

A. J. Greimas in Jakarta: Essay on Story Structure¹

Richard SKINNER

Faber Academy, UK

Abstract: A. J. Greimas' Semiotic Square first made its appearance in his book *Sémantique Structurale*, published in 1966. In it, he uses the square to identify and explore sets of oppositions within literary texts. In my essay, "A. J. Greimas in Jakarta", I use Greimas' model and apply it to stories, novellas and novels by writers as diverse as Alice Munro, Andre Dubus, Han Kang and Julian Barnes in order to explore the narrative structure of those texts. In particular, I use the square to pinpoint and highlight the four-way sets of relationships in operation in all those texts.

Keywords:

Formalism,
Deep structure,
Black holes in fiction,
Narrative theory,
Intertextuality

Article History:

Received: 12 Jan. 2021

Accepted: 04 Mar. 2021

A. J. Greimas Jakarta'da: Hikâye Yapısı Üstüne Deneme

Öz: A. J. Greimas'ın Semiyotik Karesi ilk kez 1966'da yayınlanan *Sémantique Structurale* (Semantik Yapı) adlı kitabında ortaya çıktı. Kitapta, edebî metinlerdeki karşıtlıkları belirlemek ve tanımlamak için bu kare kullanılmaktadır. "A. J. Greimas Jakarta'da" adlı denememde, Greimas'ın modelini, Alice Munro, Andre Dubus, Han Kang ve Julian Barnes gibi çeşitli yazarların öykü, kısa roman ve romanlarında metinlerin anlatı yapısını keşfetmek için uyguluyorum. Özellikle, bu kareyi tüm bu metinlerde işlemekte olan dört yönlü ilişki kümelerini belirlemek ve vurgulamak için kullanıyorum.

Anahtar Sözcükler:

Biçimcilik,
Derin Yapı,
Kurgudaki kara delikler,
Anlatı kuramı,
Metinlerarasılık

Makale Geçmişi:

Geliş Tarihi:

12 Ocak 2021

Kabul Tarihi:

04 Mart 2021

How to Cite: Skinner, Richard. "A. J. Greimas in Jakarta: Essay on Story Structure." *IDEAS: Journal of English Literary Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2021, pp. 1-9.



¹ This essay is an updated version of Richard Skinner's "A. J. Greimas in Alice Munro's 'Jakarta': Essay on Story Structure" published in *Numéro Cinq Magazine* (vol. 8, no. 3) in March 2016.

In 1998, I was lucky enough to land a job as a book reviewer for the *Financial Times* under the auspices of the great editor Annalena McAfee. In the 12 months I reviewed books for her, I posted 26 reviews and was introduced to some incredible writers and books. One of those was Alice Munro who, believe it or not, was not that well-known outside Canada then. This was long before the Nobel Prize win and the universal acclaim she now enjoys (or rather doesn't). The collection I reviewed for the FT was *The Love of a Good Woman* (1998). What struck me in particular about Munro's style was how successfully she mined the interior life of her (largely female) characters. The POV in her stories constantly shifted, too, and time seemed amorphous, easily sculpted by the author to suit her needs. Key dramatic moments in the stories were only mentioned in passing and the endings were highly uncertain and not really endings at all. She broke all the rules and, because of that, her stories seemed remarkably true to life. I knew I had stumbled across a master storyteller.

The one story that especially drew me in was called "Jakarta". As is the case with so many of Munro's stories, it is set in the Vancouver area in the 1950s, during the height of the Korean War and the execution of the Rosenbergs. Sonje, who is described as 'calm' and 'Nordic' and who has 'thick fair hair', is married to Cottar who, at 38, is significantly older than her. Cottar teases Sonje mercilessly about her bourgeoisie aspirations. Cottar is a journalist who has scandalously travelled to communist China. He believes in free love and encourages Sonje to sleep with other men, the thought of which makes Sonje unhappy and so she doesn't follow through.

Sonje and Cottar are on vacation in a rented cottage for the summer when Sonje meets and befriends a woman called Kath, who lives in the area permanently with her husband Kent. They quickly realise that they both used to work at the Vancouver Public Library at the same time although they didn't know each other. Kath, who is darker and taller than Sonje, strikes Sonje as a free spirit and she compares herself unfavourably to Kath. During their days on the beach with Kath's one-year-old daughter Noelle, Sonje and Kath discuss the relationships in the books they are reading—including DH Lawrence's "The Fox"—but the subtext of their discussion is their own attitudes towards their husbands and marriages. Kath is shocked when Sonje says, 'My happiness depends on Cottar' and is struck by how Sonje is overly eager to please Cottar. Kath hints that she finds her own husband, Kent, conservative and stuffy. Kent disapproves of 'pinko' Cottar and the wild parties Cottar holds at his and Sonje's summer cottage and Sonje can tell that Kath is attracted to that lifestyle and has a longing to be much more bohemian than she is.

At a beach party one night, Sonje cooks and looks after her guests. She is the perfect hostess. Kath gets drunk and dances flirtatiously with a stranger, with whom she exchanges a fumbling kiss, while Kent stays at home looking after Noelle. At the end of that summer, Cottar and Sonje move to Portland, Oregon, so that Sonje can take care of Cottar's blind mother while Cottar is off on another journalistic junket to the Far East.

Suddenly, we shift 30 years later, to when Kent visits Sonje in Portland, where she is still living in Cottar's mother's house, although Cottar's mother is long dead. Kent and Kath have long since been divorced. Kath lives on her own beside a small lake near Toronto, her second husband recently dead, while Kent is married for a third time, to a much younger woman, Deborah, who is younger even than his own daughter, Noelle. Sonje explains to Kent that, while Cottar was away in the Far East, she received word that Cottar had died suddenly of an insect bite while he was in Jakarta. 'Jakarta used to be called Batavia, did you know that?' she asks, to which Kent replies, 'Vaguely.' She goes on to say that she has a theory that Cottar didn't die at all, that he is still alive. Sonje can't explain why she would think that, and neither can Kent, but she does, and she tells Kent that Cottar's mother also believed that he was still alive. In an uncharacteristic moment of candour, Kent says to Sonje, 'They got away. Both of them. Cottar and Kath.' That's where the story ends.

The tenses and time schemes in the story are all mixed and fractured. Part 1—about Kathy & Sonje's friendship—is told largely from Kathy's POV. Set 30 years later, Part 2 is told from Kent's POV when he visits Sonje in Oregon. Part 3—the night of the beach party—is told mainly from Kathy's POV but also from Sonje's. Finally, Part 4 is again from Kent's POV while he visits Sonje. The story explores the fault lines of marriage—the personal struggle either to adhere to conventional notions of marriage or to find alternatives to it. The argument Kath and Sonje have about DH Lawrence's "The Fox" illustrates this perfectly. Kath and Sonje can't admit it to themselves, or each other, but they have married the wrong people. What is left so beautifully understated in the story is that, deep down, they both know it.

A few years later, I came across a diagram called the Semiotic Square, originally devised by A. J. Greimas. It was defined as 'A structuralist-inspired model for the visual representation of a semantic logic which describes a narrative's elementary structure of signification'. It's one of those ideas in narrative theory that is much better understood as a diagram than a verbal definition (see fig. 1 below).

When I saw this diagram, something immediately clicked. An inkling, a recognition, that had always been there in the back of my mind became articulated by this diagram and I understood straight away what Greimas meant.

In the diagram, Greimas was trying to map the possible permutations of relationships between four people in a story. He labelled these relationships 'contrary', 'contradictory' and 'implied'. The difference between something that is 'contrary' and 'contradictory' is one of degree—something contradictory is a direct opposite whereas something contrary is along the same lines but not as strong. For example, the opposite of love is 'hate' whereas 'indifference' implies the same thing in kind but not degree. Another example would be 'truth'—the contradiction of which is 'lies', whereas 'white lies' would be merely a contrary idea—'white lies' is along the same lines as 'lies' but is not as extreme.

Greimas Semiotic Square

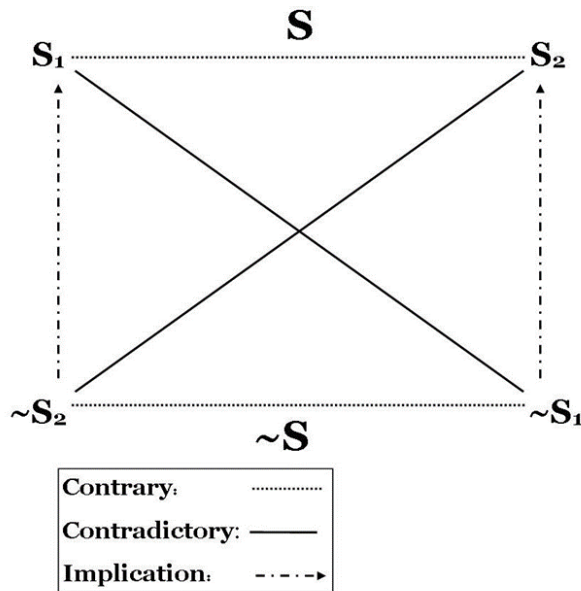


Fig. 1. Greimas' Semiotic Square.

One of the things I had been particularly drawn to in “Jakarta” was the shifting POV between the main characters and the fact that there were four of them. Many great novels are studies of single characters—loners, outsiders, or outcasts—e.g., *Madame Bovary* (1856), *The Outsider* (2018), *The Bell Jar* (1963). Then you have novels that are dissections of the symbiotic/obsessive/co-dependent relationships between two people (usually in a marriage)—e.g., Paula Fox’s *Desperate Characters* (1970), Paul Bowles’ *The Sheltering Sky* (1949), Somerset Maugham’s *The Painted Veil* (1925). And then there are those stories about love triangles, usually two men in love with the same woman—e.g., *Anna Karenina* (1878), *Thérèse Raquin* (1868), *The End of the Affair* (1951). But Greimas’ square was picking out the relationships between four people. It dawned on me that Greimas’ square described very well what was going on inside Munro’s story.

Each character in “Jakarta” has a relationship of differing strength with each of the other three characters. The story is a working through of each of these relationships, beginning with the strongest—the most contradictory—and working down through the layers, ending with the implication that there might have been a connection between Cottar and Kath all along. The other ‘implied’ relationship that we are left with is that between Sonje and Kent. The edges and crosshairs of Greimas’ square are a visual representation of the themes of the story—they *are* the story—and “Jakarta” as a whole is a working through of this set of relationships.

When I thought about Greimas' square in light of Munro's story, everything fell into place. Greimas' square helped me to understand the nature of "Jakarta" and, as with the great studies of individuals, marriages and love triangles, this four-way split (usually two sets of couples) was another universal deep structure, which continues to pop up everywhere in books, movies—any form of narrative storytelling.

Another, very similar, North American exploration of modern love revolving around the four-way split between two couples is the three novellas by Andre Dubus ("We Don't Live Here Anymore", "Adultery" and "Finding a Girl in America") gathered together into one volume entitled *We Don't Live Here Anymore* (2004). The three novellas explore two marriages—Hank's to Edith and Jack's to Terry. Each of the novellas is told from a different POV—"We Don't Live Here Anymore" from Jack's, "Adultery" from Edith's and "Finding a Girl in America" from Hank's. Again, taken together, the novellas are an exploration of the kind and degree of the bond that each of these people has with the other three.

In common with Dubus' novellas, Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2007) is a collection of three stand-alone parts, each told from a different POV and set around two couples. Set in Seoul, Part One, entitled "The Vegetarian", starts in the first person from the POV of a man whose wife, Yeong-Hye, one day announces that she is now a vegetarian. Her husband finds this intolerable, as does her father and mother, and they seek to force her to eat meat. Yeong-Hye resists so strongly that she cuts her wrist in protest. Her family have her committed to a psychiatric hospital, where she stays for several months.

Part Two, entitled "Mongolian Mark", is set two years later and is told in the third person from the POV of Yeong-Hye's brother-in-law, a visual artist who has formed a secret desire for Yeong-Hye ever since her attempted suicide. Yeong-Hye is now living on her own in an apartment and her brother-in-law begins to visit her. He asks for her help with an art project. He paints large flowers on Yeong-Hye's naked body, then his own, and films them having sex together. This part ends with Yeong-Hye's sister finding out about their affair.

Part Three, entitled "Flaming Trees", is in the third person and told from the sister's POV. Yeong-Hye has been committed to a psychiatric hospital again and, as her sister travels to visit her, the sister thinks back to when she first met her husband and to when she and her sister were young girls. It transpires that their father used to physically abuse Yeong-Hye, about which her sister has feelings of shame and guilt. While in hospital, Yeong-Hye tells her sister that she has completed her metamorphosis from animal to vegetal and is now a tree. The book ends with a vision of some trees on fire.

As the novel progresses, so we shift around the edges of the square, or across the square, exploring the strengths and weaknesses of the human relationships in the book. The sister, who was barely mentioned at the start, evolves into a main character. Her husband, also hardly noticed at the start of the book, comes forward to have his own voice

before then disappearing from the narrative altogether. By the end of the novel, Yeong-Hye's ex-husband (the entry point into the novel) has long since been forgotten. The men disappear, the women remain. Both marriages are shattered, one by a refusal to eat, the other by an act of sex, and there is an implication that Yeong-Hye and her sister's husband would have been a far better match, as would Yeong-Hye's sister and Yeong-Hye's ex-husband. The only constant is Yeong-Hye herself, although she doesn't have a voice or her own vantage point in the narrative. She remains an enigma from start to finish.

Another recent novel that is fascinating to consider in light of Greimas' square is Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending* (2011). Barnes' novel is divided into two parts, both of which are narrated by Tony Webster when he is retired and living alone. The first part begins in the 1960s with four intellectually arrogant school friends. Towards the end of their school days, another boy at the school hangs himself, apparently after getting a girl pregnant. The four friends discuss the philosophical difficulty of knowing exactly what happened. One of the friends, Adrian, goes to Cambridge while Tony goes to Bristol. Tony acquires a girlfriend, Veronica, at whose family home he spends an awkward weekend. Their relationship fails in some acrimony. In his final year at university, Tony receives a letter from Adrian informing him that he is going out with Veronica. Tony replies to the letter. Some months later he is told that Adrian has committed suicide, leaving a note saying that the thinking person has a philosophical duty to examine their life, and may then choose to renounce it.

At this point, Tony's narration of the second part of the novel begins many years later with the arrival of a lawyer's letter informing him that Veronica's mother has died and bequeathed him £500 and two documents. These lead him to re-establish contact with Veronica and after a number of meetings with her, to re-evaluate the story he has narrated in the first part. The revelation is that Adrian had an affair with Veronica's mother, and so the young Adrian is Veronica's brother, not her son, as Tony had assumed. The reason Veronica keeps saying throughout the book that Tony 'doesn't get it' is because he never understood this link. The reason her mother had Adrian's diary and said he had been happy in his last few months is that he had been with her. Tony feels guilty because his spiteful letter drove Adrian to Veronica's mother, which led them to produce a son, which led to his suicide. As Tony says, 'I looked at the chain of responsibility. I saw my initial in there.'

Those relationships that seem logical and likely to succeed—between Tony and Veronica, for instance—are the quickest to fail, whereas those most unlikely ever to come about often prove the strongest—between Adrian and Veronica's mother, Sarah, for instance. As soon as Adrian starts his relationship with Veronica's mother, the dynamic in the novel shifts and the two longest surviving relationships—between school friends Tony and Adrian, and the mother-daughter relationship—are severed forever. And, lastly, the hint of sexual tension between Tony and Veronica's mother when Tony spends the awkward weekend at Veronica's home hints at a relationship that might have worked.

All these examples revolve around two sets of couples, but another way that this model can work is via the effect one person has on three people's lives. One of my favourite novels, H. E. Bates' *Love for Lydia* (1952), is one such story. Set in the English midlands in the 1930s, the young, gawky Lydia begins a tentative relationship with the narrator, Richardson. Their relationship never flourishes because both are guarded. Through him, Lydia meets his friends Alex and Tom, both of whom fall in love with her and with whom she has dalliances. In their love for Lydia, Alex is jaunty, devil-may-care while Tom is bewildered and subservient. During the course of the novel, Alex and Tom both die accidentally and, at its close, Richardson and Lydia have come together and begun their relationship again.

Perhaps Bates found his model after reading another great pastoral novel, Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), since the two novels are identical in nature and structure. Like Bates' book, Hardy's *Bathsheba* begins a romance with solid Gabriel Oak only to reject him in favour of the dashing Sergeant Troy and then the repressed Boldwood. Boldwood shoots Troy dead and is incarcerated for the crime and the novel ends with *Bathsheba* and Gabriel reunited and married.

After thinking about this square structure in relation to Munro, Dubus, Han Kang and Barnes, I started to see this pattern everywhere: Andre Gidé's *Strait is the Gate* (1909), DH Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1920), F Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), W Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge* (1944), Max Frisch's *Homo Faber* (1957), Lawrence Durrell's *Justine* (1957), George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859), Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* (1958), to name but a few. All these novels, so wildly different in style and tone, all shared a foundation built on the four cornerstones of two sets of relationships and all were explorations of the four sides and crossways of these squares.

But then something struck me.

Looking again over the Munro, Dubus, Han Kang and Barnes, I realised that they all shared something else in common—all these narratives had a 'black hole' in it, i.e. that one of the four characters in the story were, in some way, not present—either they had gone missing, or died, or didn't have a voice in the narrative. In "Jakarta", Cottar is the only character whose POV we are never aligned with at all. He then disappears from the narrative altogether and it is precisely this disappearance that forces the other characters to review their connection to him and each other and, in the end, brings about the possibility of the 'implied' relationship. He is the 'black hole' in the story, the fall guy who must suffer and be sacrificed in order for the others to survive or change.

In Dubus' *We Don't Live Here Anymore*, Jack, his best friend Hank, and Hank's wife Edith, all have their own voices when retelling their versions of the same set of infidelities. Hank and Edith's POV might not be first person, like Jack's, but their narrative POV is very close to third person and the narrator continually uses free indirect style to allow us to hear what Hank and Edith are thinking and feeling, so their voices feel very like first

person. Terry, however, is not allowed her own voice. She is the last to transgress her vows of marriage and it is this final transgression that finally brings about the collapse of one marriage and the re-evaluation of the other. After sleeping with Hank on two consecutive nights because she was unhappy, 'Terry told Jack about Hank. Then, desperate and drunk, Jack told Terry about Edith.'

Dubus' trilogy of novellas is a detailed, intimate account of his belief that marriage is the beginning and discovery of emotional conflict, not its resolution. Hank and Edith's marriage breaks down and they both move on to other lovers, while Jack and Terry's choice to stay married initially emphasises the misery in their decision. By the time we get to Hank's POV, however (which is set many years later when Hank is now with a much younger woman), the survival of Jack and Terry's marriage takes on an unexpectedly sanguine tone.

In Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-Hye is again the only character whose POV we never move to. We hear from her husband, her brother-in-law and her sister, all of whom talk about Yeong-Hye, but she has no voice of her own in the narrative. This is the point of her story. In order to fulfil her desire to move from an animal to a vegetal state of being, she makes the *Bartleby*-like decision not to engage with those around her on their terms, terms which she finds intolerable. She sacrifices herself in order to move to another realm of understanding and this move is what horrifies her husband and parents but is what her brother-in-law and, finally, her sister come to love and accept, admire even.

In Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending*, it is Adrian's suicide that is the bomb dropped on the set of relationships in the novel, but this suicide was brought about by Tony's hateful letter, which is the source of Tony's guilt. This knowledge is what forces Tony to reassess and recount to us his role in the lives of Adrian, Veronica and Veronica's mother (whom he only met once). Adrian's suicide is a black hole down which he falls, down which Veronica and her mother also fall, albeit for different reasons and in different ways.

All these magnificent stories are highly organised, intense studies of humans interacting and behaving oddly with each other. They throw light on sublimated desires and warped motives. Ultimately, however, in all of these stories, it is some kind of lack, absence or failure of one corner of the square that triggers catastrophic change and collapse in the other three. There must be a black hole, a sacrificial lamb, for the story to work and it is these black holes that are the secret keys to the stories. Through them, we slip down a wormhole and emerge at the story's end with a fresh understanding of just how weird and wonderful human beings can be.

Works Cited

Barnes, Julian. *The Sense of an Ending*. Jonathan Cape, 2011.

Bates, H.E. *Love for Lydia*. Penguin, 1952.

Dubus, Andre. *We Don't Live Here Anymore: The Novellas of Andre Dubus*. Picador, 1984.

Hardy, Thomas. *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Cornhill Magazine, 1874.

Kang, Han. *The Vegetarian*. 2007. Portobello, 2015.

Munro, Alice. "Jakarta." *The Love of a Good Woman*. Vintage, 1998.