

Todorov proposes a "future science of literature" with structuralism providing the scientific approach.<sup>1</sup> As a means of looking at literature, structuralism does lend itself to the tools of traditionally hard science, and the theory of literature outlined here borrows from the world of the physical sciences to fashion a method of describing narrative.

In reading narrative works there is the inescapable feeling of motion in time or space, or as defined by Todorov, a shifting in equilibrium.<sup>2</sup> While he borrows from genetic psychology, here, on the principle that what moves can be described in the language of physics, literature is described in ideas loosely borrowed from the physical sciences. This is not a wholly foreign concept to literature, Barthes for example using "catalyser" borrowed from chemistry.<sup>3</sup> There is difficulty in deciding what actually moves, for while a reader may feel caught up in the momentum of a story, neither the reader nor text can be said to move. For ease of description, I shall use the term "narratom" to describe what it is that moves from the beginning to the end of the storyline to define a narrative. The model proposed looks from the end of the story back to explore what induced the reader, of his or her free will, to finish the story. From this perspective, literariness is reduced to whatever encourages the reader to finish reading a narrative.

The particle model, analogous with atoms and subatomic particles, involves the narratom made up of plot particles, which interact to give the narratom a level of energy at each point along the narrative. The plot particles are anything in the plot which can interact, characters and settings for example. As the narratom moves

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<sup>1</sup> Todorov, T., "Structural Analysis of Narrative," *Novel* (1969) 3 (1). p71.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid* p75.

<sup>3</sup> Barthes, R., "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," in Sontag (ed.) *A Barthes Reader* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982) p265.

along the path set by the text the things which happen to plot particles cause a change in interactions between the particles and can change the energy level.

Description acts upon the whole of the particles in the narratom as an excitatory force capable of increasing the potential energy in the narratom. At critical moments in the plot there is a release of this energy and facilitation of the movement of the narratom towards the end of the story. I have called these points "crests", which can be best illustrated graphically. These correspond to Barthe's nuclei<sup>4</sup> but here the emphasis is not that alternatives are opened or closed, but that there is a release of the energy built up by the prior action of description and activity of plot particles. Likewise in this model, because description raises excitation of the narratom until the energy is released over a crest, it is as involved in moving the action along as "actions" as defined by Toderov.<sup>5</sup>

The reader is an important part of this model as the energy level of narratom is defined with respect to the reader. That is because the potential energy of the narratom at any given point in the narrative is really just the inclination of the reader to continue reading. This is going to be greatly affected by reader's interests, preconceptions and approach to the work. That said, however, a graphic representation of a narrative derived from this model still offers a means of comparison of different narratives and narrative types.

Short pieces of narrative are well suited to this approach and Chopin's "The Story of

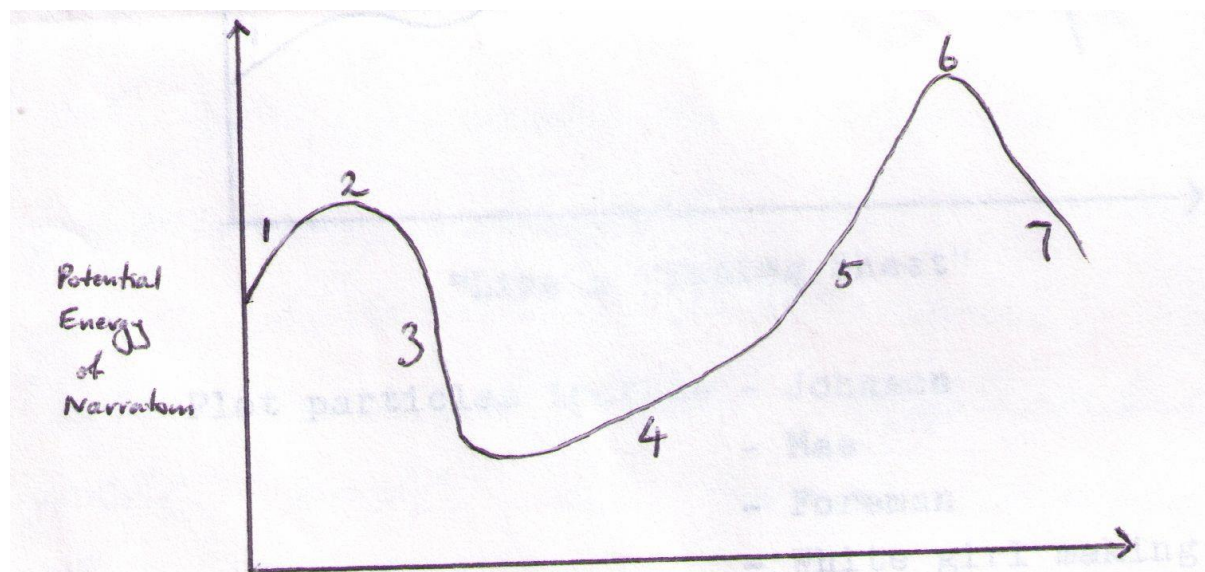
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<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Jefferson, A and Robey, D. *Modern Literary Theory* (London: Batsford Academic and Educational, 1982), p92.

an Hour"<sup>6</sup> and Petry's "Like a Winding Sheet"<sup>7</sup> are briefly described here.

### "The Story of an Hour"



Plot particles include -

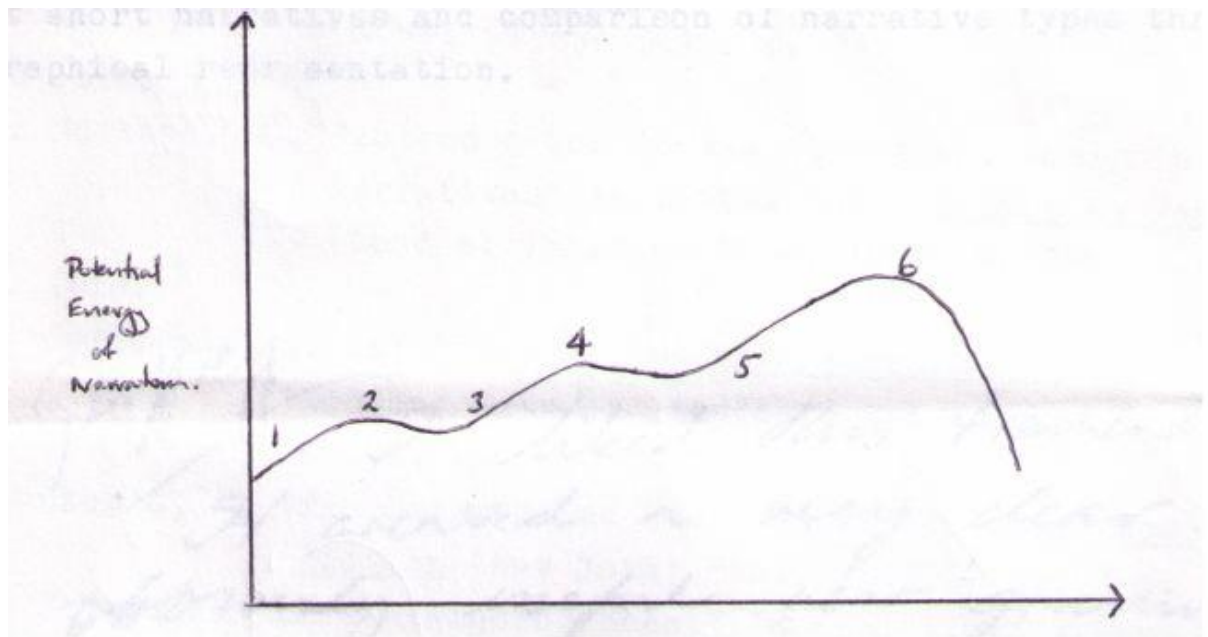
- Louise Mallard
- Josephine
- Richards
- Brently

<sup>6</sup> Chapin, K. "The Story of an Hour," in Cahill (ed.) *Women and Fiction* (New York: Mentor, 1975), p3-5.

<sup>7</sup> Petry, A. "Like a Winding Sheet," in Cahill, *ibid*, p133-142.

1. Introducing both Brently's death and Louise's frail health in the short opening paragraph prepares for the first crest. The narrator's potential energy is increased with the excitement of as yet unknown plot particles who have to break the news.
2. Crest - the actual telling of the bad news.
3. The energy stored in the plot to that point is released very quickly with Louise's immediate wild grief.
4. From the quietness of her withdrawal to the room on her own, even though there is no action, the energy level of the narrator is raised by excitement from the descriptive pattern, with her reawakening associated with motifs connected with spring.
5. Louise's triumphant declaration of freedom accelerates the increase of tension in the narrative, with fears for her health reminded to the reader by Josephine and continued reference to fever, pulses and other health related words.
6. Crest - the energy is released with an unexpected jolt. The fact that it is not an expected outcome to have Brently return accentuates this.
7. Louise's death is not an unexpected outcome considering her frail heart and our narrative competence of what happens to heroines with weak hearts, but it is delivered following an unexpected crest, having her die not because she was overexcited either by grief or her freedom, but because she loses her freedom.

## "Like a Winding Sheet"



Plot particles include:

- Johnson
- Mae
- Foreman
- White girl making coffee.

1. The description of Johnson's readying for work builds an impression of his resentment of his work, and his lack of control, initially in just being unable to get out of bed. The ordinariness of the description is seeded with ominous phrases ("the winding sheet", "Friday the thirteenth").

2. Crest - Confronting the foreman does not resolve the frustration felt by Johnson which continues to build.

3. Johnson's continuing irritation at not hitting the foreman because he can't hit

women increases the energy of the narratom. This is increased further by the description of the discord between the other workers and the fatigue involved in the night shift.

4. Crest - Again Johnson does not resolve his frustrations when he feels slighted by the girl making coffee, and again little of the built up energy is released.

5. Here tension builds further through the irritations of the subway journey home and the petty arguments once there.

6. Crest - The suddenness of his assault and the matter-of-fact description provide a sudden release of the stored energy in the narratom.

The particle model of narrative proposed here looks at a text in terms of what moves a reader to continue to read. The proposed narratom provides a way to describe what is occurring at any point in the story, its potential energy determined by the activities of plot particles in response to the description and action in the narrative, being stored and released as dictated by the siting of crests. This model provides a basis for looking at short narratives and comparison of narrative types through graphical representation.

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