Narrative

DEFINITION

What is narrative? Here's a quick and simple definition:

> A narrative is an account of connected events. Two writers describing the same set of events might craft very different narratives, depending on how they use different narrative elements, such as tone or point of view. For example, an account of the American Civil War written from the perspective of a white slaveowner would make for a very different narrative than if it were written from the perspective of a historian, or a former slave.

Some additional key details about narrative:

- The words "narrative" and "story" are often used interchangeably, and with the casual meanings of the two terms that's fine. However, technically speaking, the two terms have related but different meanings.
- The word "narrative" is also frequently used as an adjective to describe something that tells a story, such as narrative poetry.

How to Pronounce Narrative

Here's how to pronounce narrative: **nar**-uh-tiv

Narrative vs. Story vs. Plot

In everyday speech, people often use the terms "narrative," "story," and "plot" interchangeably. However, when speaking more technically about literature these terms are not in fact identical.

- A **story** refers to a sequence of events. It can be thought of as the raw material out of which a narrative is crafted.
- A **plot** refers to the sequence of events, but with their causes and effects included. As the writer E.M. Forster put it, while "The King died and the Queen died" is a story (i.e., a sequence of events), "The King died, and then the Queen died of grief" is a plot.
- A **narrative**, by contrast, has a more broad-reaching definition: it includes not just the sequence of events and their cause and effect relationships, but also *all* of the decisions and techniques that impact how a story is told. A narrative is *how* a given sequence of events is recounted.

In order to fully understand narrative, it's important to keep in mind that most sequences of events can be recounted in many different ways. Each different account is a separate narrative. When deciding how to relay a set of facts or describe a sequence of events, a writer must ask themselves, among other things:

- Which events are most important?
- Where should I begin and end my narrative?
- Should I tell the events of the narrative in the order they occurred, or should I use flashbacks or other techniques to present the events in another order?
- Should I hold certain pieces of information back from the reader?
- What point of view should I use to tell the narrative?

The answers to these questions determine how the narrative is constructed, so they have a huge influence on the way a reader sees or understands what they're reading about. The same series of events might be read as happy or sad, boring or exciting—all depending on how the narrative is constructed. Analyzing a narrative just means examining *how* it is constructed and *why* it is constructed that way.

Narrative Elements

Narrative elements are the tools writers use to craft narratives. A great way to approach analyzing a narrative is to break it down into its different narrative elements, and then examine how the writer employs each one. The following is a summary of the main elements that a writer might use to build his or her narrative.

- **Point of View:** Point of view refers to the perspective that the narrator holds in relation to the events of the story. The three primary points of view are **first person**, in which the narrator tells a story from their own perspective ("I went to the store"); **second person**, in which the narrator tells a story about you, the reader or viewer ("You went to the store"); and **third person**, in which the narrator tells a story about other people ("He went to the store"). Each point of view creates a different experience for the reader, because, in each point of view, different types and amounts of information are available to the reader about the events and characters. Writers must also choose which character will narrate the story—another factor that determines the point of view and has a huge impact on how the reader understands the events of the story.
    - For example, a story about a crime told from the perspective of the victim might be very different when told from the perspective of the criminal.
- **Voice:** Everyone's voice sounds a little bit different, and it's a distinct part of who they are. In the same way, all writers have their own distinct voice. Once you get to know a certain writer's work, you'll likely be able to recognize something they wrote based on the style of their writing.
    - For instance, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway were friends, and they wrote during the same era, but their writing is very different from one another because they have markedly different *voices.*

- **Tone:** While each writer has their own voice, writers can take on a variety of different tones. F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway have their own voices that make them unique as writers, but each of them could write with a humorous tone, a contemplative tone, or even with a romantic tone. Tone can completely alter a reader's perception of a narrative.
    - For example, Jonathan Swift's essay "A Modest Proposal" satirizes the British government's callous indifference toward the famine in Ireland by sarcastically suggesting that cannibalism could solve the problem—but the essay would have a completely different meaning if it didn't have a sarcastic tone.
- **Pacing:** In literature, film, and television, pacing refers to the how close together the writer places major events in a narrative, how much time (or how many words) the writer devotes to describing each event, and how much of the narrative is recounted in a given space.
    - For example, the first half of Charles Dickens' novel *David Copperfield* tells the story of the narrator David Copperfield's early childhood over the course of many chapters; about halfway through the novel, David quickly glosses over some embarrassing episodes from his teenage years (unfortunate fashion choices and foolish crushes); the second half of the novel tells the story of his adult life. The pacing give readers the sense that David's teen years weren't really that important. Instead, his childhood traumas, the challenges he faced as a young man, and the relationships he formed during both childhood and adulthood make up the most important elements of the novel.
- **Frame stories:** In a frame story, one story is placed within (or "framed by") one or more other stories, which serve as exposition or context for the central story. Oral storytelling, letters, and diaries can all act as *framing devices* to contextualize or introduce a story.
    - For example, Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* uses three different "frames" to tell the story of Dr. Frankenstein and the creature he creates: the novel takes the form of letters written by Walton, an arctic explorer; Walton is recounting a story that Dr. Frankenstein told him; and as part of his story, Dr. Frankenstein recounts a story told to him by the creature.
- **Linear vs. Nonlinear Narration:** You may also hear the word narrative used to describe the order in which a sequence of events is recounted. In a linear narrative, the events of a story are described *chronologically*, in the order that they occurred. In a *nonlinear* narrative, events are described out of order, using flashbacks or flash-forwards, and then returning to the present. In some nonlinear narratives, like Ken Kesey's *Sometimes a Great Notion*, there is a clear sense of when the "present" is: the novel begins and ends with the character Viv sitting in a bar, looking at a photograph. The rest of the novel recounts (out of order) events that have happened in the distant and recent past. In other nonlinear narratives, it may be difficult to tell when the "present" is. For example, in Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the character Billy Pilgrim, seems to move forward and backward in time as a result of post-traumatic stress. Billy is not always certain if he is experiencing memories, flashbacks, hallucinations, or actual time travel, and there are inconsistencies in the dates he gives throughout the book—all of which of course has a huge impact on *how* his stories are relayed to the reader.

Narrative as an Adjective

It's worth noting that the word "narrative" is also frequently used as an adjective to describe something that tells a story.

- **Narrative Poetry:** While some poetry describes an image, experience, or emotion without necessarily telling a story, narrative poetry is poetry that *does* tell a story. Narrative poems include epic poems like *The Iliad*, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, and *Beowulf*. Other, shorter examples of narrative poetry include "Jabberwocky" by Lewis Carrol, "The Lady of Shalott" by Alfred Lord Tennyson, "The Goblin Market" by Christina Rossetti, and "The Glass Essay," by Anne Carson.
- **Narrative Art:** Similarly, the term "narrative art" refers to visual art that tells a story, either by capturing one scene in a longer story, or by presenting a series of images that tell a longer story when put together. Often, but not always, narrative art tells stories that are likely to be familiar to the viewer, such as stories from history, mythology, or religious teachings. Examples of narrative art include Michelangelo's painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and the *Pietà*; Paul Revere's engraving entitled *The Bloody Massacre*; and Artemisia Gentileschi's painting *Judith Slaying Holofernes*.

EXAMPLES

Narrative in *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak

Zusak's novel, *The Book Thief*, is narrated by the figure of Death, who tells the story of Liesel, a girl growing up in Nazi Germany who loves books and befriends a Jewish man her family is hiding in their home. In the novel's prologue, Death says of Liesel:

> Yes, often, I am reminded of her, and in one of my vast array of pockets, I have kept her story to retell. It is one of the small legion I carry, each one extraordinary in its own right. Each one an attempt—an immense leap of an attempt—to prove to me that you, and your human existence, are worth it.

Narrators do not always announce themselves, but Death introduces himself and explains that he sees himself as a storyteller and a repository of the stories of human lives. Choosing Death (rather than

Leisel) as the novel's narrator allows Zusak to use Liesel's story to reflect on the power of stories and storytelling more generally.

Narrative in *A Visit From the Goon Squad* by Jennifer Egan

In *A Visit From the Good Squad*, Egan structures the narrative of her novel in an unconventional way: each chapter stands as a self-contained story, but as a whole, the individual episodes are interconnected in such a way that all the stories form a single cohesive narrative. For example, in Chapter 2, "The Gold Cure," we meet the character Bennie, a middle-aged music producer, and his assistant Sasha:

> "It's incredible," Sasha said, "how there's just nothing there." Astounded, Bennie turned to her…Sasha was looking downtown, and he followed her eyes to the empty space where the Twin Towers had been.

Because there is an empty space where the Twin Towers had been, the reader knows that this dialogue is taking place some time after the September 11th, 2001 attack in which the World Trade Center was destroyed. Bennie appears again later in the novel, in Chapter 6, "X's and O's," which is set ten years prior to "The Gold Cure." "X's and O's" is narrated by Bennie's old friend, Scotty, who goes to visit Bennie at his office in Manhattan:

> I looked down at the city. Its extravagance felt wasteful, like gushing oil or some other precious thing Bennie was hoarding for himself, using it up so no one else could get any. I thought: If I had a view like this to look down on every day, I would have the energy and inspiration to conquer the world. The trouble is, when you most need such a view, no one gives it to you.

Just as Sasha did in Chapter 2, Scotty stands with Bennie and looks out over Manhattan, and in both passages, there is a sense that Bennie fails to notice, appreciate, or find meaning in the view. But the reader wouldn't have the same experience if the story had been told in chronological order.

Narrative in *Atonement* by Ian McEwan

Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement* tells the story of Briony, a writer who, as a girl, sees something she doesn't understand and, based on this faulty understanding, makes a choice that ruins the lives of Celia, her sister, and Robbie, the man her sister loves. The first part of the novel appears to be told from the perspective of a third-person omniscient narrator; but once we reach the end of the book, we realize that we've read Briony's novel, which she has written as an act of atonement for her terrible mistake. Near the end of *Atonement*, Briony tells us:

> I like to think that it isn't weakness or evasion, but a final act of kindness, a stand against oblivion and despair, to let my lovers live and to unite them at the end. I gave them happiness, but I was not so self-serving as to let them forgive me. Not quite, not yet. If I had the power to conjure them at my birthday celebration…Robbie and Cecilia, still alive, sitting side by side in the library…

In Briony's novel, Celia and Robbie are eventually able to live together, and Briony visits them in an attempt to apologize; but in real life, we learn, Celia and Robbie died during World War II before they could see one another again, and before Briony could reconcile with them. By inviting the reader to imagine a happy ending, Briony effectively heightens the tragedy of the events that actually occurred. By choosing Briony as his narrator, and by framing the novel Briony wrote with her discussion of her own novel, McEwan is able to create multiple interlacing narratives, telling and retelling what happened and what might have been.

Narrative in Slaughterhouse-Five by Kurt Vonnegut

Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* tells the story of Billy Pilgrim, a World War II veteran who survived the bombing of Dresden, and has since "come unstuck in time." The novel uses flashbacks and flash-forwards, and is narrated by an unreliable narrator who implies to the reader that the narrative he is telling may not be entirely true:

> All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true. One guy I knew really *was* shot in Dresden for taking a teapot that wasn't his. Another guy I knew really *did* threaten to have his personal enemies killed by hired gunmen after the war. And so on. I've changed all the names.

The narrator's equivocation in this passage suggests that even though the story he is telling may not be entirely factually accurate, he has attempted to create a narrative that captures important truths about the war and the bombing of Dresden. Or, maybe he just doesn't remember all of the details of the events he is describing. In any case, the inconsistencies in dates and details in *Slaughterhouse-Five* give the reader the impression that crafting a single cohesive narrative out of the horrific experience of war may be too difficult a task—which in turn says something about the toll war takes on those who live through it.

WHY WRITERS USE IT

When we use the word "narrative," we're pointing out that *who* tells a story and *how* that person tells the story influence how the reader understands the story's meaning. The question of what purpose narratives serve in literature is inseparable from the question of why people tell stories in general, and why writers use different narrative elements to shape their stories into compelling narratives. Narratives make it possible for writers to capture some of the nuances and complexities of human experience in the retelling of a sequence of events.

In literature and in life, narratives are everywhere, which is part of why they can be very challenging to discuss and analyze. Narrative

reminds us that stories do not only exist; they are also made by someone, often for very specific reasons. And when you analyze narrative in literature, you take the time to ask yourself why a work of literature has been constructed in a certain way.

OTHER RESOURCES

- **Etymology:** Merriam-Webster describes the origins and history of usage of the term "narrative."
- **Narrative Theory:** Ohio State University's "Project Narrative" offers an overview of narrative theory.
- **History and Narrative:** Read more about the similarities between historical and literary narratives in Hayden White's *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th-Century Europe.*
- **Narrative Art:** This article from Widewalls explores narrative art and discusses what kind of art *doesn't* tell stories.

HOW TO CITE

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