

LANGUE AT WORK: A REVIEW AND COMPARISON OF THE NARRATIVE THEORIES IN LITERATURE

LANGUE AT WORK: UNA REVISIÓN Y COMPARACIÓN DE LAS TEORÍAS NARRATIVAS EN LA LITERATURA

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ABSTRACT

During its early structuralist and typological phases, narratology faced a great deal of difficulty relating theory to practice. The study of narrative texts is both an applied science and a theory in its own right. Its critical challenge as applied narratology is ‘So what?’ Why do we need all these subcategories to understand texts? Narratology has been criticized for not producing significant readings as a theory, like deconstruction or Lacanian psychoanalysis. The main objective of this paper is to seek to explore the narratological dimensions of literature and compare the Narrative Theories based on structuralist views. To achieve this goal, first a brief history of narratology is offered to provide an opportunity to discuss the structure and the leaders of the narratology movement, and then the entire structuralist discussion of narratology, its concepts, the procedure, and the practitioners is examined. According to the results, structuralist narratology encompasses the opening of a path to the language of a narrative and, therefore, the decoding of the language to act upon its meaning.

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Keywords: Narrative theories; narratology; structuralist.

RESUMEN

Durante sus primeras fases estructuralista y tipológica, la narratología enfrentó muchas dificultades para relacionar la teoría con la práctica. El estudio de los textos narrativos es tanto una ciencia aplicada como una teoría por derecho propio. Su desafío crítico como narratología aplicada es ‘¿Y qué?’ ¿Por qué necesitamos todas estas subcategorías para comprender textos? La narratología ha sido criticada por no producir lecturas significativas como teoría, como la deconstrucción o el psicoanálisis lacaniano. El objetivo principal de este artículo es buscar explorar las dimensiones narratológicas de la literatura y comparar las teorías narrativas basadas en visiones estructuralistas. Para lograr este objetivo, primero se ofrece una breve historia de la narratología para brindar la oportunidad de discutir la estructura y los líderes del movimiento narratológico, y luego se examina toda la discusión estructuralista de la narratología, sus conceptos, el procedimiento y los practicantes. Según los resultados, la narratología estructuralista engloba la apertura de un camino al lenguaje de una narración y, por tanto, la decodificación del lenguaje para actuar sobre su significado.

Palabras clave: Teorías narrativas; narratología, estructuralista.

INTRODUCTION

The term narratology refers to the systematic reading of narratives, or as Bal puts it, “the theory of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events; cultural artifacts that tell a story” (Varadarajan & Dutta, 2021; Crespo & Fernández-Lansac, 2016). Encompassing such a huge scope as large as the history of human life, the systematic study of narrative as an autonomous whole has made this effort much more comprehensible and graspable under one internationally accepted term, narratology (Fludernik, 2009).

In addition to its connections to poetry, the theory of genre, and semiotics, or semiology, of literature, Narratology has traditionally been a sub-discipline of literature studies. It is similar to genre theory in that it distinguishes between lyric, epic, and drama. Additionally, it examines narrative subgenres such as Bildungsroman, Gothic novel, novel of consciousness, fable, anecdote, and short story in terms of typological, historical, and thematic considerations. Any literary study must address such issues as part of its basic repertoire. In analyzing (narrative) literary texts’ aesthetic and narrative functions, narratology shares many similarities with poetics. As a final note, narratology is similar to semiotics in analyzing the construction of meaning in texts (films, conversations, etc.). (Fludernik, 2009).

Long before the term narratology came into worldwide use by Todorov’s coinage, the classical narrative theory was established mainly on the works of German narratives. According to classical theory, these texts are narratives that contain specific communication features. In contrast to drama where events are presented directly, narration relies on a mediating authority, the narrator. Narrativity in classical narrative theory was defined by the existence of a mediator between author and narrated world. (Wong et al., 2013). The term narratology flourished from the structuralist perspective toward narrative.

Therefore, two distinct perspectives exist in studying the narratives, classical and structuralist. The focus of the present research is the structuralist view and its insufficiency and inaptness to analyze the concept-making process of narratology.

Before the advent of structuralist narratology, classical narratology as the early phase of narratology mostly dealt with universals and universal concepts. It was until Todorov called for science to study the structure of any narrative. Attempt was done by numerous narratologists in order to prepare a model to illustrate the meaning of a story through its overall structure or langue. Starting from Vladimir Propp's attempt to draw out the structure of the Russian folk tales, Roland Barthes, Claude Brémont, Gérard Genette, Algirdas Julien Greimas, Tzvetan Todorov, and others (Phelan & Rabinowitz, 2008; Barthes & Duisit, 1975; Genette, 1980; Greimas, 1987) tried to prepare a manifesto for their claim. Propp and other Russian formalists proposed a distinction between Fabula and Syuzhet, which is parallel to what Genette has proposed as the distinction between the story and narrative, or story and the plot. This distinction led to two distinct styles for analyzing narratives, thematic and modal narratology (Genette, 1980).

The proponents of the first style are Propp, Bremond, Greimas, Dundes, and others, and that of the second are Genette, Prince, and others. The structuralist narratologists' main attempt is somehow to deconstruct the language of the narrative, differentiating the story, the discourse, and the plot, besides deciding on the different concepts forming a narrative, and the manner in which they are presented. The analytical approach of this research is started with Genette's narrative discourse, along with what Prince and Bal have added to his model (Ruparel et al., 2023), and then it will proceed with much more recent structuralist views on narratology proposed by critics such as Bremond for thematic investigation (Bremond & Cancalon, 1980).

Seemingly, after World War II, all narratological premises are divided into three categories. The main representatives of the first category are Vladimir Propp and his followers, Levi-Strauss, Todorov, and early Ronald Barthes. For them, a narrative is a sequence of events independent of its genre. The second group includes names such as G. Genette, M. Bal, and Chatman, who see a narrative as a discourse. Finally, the third group finds narrative as a much more complex artifact in which its meaning is discovered by the receiver. The practitioners of this group are later Ronald Barthes, Umberto Eco, and Jean Francois Lyotard (Barthes & Duisit, 1975; Genette, 1980).

METHODOLOGY

- **Basic Tenets of Structuralism**

Under the influence of the Swiss philologist, Ferdinand de Saussure, a new approach started to reform and reorient the long-practiced tradition of language study in the early 1900s. He published his lectures and notes on this reformation in his book *Course in General Linguistics*, and by so doing, he marked the beginning of modern linguistics and formed the basic ground for structuralist literary theory. What mainly occurred in Saussure's reformation was the shift in the perspective toward language; in the past, a diachronic approach was utilized for such an analysis to be done by 19th-century philologists like Karl Verner and the Grimm Brothers, which focused on the historical development and evolution of a single element in Indo-European languages, but Saussure introduced another approach, which is both a continuation and a deviation from the diachronic one, that is called synchronic approach. The way that language operates and works outstood rather than its historical evolution, it is a method

that focuses on a language at one single and specific time not its historical process. Therefore, how language is formed and functions forced him to focus on the constituents and the composition of language. By introducing the synchronic approach and the constituent parts of language, along with his declination of the mimetic theory of language structure, he actually articulated the principles of modern linguistics (Siddaway et al., 2019). Saussure's claim was basically that all languages are dominated and governed by their internal rules "that do not mirror or imitate the structure of the world" (Lodge & Wood, 2014). For him, every language consisted of two parts, *langue* (the general rule and structure of a language that is taken and shared by all of its speakers) and *parole* (personal and individual style of language), and based on this he redefined the meaning of a word in the language. He refused to hold the old meaning of a word as a symbol that equaled a thing and instead proposed that words are signs composed of two parts, the signifier (a written or spoken symbol) and the signified (a concept). Therefore, there would be no objective reference in the external world for a word (a sign) and all the signs are arbitrary, conventional, and differential. Following his declaration of language as a sign system, he proposed semiology as the new science. Following this, the structuralists and their variously named practitioners in different fields such as semiotics, stylistics, and narratology, tried to discover the codes that governed all language systems by their own rules. The consequence of this belief was that the structure of literature bore resemblance to that of a language. Consequently, literature became a self-governed system without any external referent.

For structuralists, the way that a symbol or a literary device works is of great importance, not the way it copies reality. Therefore, the structuralists claimed that there is a system of literature that can be decoded and demystified by structuralist analysis, an objective and scientific study. Besides, all texts are a part of a shared system of language, and consequently, a shared system of meaning, and are all intertextual, that is, meaning is conveyed through a system of relation (McQuillan, 2000).

Structuralism, as an approach, has many varieties when it is applied to textual analysis. Five structuralists or subgroups can be outlined for this textual analytical approach. The first one to implement Saussure's ideas was the French anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss, about the act of reading and analyzing myths, which he proposed to possess a structure like that of language. The next one is the French structuralist, Ronald Barthes, who responded to Lévi-Strauss's theory by claiming that by discovering and recognizing the binary oppositions within a text, and presenting how these pairs are interrelated, a structuralist can decode a text and find its meaning (Barthes & Duisit, 1975). The next figure is the Russian formalist, Vladimir Propp and a group of structuralist narratologists. Narratology, as the science of narrative, claims to bring about the meaning from the overall structure, the *langue*, rather than individual narratives. Narratologists borrowed a lot from LéviStrauss and also Propp, who investigated the Russian fairy tales to decode their overall structure or *langue*. Propp outlined these fairy tales based on thirty-one fixed functions that plotted predictable patterns for the central characters of the tale. The next narratologist, is the Bulgarian philosopher, Tzvetan Todorov, who first coined the word narratology, as a systematic study of narratives. He claimed that *parole* can serve as a path to grasp the *langue*, for this claim, he suggested that all stories are framed based on grammatical units, and how these units are related and connected to each other, or the syntax of a narrative was his main concern. The next narratologist, along with Todorov, was the French theorist, Gerard Genette, who also accentuated methods to analyze a narrative's structure in order to decode its meaning. His book, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay on Method*, outlined his theory and contained and also revived numerous technical terms and methodology that are still in use by structuralist narratologists. What all these narratologists did for us is bestowing us with a metalanguage to figure out how a text means. Finally, there appeared a retreat to the analysis of *langue*, which was Saussure's

main claim by the structuralist Jonathan Culler. He insisted that instead of scrutinizing individual interpretations of a single work, one should analyze the act of interpretation itself. With the help of this claim, he proposed a theory of reading. To conclude the structuralist tradition of analysis, it has to be said that structuralism insists on the form, the structure, and the underlying system of a language that paves the way for transferring the meaning rather than the texts themselves (Batbaatar et al., 2015; Mitchell & Egudo, 2003). What follows below, is the method and the theories proposed by each of the structuralist narratologists, and their specific terminology and approach for studying this underlying rule-governed system.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

- **Tzvetan Todorov's Narrative Theory**

Needless to reconsider that it was Todorov who first took benefit from the term narratology in order to refer to the systematic study of narratives as a whole. His main assertion was that the parole of a narrative could open a way to scrutinize the langue, to do so, he basically maneuvered on the grammatical aspect of a narrative. Practicing upon the initial differentiation between 'fabula' and 'siuzhet' proposed by Russian formalists, which he called 'story' and 'discourse', he claimed that the complexity of a narrative upon its vertical axis must be interpreted based on these two levels, story, and discourse (Barthes & Duisit, 1975).

According to Tzvetan Todorov, who revives the distinction made by Russian formalists, narrative (the argument) consists of logic of actions and character syntax, whereas discourse (the discourse) consists of tenses, aspects, and modes of narrative. In spite of the many levels proposed, and whatever definition they are given, narrative can be considered a hierarchy of instances. It is not enough to follow the unfolding of a narrative to understand it; one must recognize its construction in 'stories' and project its horizontal concatenations onto an implicitly vertical axis to understand it; when one reads (listens to) a narrative, one does not simply move from one word to the next, but they also move from one level to another (Bressler, 1999).

- **Roland Gérard Barthes's Narrative Theory**

Ronald Barthes's contribution to semiology is widely known to every school of criticism and its practitioners, but the traces of his influence can be found in an array of fields namely, structuralism, anthropology, literary theory, and post-structuralism. His preoccupation with narrative theory is basically of structuralist nature and that of Saussurean tradition. Believing that human life is surrounded by myriads of various narratives of diverse kinds and genres, he explicitly posed the question, structuralism's main aim is to describe the language or languages from which any speech act originates or can be derived. This will enable us to control the infinite variety of speech acts. Barthes started his claim of the narrative theory by speculations on the level of language, maneuvering on discourse (as a set of interrelated sentences), and its relation to and dependence on a sentence, which is the largest unit scrutinized by linguists. Calling a discourse, a set of sentences, a narrative, that can be treated as a long sentence (Barthes & Duisit, 1975).

- **Claude Bremond and the Logic of Narrative Possibilities**

Claude Bremond was a French semiologist whose logic of action or narrative possibilities was

considered an outstanding model in the world of narrative. In the preface to his article named ‘The Logic of Narrative Possibilities’, he stated that:

I became convinced that the description of a particular literary genre must begin with a map of the logical possibilities of narrative as a result of studying Vladimir Propp’s method for identifying the specific characteristics of the Russian folktale, which is one of these particular literary genres. As soon as this is accomplished, it will be possible to classify narratives according to structural characteristics, such as those that assist botanists and biologists in defining their research goals.

Bremond initially introduced his logic of narrative to decline Vladimir Propp’s thirty-one predetermined functions (Bremond & Cancalon, 1980). For Bremond, the logic of a narrative is open and every single action makes various possibilities. Therefore, the linear plan of narrative structure proposed by Propp was marginalized and superseded by an interwoven number of sequences, which Bremond called the elementary sequence. He claims: We obtain an interlacing of several sequences that condition, bind, interweave, or parallel one another instead of a linear narrative structure. There is some degree of independence between functions within various interlaced sequences, but the sequences themselves are not entirely autonomous - which explains the frequency of certain kinds of connections (Bremond & Cancalon, 1980).”

Bremond’s main concern was to demolish the singularity that Propp’s model imposed on the narratives. When a function opens the process of a narrative, it necessarily does not go through a singular path or does not terminate in a pre-attained result, therefore, the narrator encountered two options, whether to follow the acting path or to maintain it in a virtual state. Here, Bremond proposed his triadic model that can be summarized as follows: a possibility may lead to an actualization, if so, it may lead to either success or failure, otherwise, the possibility may lead to a state of non-actualization (Lodge & Wood, 2014; Bremond & Cancalon, 1980) (Figure 1).

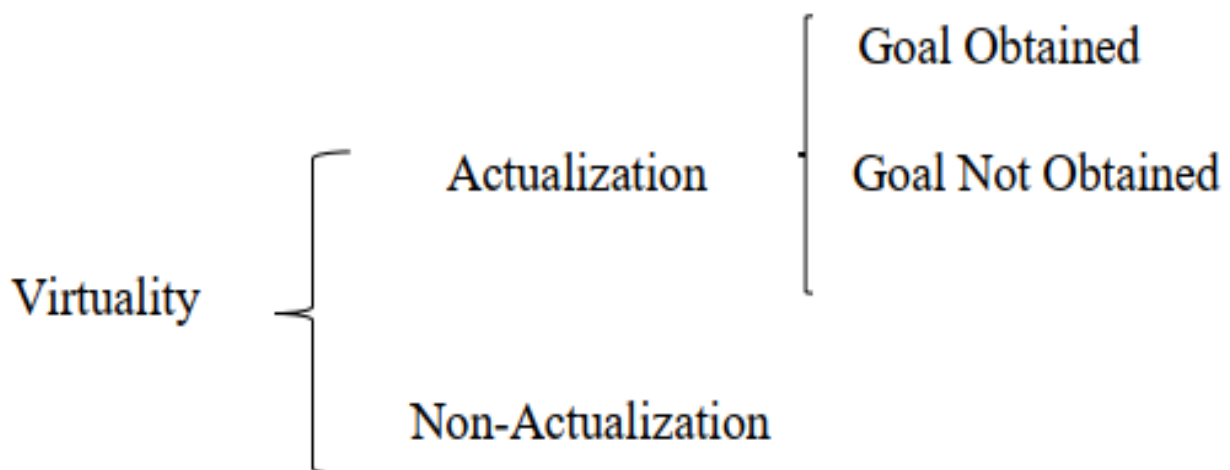


Figure 1. Bremond theory

- **Algirdas Julien Greimas and the Square Model**

Greimas was a Lithuanian literary scientist, best known for his contribution to semiotics. Among all his contribution to literary tradition, semiotics and structural linguistics, he is greatly known for Greimas Square (Greimas, 1987). What concerned Greimas the most was finding a deep structure for

all the narratives, a kind of underlying schemata or grammar, or as he put it, “the semiolinguistic nature of the categories used in setting up these [narratological] models” (Ruparel et al., 20203). Taking up Saussure’s claim that all language is arbitrary, he asserted that “linguists became aware of the possibilities of a generalized semiotic theory that could account for all the forms and manifestations of signification” (Bressler, 1999). What he mainly sought was the way that a single narrative with its underlying grammar can contribute to the process of making meaning generally, in another word, how a specific narrative contributed to semiotics. Speculating upon Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of Folktales*, he maneuvered on the concept of actant as being different from Propp’s actor. Actors are actual characters of a narrative, but actants are the characters while fulfilling the actions or the functions, in other words, actants refer to the act of discoursing not the discourse itself. Consequently, to quote Greimas, “one actant can be manifested by several actors and, conversely, one actor can at the same time represent several actants” (Batbaatar et al., 2015). To reconsider, the actants are neither characters, nor events, but the characters while performing an event. Bal believed that Greimas’s definition of actions and actants has solved the structuralist problem of dealing with the events and their function (Greimas, 1987).

Greimas’s next contribution, and the most influential one, is his semiotic square. In his book, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt in Method*, he described his model as a tool for analyzing the structure of a narrative based on oppositional relationships. Any semantic term (or to use Greimas’s own word seme) can be illustrated or understood in an oppositional or contradictory relationship with the other semes. He pointed out that S1 is any given seme, and S2 is its opposite, S and -S are the relationship between the two (McQuillan, 2000). What follows is Fredric Jameson’s words to the foreword of Greimas’s *On Meaning*: “-S1 and -S2 are the simple negatives of the two dominant terms, but include far more than either: thus ‘nonwhite’ includes more than ‘black,’ ‘nonmale’ more than ‘female’” (xiv) (Davis, 1984; Greimas, 1987) . The visual square model is presented here (Figure 2):

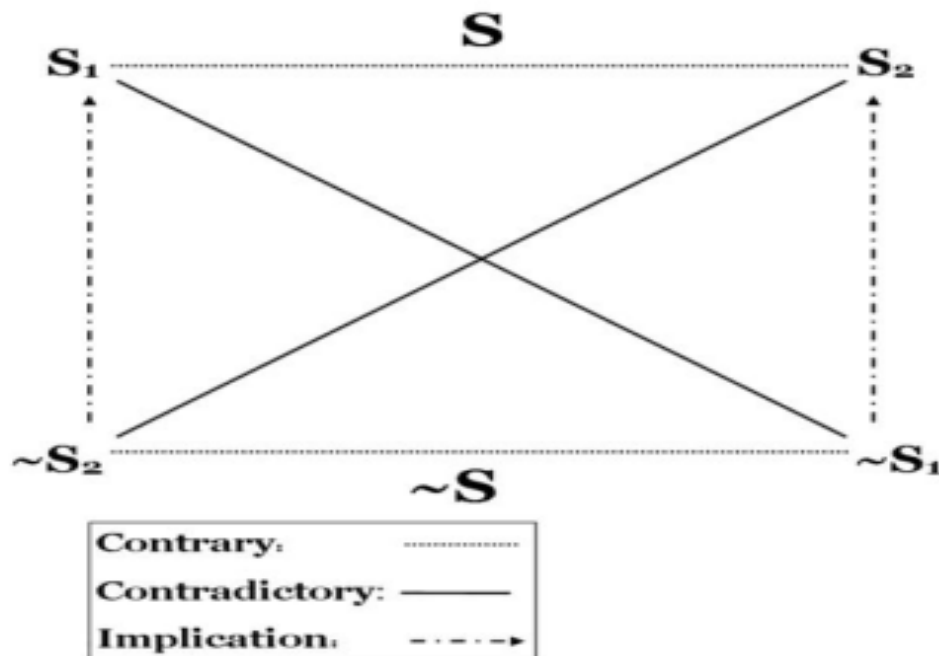


Figure 2. Greimas’s square model (Greimas, 1987)

- **Genettian Narrative Theory**

Considered the most prominent of the structuralist narratologists, Gérard Genette outlined an analytical model for analyzing narratives in his book, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. The manner of analysis proposed by him is more that of syntax than semantics. He was highly skeptical about the previously-practiced models of reading, such as the one proposed by Vladimir Propp, believing that they simply can handle the analytical reading of simple stories like fairy tales. Reacting against them, he explained his theory by taking advantage of Marcel Proust's epic *In Search of the Lost Time*, admitting that if a theory is able to deal with Proust, it will be able to deal with all other literary works. In the preface to his aforementioned book, Genette distinguishes three separate notions of the widely-used term, narrative, in order to impede bewilderment, *story*, *narrative*, and *narrating*.

According to Genette, all narratives of any genre can be analyzed based on his proposed model (Genette, 1980). His five concepts are as follows:

- **Order**

The way the events are arranged in the story and their turn of happening in the narrative is called the order. The narrator is free to choose to disclose the events chronologically or out of order. Genette has his own technical term for diving back and forth in time, anisochrony, which is divided into two types: "a. Analepsis (flashback): During the main story, the narrator recounts an event that happened earlier. b. Prolepsis (flashforward/ foreshadowing): The narrator anticipates events that will occur after the main story ends" (Genette, 1980).

- **Duration**

It is of great help to define the word time before discussing what Genette meant by duration. In *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, Scheffel, Weixler, and Werner offered a broad definition for time: "time is a constitutive element of worlds and a fundamental category of human experience" (1). The definition of time is narrowed down to one that is more relevant to narrative theory: "Time is a dimension of the narrated world (as conceived in a broad sense) as well as an analytical category ('tense') that describes relationships between narrative tiers." (1). Hence, as Bruner claimed, "narrative is an account of events taking place over time. It is irreducibly durative" (6), consequently, the relation between time and narrative cannot be denied or ignored. Differentiating storytime and discourse time, the relation between story time and discourse time is what Genette called duration. For him, there are four classifications of duration:

- A. Ellipses, in which the storytime is completely erased from the discourse time.
- B. Summary, in which the storytime is summarized in the discourse time, therefore, it takes a shorter time.
- C. Scene, in which there exists an exact match between story time and discourse time, like real events.
- D. Pause, in which the storytime comes to a halt for describing a static setting, like a landscape or a scene (Genette, 1980). It is of great help to mention what Prince has added to Genette's concept of duration, stretch, which in this research, it is considered the fifth element of duration.
- E. Stretch, in which the discourse time takes longer than the storytime, it is worth mentioning that this type of anachronism shows itself in slow-motion scenes of the movies (Genette, 1980).

- **Frequency**

In the narrative, frequency refers to the frequency with which an event occurs in the story and how often the author mentions it. In the narrative statement (of the text) as well as the narrated events (of the story), we establish a system of relationships between these capacities for 'repetition' - a system of relationships that a priori can be reduced to four virtual types by multiplying the two possibilities on both sides: whether or not the event is repeated or not. (Genette, 1980).

- **Voice**

The concept of voice deals with two questions, who narrates and from where, therefore, the narrator's being a character of the story or not, matters a lot. Rather, he proposes defining narrators based on their modes of participation. There are homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narratives, in which the narrator participates (or did) in the events being recounted. (Herman, 1998).

- **Mood**

Genette claims that the narrative mood is determined by the distance and perspective of the narrator, as well as by patterns such as music. Voice plays a role in it. When narrated, transposed, or reported speech is used, the narrator's distance changes. The perspective of the narrator is called focalization. Narratives can be non-focalized, internally focused, or externally focused. Therefore, the mood of a narrative is to tell a story, or report real or fictional facts, hence, the degree of this action is what matters. "The narrative can furnish the reader with more or fewer details, and in a more or less direct way...to keep at a greater or lesser distance from what it tells. The narrative can also choose to regulate the information it delivers...according to the capacities of knowledge of one or another participant in the story... with the narrative adopting...the participant's "vision" or "point of view"(Genette, 1980). Focalization is a term that completely served as a substitution for the terms, point of view, or perspective. Mieke Bal proposed a two-fold distinction to supersede Genette's three-fold above-mentioned one, character-bound or internal, corresponding to Genette's internal focalization, and external which goes with Genette's zero and external focalization.

CONCLUSION

For this research to be drawn to a close, narratology, generally, and structuralist narratology, specifically, bear the problem of practice. The structuralist narratologists' main attempt is somehow to deconstruct the language of the narrative, differentiating the story, the discourse, and the plot, besides deciding on the different concepts forming a narrative, and the manner in which they are presented, regardless of its genre. What encompasses thoroughly the structuralist narratology is to open a path to the language of a narrative and therefore, to decode the language to act upon the meaning. Meanwhile, the signifying point of this research is that exempt from the taxonomy of genres, structuralist narratology can be applied to narrations of any kind, consequently, it helps to improve interpretation or forming meaning process.

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