

# Narrative Sequence in Contemporary Narratology



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VLADIMIR: Shall we go?

ESTRAGON: Yes, let's go.

*They do not move.*

(54, 94; see also 12)

...

ESTRAGON: Let's go.

VLADIMIR: We can't.

ESTRAGON: Why not?

VLADIMIR: We're waiting for Godot.

(14, 48, 68, 84)

Equally frequent are expressions of suicidal despair and the inability to act on it, as when they contemplate hanging themselves on the tree only to admit its impracticality; the general atmosphere of inertia is also expressed explicitly: "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!" (41). This is further underscored by the protagonists' (especially Estragon's) forgetfulness and uncertainty about the correct place to meet Godot, for instance. The other two characters, Pozzo and Lucky, exemplify not only extreme human inequality and exploitation but also the sudden deterioration and decline of the powerful and wealthy when they return in the second act and Pozzo is blind and miserably helpless.

Against this pervasive background of hopeless stagnation and inaction, the behavior of Vladimir and Estragon and the happenings in the play repeatedly indicate the possibility and even the imminence of a decisive change or turn. This goes famously for the anticipated appearance of Godot: not only are the protagonists waiting for him to come, as is frequently and explicitly stressed, but he is twice announced by a boy for the following day, failing both times, however, to turn up (50, 91). Although Godot's personality, status, and intentions remain vague, his coming is obviously considered of great importance by the two characters, since it would break the monotony and stagnation of their lives and possibly introduce a fresh development. Vladimir encourages the more doubtful Estragon: "Ah Gogo, don't go on like that. Tomorrow everything will be better" (52), or expresses his hope more specifically:

VLADIMIR: We'll hang ourselves tomorrow. (*Pause.*) Unless Godot comes.

ESTRAGON: And if he comes?

VLADIMIR: We'll be saved.

(94)

And Pozzo likewise assumes that Godot "has your future in his hands . . . at least your immediate future" (29).

## Privileged Authorial Disclosure about Events

*Wolff's "Bullet in the Brain" and O'Hara's "Appearances"*

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JAMES PHELAN

TOBIAS WOLFF'S "Bullet in the Brain" (1995), which recounts the last moments in the life of Anders, a fifty-year-old book critic who gets shot during a bank robbery, contains a highly unusual sequence in its second half. As the bank robber's bullet makes its way through Anders's brain, it triggers a memory from his youth. But rather than narrating that memory, Wolff pushes the pause button on the forward movement of the story and inserts three paragraphs of "disnarration" (Prince), during which the narrator recounts a variety of things that Anders did not remember. Wolff's move gives his audience access to events from Anders's past that Anders himself does not have. Consequently, we move from a position alongside Anders to one in which we have a much broader view: we share with Wolff a bird's-eye perspective on Anders that Anders himself never achieves. In addition, this passage of narration gives us a sense of the temporality of Anders's life that is not part of his own experience in the Narrative Now: for him, the temporality of the story consists only of the bank robbery and the youthful memory. For us, as a result of the disnarration, the temporality includes a much broader context within which to place both the bank robbery and the memory. Needless to say, our

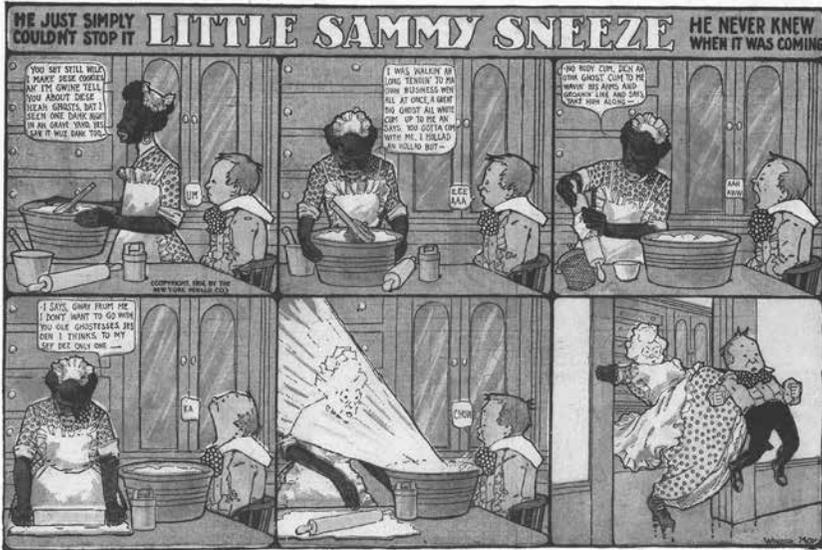


FIGURE 7.10. Winsor McCay, *Little Sammy Sneeze*, October 23, 1904

levels of vectorization, namely: (1) the decomposition of the different stages of the sneeze into a series of iconic representations; (2) the unfolding of the activities of the secondary characters; (3) the successive stages of a narrative told by one of the protagonists (the narrative appearing in the balloons).

## VERBAL NARRATIVES IN COMIC STRIP NARRATIVE

In the first page (figure 7.10), a “secondary” character, the black cook, states her intention to tell Sammy a story while preparing biscuit dough. The three lines of vectorization mentioned above can be observed: the temporal development of the sneeze, the progressive unfolding of the “making pastry” script, and the cook’s story. All three are set out in parallel in the foreground.

In the first panel, the servant offers Sammy a story in return for his good behavior (“you set still . . . an’ I’m gwine tell you . . .”).<sup>14</sup> She presents its theme: a ghost story at night in a cemetery. This is somewhat out of the ordinary, and it might be expected to arouse a certain degree of interest. But Sammy,

14. We shall not go into the way McCay represents the speech of the black servant, whose pronunciation and grammar are clearly underpinned by social and racial prejudice.

## Unusual and Unnatural Narrative Sequences

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BRIAN RICHARDSON

THE LATTER PART of the twentieth century and the first years of the twenty-first have seen an explosion of innovative developments in the possibilities of the *sjuzhet*; every aspect of the sequencing of the narrative text is in the process of being reconstructed. Narrative theory has not fully caught up with many of the more unusual and extreme cases; in what follows, I will attempt to identify the most interesting adventures of narrative sequencing and go on to offer some supplemental theoretical formulations where needed. My essay will therefore be conceptually situated in this anthology between those of Raphaël Baroni and James Phelan, on the one hand, and Emma Kafalenos and Marie-Laure Ryan, on the other, and it is in dialogue with Eyal Segal's essay on endings.

### THE NEW LINEARITY

A new linearity is emerging in which authors explore chronological sequencing in original ways. Daniel Glattauer's novel, *Gut gegen Nordwind* [*Love Virtually*], is a transcription of a sequence of email messages between a man and a woman. The temporality of this unswerving linearity is often identified to the second that successive email messages were sent. This produces a keen

or constitutive principles, while also considering the methodology used in such operations (methodological norms) (cf. Margolin, “Response”).

### *The Objectivist Paradigm*

With the term “objectivist paradigm,” we refer to those narrative theories characterized by the following conditions:

- (i) Ontological level: narrative is an entity that has an immanent and specific ontological status, an object that we can recognize thanks to its essential qualities, which are differential features. In general, certain syntactic and/or semantic properties are assumed to be the predicative basis of the narrative object.<sup>13</sup>
- (ii) Epistemic level: the identification and description of narrative relies on the possibility of the *recognition* of those features that are considered to be typical of all and only narratives. The process of knowing that an object is a narrative is an act of detection of the narrative properties of the object, without any influence on its ontology due to the process of knowing it or to the extra-objectual domain.

### NARRATIVE CONSTANTS

In a discourse, the invariable properties that can be identified as narrative features are located in the object of study—that is, they are objective. This is due to the fact that the ontological level is logically antecedent to the epistemic level: it is the case that an object has some elements and/or properties, and only then can we determine its relationships with the framework of knowledge, with the pragmatic level. What follows from this epistemic orientation is the notion that objectivist narrative theories postulate the existence of narrative constants, which are abstracted in various concepts and terms (event, *fabula*, *sjuzhet*, plot, etc.), sometimes subsumed under labels such as “narrative sequence,” “basic plot structure,” “minimal narrative,” and the like. The structure or configuration of narrative is usually determined by syntactic and

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13. Predication is the ascription of attributes to an entity, and the predicative basis is constituted by the existents (attributes and entities) that we can associate through predication (Kahn 3–4).