

NARRATOLOGY ORIGINS FROM CLASSICAL POETICS TO EARLY NARRATIVE THEORY

Khamroyeva Farida Fakhriddinovna

PhD, Acting Associate Professor at SamSIFL

Khamrayeva Oysha Khayrulla qizi

Student of Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages

Abstract: This paper explores the intellectual and historical origins of narratology, tracing its evolution from classical poetics to the emergence of early narrative theory in the modern era. Beginning with foundational insights from ancient Greek philosophy, particularly Aristotle's Poetics, the study examines how narrative structures, functions, and aesthetics were conceptualized long before narratology became a formalized discipline in the twentieth century. The paper further investigates the transition through medieval and Renaissance literary thought, leading to structuralist and proto-narratological frameworks in the works of Russian Formalists and early European theorists. By integrating comparative examples, including selected Uzbek narrative traditions, the study highlights both universal and culturally specific aspects of storytelling.

Keywords: Narratology, classical poetics, Aristotle, Russian Formalism, narrative theory.

Introduction

Narratology, broadly defined as the systematic study of narrative structures and functions, is often associated with twentieth-century structuralism and theorists such as Roland Barthes, Gérard Genette, and Tzvetan Todorov. However, this association risks obscuring the much deeper intellectual lineage of narratological thinking. The fundamental questions of narratology—what constitutes a narrative, how stories are structured, and how meaning is generated—have been explored for millennia across diverse philosophical and literary traditions.

The purpose of this paper is to trace the origins of narratology from its earliest conceptual foundations in classical poetics to its gradual emergence as a proto-disciplinary field in early modern narrative theory. By situating narratology within a broader historical continuum, this study seeks to demonstrate that contemporary narrative theory is deeply rooted in earlier intellectual traditions rather than being a purely modern invention. The paper is structured as follows: first, it examines classical poetics, particularly Aristotle's foundational contributions; second, it considers medieval and Renaissance developments; third, it explores the pivotal role of Russian Formalism and early twentieth-century theorists; and finally, it integrates illustrative examples, including Uzbek narrative traditions, to highlight the universality and diversity of narrative forms.

Methodology

This research adopts a historical-analytical approach, combining textual analysis with comparative literary study. Primary theoretical texts—from Aristotle to Russian Formalists—are examined alongside secondary scholarly interpretations. The study employs a diachronic framework, tracing the evolution of narrative theory across historical periods. In addition, the paper incorporates cross-cultural comparison by including examples from Uzbek oral and written traditions. This approach allows for a broader understanding of narratology beyond Eurocentric frameworks and demonstrates how fundamental narrative principles manifest across different cultural contexts.

Results And Discussion

1. Classical Poetics and the Foundations of Narrative Theory

The origins of narratology can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophy, particularly Aristotle's Poetics, which remains one of the earliest systematic analyses of narrative structure. Aristotle's concept of mimesis (imitation) establishes narrative as a representation of action rather than mere description¹. This distinction is crucial, as it frames narrative as a dynamic process involving causality and temporality.

Aristotle identifies key components of narrative, including plot (mythos), character (ethos), and thought (dianoia). Among these, plot is considered the most important element, as it organizes events into a coherent sequence². His emphasis on unity, causality, and completeness anticipates later narratological concepts such as narrative coherence and structural integrity. For example, Aristotle's notion of a beginning, middle, and end can be seen as a precursor to modern narrative models. This tripartite structure is evident not only in Greek tragedy but also in traditional Uzbek storytelling, such as epic narratives (dostonlar), where events unfold in a logically connected sequence leading to a resolution.

Consider the Uzbek epic Alpomish, where the hero's journey follows a clear narrative arc: separation, испытание, and return. This structure aligns closely with Aristotelian principles, suggesting that fundamental narrative patterns transcend cultural boundaries³.

2. Medieval and Renaissance Developments

During the medieval period, narrative theory was not systematically developed as an independent discipline; however, significant contributions were made through theological and rhetorical writings. Narrative was often viewed through a moral or allegorical lens, emphasizing its didactic function.

In the Renaissance, renewed interest in classical texts led to reinterpretations of Aristotle's ideas. Scholars began to focus more explicitly on narrative techniques, such as perspective and characterization. The emergence of the novel as a literary form further stimulated theoretical reflection on narrative structure. For instance, the works of Cervantes introduced complex narrative layering, including metafictional elements that challenge the boundaries between fiction and reality. These developments anticipate later narratological concerns with narrative levels and focalization.

3. The Transition to Modern Narrative Theory

The transition from classical poetics to modern narratology is marked by the emergence of Russian Formalism in the early twentieth century. Scholars such as Viktor Shklovsky and Vladimir Propp played a crucial role in transforming narrative analysis into a more systematic and scientific endeavor. Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarization (ostranenie) emphasizes the role of narrative techniques in making the familiar appear strange⁴. This shifts the focus from content to form, a key principle of structuralist narratology.

Propp's Morphology of the Folktale represents a major milestone in narrative theory. By analyzing Russian folktales, Propp identifies recurring narrative functions and character roles, demonstrating that stories can be understood as structured systems⁵. His methodology laid the groundwork for later structuralist approaches. Interestingly, similar narrative patterns can be observed in Uzbek folktales. For example, in the tale of "Zumrad va Qimmat," the protagonist undergoes a series of trials that correspond to Proppian functions such as departure, испытание, and reward. This parallel suggests the universality of certain narrative structures.

4. Early Structuralism and Proto-Narratology

Building on the foundations of Russian Formalism, early structuralist thinkers began to develop more comprehensive theories of narrative. Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic model,

which distinguishes between langue and parole, influenced the study of narrative as a system of signs⁶. Tzvetan Todorov introduced the term “narratology” and proposed a structural analysis of narrative grammar. Gérard Genette further elaborated on narrative discourse, introducing concepts such as focalization, narrative time, and voice⁷.

These developments mark the transition from proto-narratological thinking to a fully articulated discipline. However, it is important to recognize that these theories build upon centuries of earlier reflection on narrative.

5. Cross-Cultural Perspectives: Uzbek Narrative Traditions

While much of narratology has been developed within European intellectual traditions, narrative itself is a universal human phenomenon. Uzbek oral literature provides valuable insights into narrative structures that parallel and enrich theoretical models. For example, consider the following excerpt from a traditional Uzbek tale:

“Bir bor ekan, bir yo‘q ekan, qadim zamonda bir yigit yashagan ekan...”

This opening formula establishes a narrative frame similar to the “once upon a time” convention in European folklore. It signals the transition from reality to the narrative world, a concept that aligns with modern theories of narrative framing⁸. Moreover, Uzbek narratives often emphasize moral lessons, reflecting the didactic function of storytelling. This aligns with medieval European traditions, highlighting the shared cultural significance of narrative as a tool for ethical instruction.

Conclusion

Narratology, as a formal discipline, may be a product of the twentieth century, but its conceptual foundations extend back to classical antiquity. From Aristotle’s *Poetics* to the analytical frameworks of Russian Formalism and structuralism, the study of narrative has evolved through a continuous process of intellectual refinement. This paper has demonstrated that key narratological concepts – such as structure, function, and representation – have deep historical roots. Moreover, the inclusion of Uzbek narrative examples highlights the universality of storytelling while also emphasizing cultural specificity. Ultimately, narratology should be understood not as a sudden innovation but as the result of centuries of theoretical engagement with one of humanity’s most fundamental forms of expression: the story.

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