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[Ferdinand-Victor-Eugène Delacroix, Ovid among the... in Pocket Guides: Narrative](#)

Summary Article: **narrative**

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“Narrative” appears in the English language in the sixteenth century first as designating a legal document (1537) “which contains a statement of alleged or relevant facts closely connected with the matter or purpose of the document; *spec.* a statement of the parties to a deed and the cause of its granting” (*Oxford English Dictionary*), and then, a few years later (1571), in the more general and nontechnical sense of “An account of a series of events, facts, etc., given in order and with the establishing of connections between them.” It is only in the mid nineteenth century (1843) that it enters the vocabulary of literary criticism as designating “The part of a text, esp. a work of fiction, which represents the sequence of events, as distinguished from that dealing with dialogue, description, etc.” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). The conditions for what counts as a narrative as it appears in these usages are simple and define a phenomenon that is of little intrinsic interest.

Certain negative conclusions can be drawn about narrative on the basis of this very simple definition. The notion of narrative is distinct from notions such as fiction, story, tale, and plot, though all of these may have narrative as an element. There is nothing in the notion of narrative itself that licenses the conclusion that narratives have a special cognitive function, that is, that they have or do not have a referential function; that they necessarily constitute or construct fact rather than describe them; that they do or do not make claim to truth; that they have the function generally of imposing meaning and structure on “the world,” on one’s “life.”

Narrative in this traditional sense can be of different kinds. There are literary narratives (and within this kind there is narrative poetry, epics, novels, etc.); there are fictional narratives, historical narratives, scientific narratives (the Big Bang Theory of the origin of the uni verse), etc. And while narrative itself is theoretically innocuous and of minimal theoretical interest, various *types* of narrative can and do have great cultural and, indeed, epistemological interest. But the interest is not due to the fact that something is a narrative but that it is literary, fictional, historical, etc.

This point is worth making since there has been a tendency in recent literary and cultural theory to assign to narrative a “deep” significance. Until the early 1960s, the notion of narrative was employed essentially as a nontheoretical, nontechnical concept in literary criticism. Then, with the effort to establish the disciplinary respectability of literary criticism by “theorizing” it, narrative became a technical concept. The theorizing of criticism was based in Saussurean structuralist linguistics, and rested on the assumption that there was a strong analogy between linguistic entities like the sentence and the literary work. The literary work could be segmented in the same way as a sentence, and the structure into which these segments entered could be described in a “grammar.” Just as Saussure had developed a structural description of the sentence and rules for how to combine its constituent entities, one could develop a structural description of the literary text, breaking it down into constituent minimal units, and look for general rules for how these units could combine to yield (literary) meaning. Structuralist theory did not, however, stop at applying the analogy to literary works, but suggested that it would also hold for all kinds of cultural expressions.

For structuralist theory the concept of narrative was particularly suitable as a technical concept. It enabled theorists to emphasize what they saw as the commonalities between different kinds of stories: folktales, myths, novels, epics tales, historical accounts, scientific accounts, etc., and thus enabled them to develop a theory that would ostensibly apply to a wide range of cultural phenomena rather than just to literature. This gave the theory explanatory power. It enabled theorists to explore the elements common to all “narrative forms,” oral and written, verse and prose, factual and fictional (Scholes & Kellogg 1966). However, this exploration was based in a theory of the novel, and was essentially an attempt to extend the theory of the novel to other kinds of story types. Literary narrative became the paradigmatic type of narrative and it was this kind of narrative that became the object of study in “narratology,” a name modeled on “biology” and “sociology” (Todorov 1969), the “science of narrative” created by structuralism.

The assimilation of narrative per se to literary narrative might have some initial plausibility because there are certain features that all types of narrative share. They are narrated by a narrator, and insofar as they are narrations, narratives are human creations. The narrator employs a specific language, which is not neutral (transparent) but has a range of rhetorical features chosen by the narrator for a specific purpose. The narrator always presents a certain kind of perspective and exercises choice in picking out the events that make up the narrative. All types of narrative have a structure, even though it may be minimal: the events of a narrative must be linked in some way even though the link may simply be a chronological one (“The king died and then the queen died”). And all narratives have a temporal dimension.

The consequence of adopting literary narrative as paradigmatic was that those features that are characteristic of this type of narrative were assumed to be features of narrative per se and assumed to play the same role and to receive the same emphasis in other types of narrative as they do in literary narrative. Literary narratives are made up in a strong sense: they create characters, objects, and events and structure these in accordance with certain conventions (literary narratives have a beginning, a middle, and an end); they present a perspective on the events they describe, a perspective which is defined through a variety of rhetorical devices; and through these various means the literary narrative creates coherence and meaning but it does so without employing reference to a world external to the narrative.

The assimilation of narrative per se to literary narrative had two particularly important consequences. The view of narrative as imposing order and creating meaning gave narrative a new importance. It could be seen as a way of imposing order and meaning on “reality,” whether that reality was the historical past, the identity of the individual, the physical world, the social world, or the world of ideas. This new importance assigned to narrative also led to its being sought and found everywhere. Or to put it in slightly different terms, a number of different kinds of human discursive practices came to be conceptualized as narratives in the literary sense, thus giving the new science of narrative an object worthy of attention and inquiry. This science of narrative also identified for itself precursors which had established the deep significance of certain kinds of narrative: Vladimir Propp's *Morfologiya skazki* (1928; *Morphology of the Folk Tale*), which created a model for folktales based on seven “spheres of action” and 31 “functions” of narrative, and Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Anthropologie structurale* (1958; *Structural Anthropology*), which outlined a “grammar” of mythology.

The view of narrative as imposing order and meaning was attacked in poststructuralist theory. As in so many areas of poststructuralism, the criticism of the structuralist theory of narrative was conservative

rather than radical. It did not reject the concepts and framework of analysis, but only the thesis that the meaning and order produced by narrative was substantive and true. In fact, the attack on the meaning-producing function of narrative took its point of departure in the second important consequence of assimilating narrative per se to literary narrative: the adoption of the view that narrative did not have referential function and consequently could not be true or false. In this perspective, the order and meaning created by narrative were seen as social constructs without any basis in the world outside the narrative. Indeed, narrative created not only the order and meaning it presented but also the objects and events that constituted that order. There was no final narrative (*grand récit*) about the world, which could reveal an objective order, nor a final narrative about the historical past, the self, the social world, or the world of ideas, which was the *true* narrative. There were just different narratives.

When the concept of narrative was introduced first in literary theory and then into a broader cultural theory, it was employed as a critical primitive. It was assumed that the concept as such was unproblematic and that it referred to a phenomenon, which could be the object of study and be described in a theory. The question that was raised neither in literary theory nor when the concept of literary narrative was extended to other forms of cultural discourse was whether the concept of narrative was a useful critical instrument. Narrative in the sense in which it appears in cultural theory is a theoretical construct: narrative is not a given that awaits discovery and description. The question of usefulness is therefore centrally important.

The question can be briefly answered insofar as the application of the concept to discourses other than literature is concerned, and written history provides a touchstone. First, historical accounts are not necessarily constituted through a narrative. An article presenting the results of an inquiry into the income of hand-loom weavers in Flanders from 1650 to 1660 will not in any sense constitute a narrative. When a historical account does make use of narrative it is subject to constraints that are absent in the case of literary narratives: in a historical narrative the referential function is central, and it is subject to the requirement that it be a true and accurate account of events. On the other hand, a historical narrative does not have a formulaic structure that can be captured in a theory. It can be fairly clearly structured or it can have only a very loose structure. It needs only to be “An account of a series of events, facts, etc., given in order and with the establishing of connections between them.” And it does not present a story with a meaning. Indeed, the establishment of the academic discipline of historiography came about through a series of steps where the moralizing of history was rejected as were those historians who wrote grand narratives employing an attractive literary style. So in relation to history, the concept of literary narrative is not helpful. Indeed, in the philosophy of history the notion of narrative has been developed in another direction in an attempt to develop a notion of “narrative explanation.”

In literary criticism and theory, where narrative as a technical concept was first introduced, the answer about usefulness can be somewhat more positive. The “science of narrative” has been unable to answer the question about the “nature of narrative,” that is, unable to reach any sort of agreement concerning the elements and structural principles of narrative. Also in this area, the concept of narrative and, consequently, the nature of narrative itself remains Protean. However, narrative theory, inspired in particular by Gérard Genette's work, has produced a vocabulary for discussing narrative which can be used eclectically and which has provided critics of the novel, the epic, and, indeed, of film with a useful toolbox. To that extent the attempt to move from a nontechnical concept of narrative as designating “The part of a text, esp. a work of fiction, which represents the sequence of events, as distinguished

from that dealing with dialogue, description, etc.” to a well-defined technical concept of narrative has brought the disciplines of literary studies and film studies a step forward.

See *also* literature; fiction, truth in; structuralism and poststructuralism.

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