Narratology

Narratology is a specific way of understanding narrative that was developed out of structuralism and Russian formalism. Sometimes "narratology " is the name given to any form of analysis of narrative, but this is misleading. The term instead refers to a particular period in the history of narrative analysis that not only has had important consequences for other areas of study but has itself been transformed by other disciplines and perspectives. What characterizes narratology most readily is a systematic, thorough, and disinterested approach to the mechanics of narrative, an approach in stark contrast to those approaches that observe or seek out "value " in some narratives (and not others) or provide hierarchies of narratives based on spurious categories, such as the "genius " of an author or artiste.

The development of narratology can be outlined briefly. Its ultimate ancestor is Aristotle (c. 384–322 b.c.e.) whose Poetics (c. 330 b.c.e.), a work existing in fragments, telegraphically offers a prescriptive guide to the workings of poetry. Narrative is not considered here explicitly; rather it is implicitly embedded in the forms tragedy, comedy, and epic. Although Western letters sporadically included observations on the forms of narrative during the next two thousand years, it is generally considered that the kind of literary theory retrospectively attributed to Aristotle did not reappear in concerted form until the twentieth century. The most important foundation for narratology, therefore, is the work of Russian Formalism in the 1920s, and especially the work of a Russian folklorist with an oblique relation to Formalism, Vladimir Propp. Allied to Propp’s work in some ways, structuralism grew out of the applications of parts of Ferdinand de Saussure’s Cours de linguistique générale (1916, Course in General Linguistics, 1959) to areas of the human sciences and to literary theory, especially narrative. The procedure adopted by the structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss to interrogate the structure of myths, for example, provided an impetus and blueprint for narratology. The methods of other structuralist thinkers investigating narrative forms, literary analysts such as Algirdas Julien Greimas and Claude Bremond, added to this impetus. As structuralism spread through the human sciences in Europe and then into Anglo-American academia, so too did structuralist-orientated literary theory. Roland Barthes’s essay "Introduction à l’analyse structurale des récits " (1966, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative," 1977) and Tzvetan Todorov’s Grammaire du Décaméron (1969), the latter of which actually coined the term narratologie, represented the birth of narratology proper. In the late 1960s and early 1970s these paved the way for works by names frequently associated with the narratological enterprise: Mieke Bal, Seymour Chatman, Dorrit Cohn, Gérard Genette, and Gerald Prince.

Narratology not only encouraged the study of narrative in general, as opposed to the "pure " study of, say, the novel or film, but also grew out of the structuralist imperative to subject different forms to a "neutral " method of questioning. Narratology therefore took encouragement from structuralism and, more broadly, the newly crystallizing field of semiotics, the study of the sign in all its manifestations. Theoretically, narratology would be able to identify the key structuring devices in narratives appearing in media as different as oral language, writing, mime, visual, audio and audio-visual media, and computers. It could therefore embrace narrative forms such as oral poetry, epic, ballads, the romance, the novel, plays, opera, puppet shows, paintings, comic strips, films, radio serials, television series, news, computer and video games, virtual-reality scenarios, and so forth. The analysis would take place with reference to some core concepts that could be translated across media and forms and that all narratives would have in common, in addition to concepts developed to describe the specificities of particular forms within given media.

The tacit idea that underpins all narratology, however, is that narrative is part of the general process of representation that takes place in human discourse. That is to say, the world is not given to humans in pure form; instead, it is always mediated or re -presented. Stuart Hall suggests that there are three general approaches to the question of the work done by representation. The "reflective " approach sees meaning as residing in the person or thing in the real world; a representation such as narrative "reflects " that meaning. The "intentional " approach sees meaning in the control exercised by the producer of a representational form such as narrative; he or she uses representation to make the world "mean. " The "constructionist " approach sees meaning neither in the control of the producer nor in the thing being represented; instead, it identifies the thoroughly social nature of the construction of meaning, the fact that representational systems, rather than their users and objects, allow meaning to occur. Narratology generally embraces the "constructionist " perspective as its guiding principle, seeing in narrative form the organization, possibility, and very progenitor of narrative meaning.

The most fundamental elements of narrative representation for narratology are the terms "story, "...
"plot," and indeed "narrative" itself. No narratological approach can proceed without some conception regarding each of these. However, this is not to say that narratologists never disagree on what defines each of these elements of narrative. Moreover, in commonsense parlance, "story" and "narrative," as well as "story" and "plot," are also constantly conflated. The analysis of the basic separation between plot and story goes back to the Russian Formalists, especially Viktor Shklovskii’s influential distinction between fabula, the raw material of a story, and sujet, the way a story is organized. It is important to acknowledge that these influential terms are usually translated in works by Anglophone narratologists as "story" and "discourse," respectively (Chatman, Story), although they are sometimes translated as "story" and "plot" (Hawthorn, Shklovskii). Genette ("Frontiers," Narrative Discourse Revisited), on the other hand, relies on the French terms récit (narrative) and discours (discourse) to distinguish between the events of a narrative and how these events are "arranged" by the devices and figures of narrative that are customarily identified by narratology. Despite the potential confusion inherent in these arguments, what is essential to the separation of all these terms is the recognition that narratives consist of a presentation of something, which is always, in fact, a re-presentation. Alternatively, it might be said that story comprises "all the events that take place in a narrative"; plot comprises the "underlying causality that binds these events together and demands that some events be narrated and not others"; and narrative is "how all these events with underlying causality are narrated" —in what sequence, through which devices, and with what kind of narratorial voice (Cobley).

These fundamental distinctions in narratology were developed, in different ways, by the immediate precursors of the main narratological enterprise, who came after Russian Formalism. Both Propp and Lévi-Strauss undertake analyses of narrative that focus on "story" or, in the latter’s case, in an extension of the linguistic terminology from Saussure, "semantic structure." In Morfologia skazki (1928, Morphology of the Folktales), auspiciously translated into English in 1958 and appearing in book form only ten years later, Propp analyzed 100 Russian folk stories. Rather than attending to the surface differences of the narratives, he examined their underlying commonalities, particularly the basic function of actions in each story. Propp identified 31 functions characterizing the tales, for example, "One of the members of a family absents himself from home," "An interdiction is addressed to the hero," "The interdiction is violated," through to "The villain is punished," and "The hero marries and ascends the throne." Each of these functions is, of course, carried out by one or more of the dramatis personae. Propp therefore proceeded to isolate the seven basic roles of characters in his sample, listing the particular sphere of action to which each belonged: the hero, the villain, the (sought-for) princess and her father, the dispatcher, the donor, the helper, and the false hero. The taxonomy was not inflexible: sometimes a character took on more than one role, or a single role was played by more than one character. Along with this methodology, Propp’s concluding comment on how modern literature would seem as susceptible to his approach as the highly formalized stories he analyzed provided a spur to future narratologists.

In a similar way, Lévi-Strauss’s procedure in the analysis of myth was also an important point of reference, and it is often taken to be synonymous with Propp’s even though Lévi-Strauss distanced himself from Morphology of the Folktales by writing a scathing assessment of the Russian’s work in 1960 (Lévi-Strauss, "Structure and Form"). Taking as his model the analysis of language as a set of oppositions between its smallest possible elements, phonemes, Lévi-Strauss proceeds in the same way for myth. His celebrated dissection of the Oedipus story identifies various key events, actions, or relationships as a myth’s fundamental elements, or "mythemes"; these are then rearranged in a table to demonstrate their identical functions in the narrative. Following this procedure for the Oedipus story, it is possible to see that mythemes such as "The Spartoi kill one another," "Oedipus kills his father, Laius," and "Eteocles kills his brother, Polynices" all go together as elements to do with murder in this particular structure. The narrative, when isolated from a reader’s surface involvement with its sequence, evinces just a small number of such repetitive relations that reveal the purpose of the story (Lévi-Strauss, Structural Anthropology). Mythic narrative, in this formulation, is like a "grammar" that generates new sentences, or a vessel into which new contents might be poured; the sentences or the contents themselves are not nearly as important as the grammar or vessel that gives them shape.

Equally influential in narratology are the categories introduced by Greimas. Most importantly, he emphasizes the functional nature of Propp’s "dramatis personae" by referring instead to "actants." "Actants" or "actantial roles" are defined in relation to each other, in relation to their place in the narrative’s "spheres of action" or "functions," and in relation to their place in the logic of a narrative. In Greimas’s revision of the dramatis personae in Sémantique structurale (1966, Structural Semantics, 1983) the actants comprise "subject vs. object," "sender vs. receiver," and "helper vs. opponent," a set of categories that replaces Propp’s analysis based on character roles (heroes vs. sought-for person, father/dispatcher vs. hero, helper/provider vs. villain/false hero). Narrative meaning in this formulation is played out through the various functions. Thus, the "subject" searches for the "object"; the "sender" is on a quest, initiated by a "subject," for an "object"; and so on. In addition, Greimas explores the way in which the structure of narrative can be defined by the interaction of "positive" and negative functions, such as the opposition between a relationship designated A and containing command/behest (a) and acceptance (non A) and a relationship designated A and consisting of violation (non A) and interdiction (a). Ultimately, the systematic scrutiny of these relations led Greimas to posit a "semiotic square" of such coordinates as a
In the same year that Greimas published *Structural Semantics*, a special edition of the French journal *Communications* contained essays by both Barthes and Todorov that, along with others, adopted for a projected narratology the agenda set by Propp, Greimas, and Lévi-Strauss. In his "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," Barthes proposes three *levels* of narrative to be analyzed: *functions* (as does Propp), *actions* (citing Greimas), and *narration* (derived, in this case, from Todorov). Barthes also obviates the injunction from Lévi-Strauss to "dechronologize" narrative in a manner not dissimilar to the "synchronic" reworking of the Oedipus myth. "Both language and narrative," Barthes asserts, "know only a semiotic time, 'true' time being a 'realist,' referential illusion." However, the level of *narration* in Barthes’s essay marked a significant departure from the fathers of narratology. Instead of dealing with "content," "raw story matter," or the arrangement of *fabula* alone, narration included contemplation of what are now standard narratological focuses, such as the role of the narrator and point of view.

Questions to do with the narrative levels had been standard in literary criticism well before the advent of narratology. However, the systematization of issues around narration was to produce a sea change throughout literary theory, especially where hierarchies, canons, and the authority of realism were cherished. Before narratology, literary criticism and common sense frequently held the strong view that narratives were produced by industrious and authoritative individuals and then consumed by avid and painstaking readers. Narratologists such as Genette, Chatman, and Bal implicitly took Barthes’s cue to demonstrate that such a view of narrative "transmission" was far from accurate. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, summarizing their work, identifies the following participants in narrative, each of which might seem to aid the act of transmission but each of which might equally "interfere" with it. Empirical entities named a Real Author and a Real Reader, both of whom are human beings, appear at each pole of the communication process (sending and receiving, respectively); these are placed in the company of other mediators in a narrative fiction, such as a novel, as follows: Real Author, Implied Author, Narrator, (Narratee), Implied Reader, Real Reader (slightly modified from Rimmon-Kenan 86; see also Gibson, "Authors"). The Implied Author is the organizing principle of the text, the guiding star responsible for the presentation of the text’s materials in a specific way: the ordering of scenes, the narration of certain objects and events and the non-narration of others, the structure of the plot, and so forth. The Narrator is a narrative "voice" that tells the story in the first or third person, sometimes as a character in the story and on occasion even "omnisciently." Theoretically, the Narratee is that ideal entity to whom the text is narrated, an entity that will accept uncritically all that the text has to offer and the way that it is offered (in parentheses above because invariably it is impossible to separate this entity from the Implied Reader). Narratology’s investigation of these coordinates in the structure of a text not only demonstrated the complexity of narrative levels but also dealt a blow to those in literary criticism who believed that the only impediment to "comprehension" of the "core meaning" of a narrative was a lack of decorous, cultured appreciation of canonical texts.

Questions about the discourse of the narrator or the implied author were also logically connected to the issue of "point of view." As with narrative levels, the question of whose point of view is represented in a narrative has a long lineage: in Anglophone criticism, arguably back through Wayne C. Booth, Percy Lubbock, and Henry James to Henry Fielding in the eighteenth century (Gibson, *Towards*); in the Western tradition, somewhat problematically, back to Plato (c. 427–347 B.C.E.). Frequently, arguments about this distinction in narrative revolved around the issue of which was more effective—showing (by depicting story events through someone’s point of view) or telling (through narratorial observations, sometimes made from an omniscient viewpoint). Narratology circumvented questions of value by formalizing analysis, focusing not on what was good or bad but on what actually happened when events or objects in a narrative were "focalized" (Genette, *Narrative Discourse*) or "filtered" (Chatman, *Coming*) in a specific way. "Focalization" of course, is a visual metaphor; therefore, it was hardly surprising that the term was taken up avidly by film studies in the 1970s (see Branigan, Browne). Most importantly, perhaps, the exploration of the ramifications of focalization recapitulated in more detail those questions of authority in narrative—who speaks? and who covers up their perspective?—that were raised in the proto-narratological distinction between histoire and discours introduced by the French linguist Émile Benveniste.

The other key areas of concern to narratology are associated with time—or "duration"—as it has been figured in narrative. Even if its ultimate reference might be thought to be the movement of the clock, time in narrative does not necessarily unfold linearly. Hence, Genette, for example, discusses at length the way in which narration can move backwards in time to depict events which have taken place before those that have most recently been narrated. He calls this *analepsis* (*Narrative Discourse*; cf. *retroversion* in Bal), and examples abound in films as flashbacks. He also discusses the way in which events in the future can be narrated, through means of *prolepsis*, or flashforward. Both phenomena involve the narrative opting to choose some things or events (in the past or the future) rather than others. The same can be said of a similarly prominent feature of narrative usually called "summary and scene." Summary is a form of prose in a narrative that *tells* about events or people without directly presenting their speech: a narrative might move, by way of summary, to a later point in time, passing over quickly what happens in between; alternatively, by the same means it can move from one place to another, more distant one. Scene,
conversely, bears affinities with dramatic narrative: it shows the events, and, more often than not, such events will contain speech that scene is able to imitate through the use of quotation marks (Bal 104–5).

Near the beginning of the "official " narratological enterprise, Todorov suggested that "our first task is the elaboration of a descriptive apparatus; before being able to explain the facts, we must learn to identify them " (Grammaire 119). Despite the achievements in this sphere over thirty years, it is perhaps for the same reason stated by Todorov that Bal is able to write in 1999 of a current "return to narratology " (220). The narratological project of description is ongoing. Indeed, the awareness of narrative that has been instilled by narratology, the identification of narrative across all media and in everyday places, such as conversations and life stories, enables one literary theorist of the 1990s to propose a "natural " narratology (Fludernik). The book in which this proposal appeared also provided evidence of some of the criticism that now frames the practice of narratology.

Criticisms of narratology can be boiled down to just one singular but ineluctable issue and a number of subsidiary ones. One of the first and most frequent of the subsidiary criticisms contends that narratological models are reductive and fail to apprehend the richness of narrative in all its forms. One example of this might be narratology’s neglect of the color and quality of a setting or location for a story, or the multifaceted nature of the characters that make a narrative interesting and dramatic. Clearly, there is some truth in this: reducing Raskolnikov, Charles Foster Kane, or even Mr. Spock to an actant would seem to make little sense. Since the epic and biblical narratives, psychology, motivation, mood, and detail have been integral to narrative. However, it should be noted that narratologists never explicitly deny such features of narrative. Further, it is clear that narratology is, in some senses, a self-consciously "general " exercise in that it attempts to account for all kinds of narrative.

Another common subsidiary criticism is that the approach of narratology is static, or that it provides a synchronic view of a narrative without paying attention to the dynamism resulting from the interaction of narrative elements. Undoubtedly, one of the key elements here is plot and its embodiment of an ongoing causality. At the height of narratology’s currency, Peter Brooks addressed this issue, referring to Barthes’s S/Z (1970, S/Z, 1974) and the propulsion of narrative towards its end. Ultimately, Brooks had to rely on psychological speculation to arrive at any conclusion, but the point remains that, as with its origins in Saussurean linguistics, narratology is constrained by a resolutely synchronic perspective. It has even been suggested that one handicap of narratology is that it is unable to think beyond the bounds of the "end " of narrative (Cobley).

It has also been argued that narratology neglects the pragmatics of narrative or, to put it another way, fails to take account of the contextual factors that might govern the manner in which a narrative operates. Most narratives are accompanied by a relay indicating what kind of narrative is being enacted and what its characteristics will be. Narratives also take place in specified situations. The preliminary statement "I want to tell you a story " has a different bearing when uttered to a gathering round a campfire 3,000 years ago, when appearing at the beginning of a nineteenth-century novel, and when uttered by a twenty-first-century stand-up comedian to an audience in a nightclub. Not only is it a relay indicating that a narrative will take place but it operates in conjunction with the setting, which tells what kind of narrative it will be, what formal properties about it require attention, and what kind of response should be elicited. A narratological analysis cannot analyse all these factors; it can do no more than list the formal properties of the enacted narrative and attempt to show how their components interact.

One of the most noted criticisms of narratology appears in Paul Ricoeur’s three-volume work Temps et récit (1983–85, Time and Narrative, 1984–88). Ricoeur holds that time is not just a part of the narrative apparatus, as narratologists would have it, but the human relation to time. Ricoeur insists that the kind of temporality encountered in narrative has more to do with the interpretative mode "expectation—memory—attention " than it has to do with the commonplace version of time as a series of instants arranged along a line. For him, the end point of a narrative is crucial, and the understanding of successive actions, thoughts, and feelings in a narrative is dictated by anticipation of the conclusion ( "Narrative "). From this recognition it follows, then, that the cornerstone of narrative structure is the plot, or what Ricoeur, borrowing from Aristotle’s "muthos, " calls "emplotment. " Ricoeur chides narratology—which he misleadingly calls the "semiotics " of narrative—for the way it acts to "dechronologize " narrative and reduce it to a series of dominating "paradigmatic " functions, leaving sequence to the mercy of the commonsense linear interpretation of time.

Lying behind Ricoeur’s comments, in addition to the subsidiary criticisms that have been discussed, is a deeper critique of the text-centeredness of narratology. Even though they do not necessarily state it explicitly, all the above criticisms of narratology point to the omission of readers’ meanings. In literary theory alone, since the inception of narratology there has been a growing awareness of the need to consider how readers make meanings (see Reception Theory). This awareness encompasses a range of concerns, from verisimilitude to critical or ideological dissent from the projects of individual narratives. Furthermore, disciplines to whose development narratology contributed, such as media, communications, and Cultural Studies, have been dominated in the last twenty years by attempts to achieve an understanding of audiences’ receptions of texts. Narratology’s focus on textual constituents means that it is constrained from revealing
all but the slightest amount regarding readers’ investment in semantic features of texts; how readers are engaged or moved by "muthos", or plot; how readers receive "cues" to their investments by the pragmatic aspects of texts; and how readers’ perception in time is carried over into the very fabric of individual narratives.

It might be said that narratology represents a high point in the analytic turn in twentieth-century humanities that included Russian Formalism, prague school structuralism, the Copenhagen school, new criticism, the Toronto school, French structuralism, and poststructuralism. As such, it attempted to take a neutral approach to explicating textuality rather than a prescriptive or value-laden one. That narratology so severely brackets out consideration of potential readers’ responses does not invalidate it. Nor has textual analysis become unnecessary. Bal’s vision of a "return" to narratology is just one indication that despite the diversity of readers, the narratological enterprise is still needed to help with the task of understanding the relatively limited number of reading practices that exist and the tendency of narratives to be understood as belonging to certain sets, kinds, or genres.

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See also American theory and criticism: 3, 1970 and after, Canadian theory and criticism: 2, French, fiction theory and criticism, film theory and criticism, Russian formalism, semiotics, and structuralism.

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