

Tzvetan Todorov
Structural Analysis of Narrative

Narratology

- He coined the term “narratology,” the scientific study of narrative, in his book on *The Decameron*

Structural Analysis

- There are 2 attitudes toward literature:
 - 1) a theoretical attitude
 - 2) a descriptive attitude
 - Structural analysis is “essentially theoretical and non-descriptive”
- Structural analysis “coincides” with theory and the “poetics of literature,” and the object of structural analysis is “the literary discourse.”
- Todorov seemingly defines structural analysis as a way “to propose a theory of structure and operation of the literary discourse, to present a spectrum of literary possibilities, in such a manner that the existing works of literature appear as particular instances that have been realized.”

Some Key Ideas & Terms

- Plot → While story is “the description of an improvement process—until the flaw is no longer there,” plot, for Todorov, is the mechanics of narrative.
 - The *Decameron* serves to “display an abstract literary structure, that is, plot.” So he begins his structural analysis by laying out 4 of Boccaccio’s plots
- Poetics → He uses phrases like “poetics of literature” and “literature becomes only a mediator, a language, which poetics uses for dealing with itself.”
 - From “Poetics and Criticism” in *The Poetics of Prose*: “that investigation of the properties of literary discourse.”

Christine Smallwood, “A Reviewer’s Life”

from *The Yale Review*, 10 June 2024

“CRITICISM IS AN ACT of autobiography. The work of making an argument, coming to a judgment, or simply choosing which books or objects to give time and attention to is inevitably, helplessly, an expression of values—and an expression of self. Our tastes tell on us as much as our syntax and tone; that mysterious compound called sensibility is formed by some strange alchemy of innate tendencies, life experiences, and material circumstances. In the pursuit of explicating a text, observing its patterns and structure, how it works, what it means, I also explicate myself—revealing what catches my interest, where my attention lingers. I might do this more, or less, intentionally, but I always do it.”

From Henry James' "The Art of Fiction"

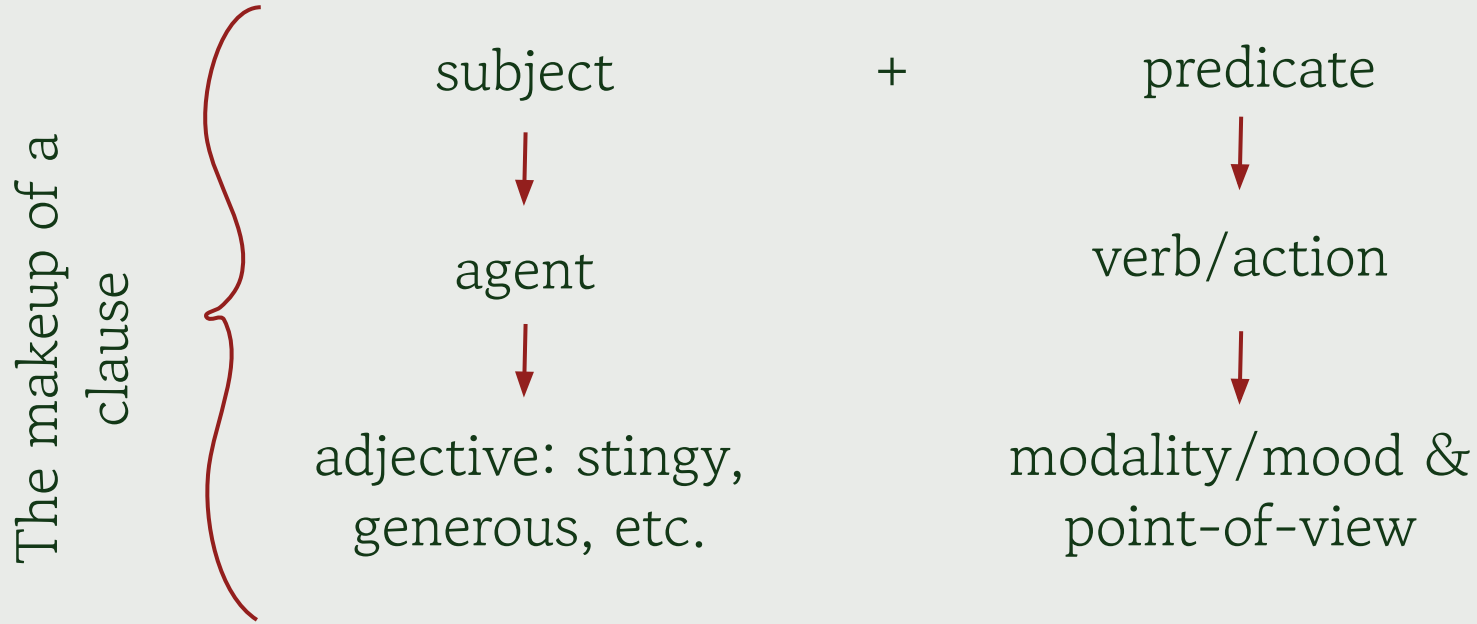
People often talk of these things as if they had a kind of internecine distinctness, **instead of melting into each other at every breath and being intimately associated parts of one general effort of expression. I cannot imagine composition existing in a series of blocks,** nor conceive, in any novel worth discussing at all, of a passage of description that is not in its intention narrative, a passage of dialogue that is not in its intention descriptive, a touch of truth of any sort that does not partake of the nature of incident, and an incident that derives its interest from any other source than the general and only source of the success of a work of art—that of being illustrative. **A novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like every other organism, and in proportion as it lives will it be found, I think, that in each of the parts there is something of each of the other parts.**

A Structural Analysis of the *Decameron*

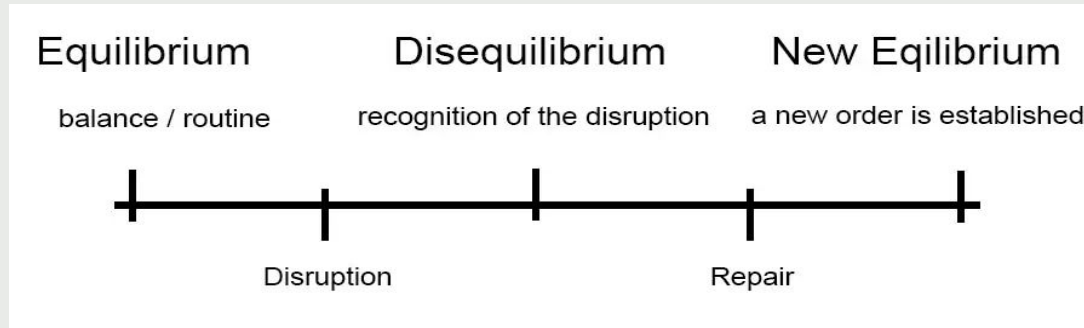
- “My aim is to suggest a certain number of useful categories for examining and describing plots.”

X violates a law \rightarrow Y must punish X \rightarrow X tries to avoid being punished \rightarrow
 \rightarrow $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Y violates a law} \\ \text{Y believes that X is not violating the law} \end{array} \right. \rightarrow \text{Y does not punish X}$

Plot Schema



Todorov's Narrative Theory of Equilibrium



Step 8: “How does one get from the abstract, schematic representation to the individual tale?”

- 8a. The level of generality or the “concrete level”
 - Instead of each clause coming together to form a sequence, which is Todorov’s approach, you can do the opposite: make each clause its own sequence
- 8b. “A thematic study”
 - Pinpointing concrete actions, violated laws, and subsequent punishments
- 8c. “A rhetorical study”
 - The verbal medium that’s expressed through dialogue, description, and discourse + the action’s POV