general distrust of religion during that time period. Analyzing that single moment in time, we know that the book struck during a revival of religious ecstasy emanating from the US government and a renewed push to place Christian paraphernalia in government buildings. From the diachronic approach, we can find meaning in the renewed interest in tabletop RPGs such as *Dungeons & Dragons*. Popular among “freaks and geeks” in the 80s-90s, despite the moral “Satanic panic” surrounding these games. Then, it largely fell out of favor during the 2000s – 2010s. It has once again seen a resurgence both in popularity and investment. One of the newest tabletop RPGs, *Mothership*, earned \$1.4 million dollars through crowdfunding, one of the highest in the history of Kickstarter and TTRPGs in general. We can use a diachronic analysis to find cultural values change – in the 80s-90s, playing co-operative games with your friends was mostly achieved through TTRPGs. In the 2000s – 2010s, online gaming took its place. Today, a pandemic keeps us from spending time with our friends, and so TTRPGs have broken out of the standard gaming community and towards a different audience – on that wants to spend time with their friends, must do through a virtual medium, but are not compelled to do so through online gaming.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed various ideas in the semiosphere of narratology. These ideas are the monomythic nature of narratives, the linguistic situations present within a narrative, methods of interpreting text by using sign theory, and how we can use methods of analysis to find cultural significance within a narrative. All of these things are elements of narratology. Narratology is not just a single thing, but many methods and uses combined into a semiosphere.