

Weird Stories: Pacing

The idea of “pacing” in fiction is related to that of time – a subject we have already addressed in this class. To be sure, the two are strongly correlated. But the way a narrative is paced must integrate the apparent passage of time with the *feel* of the passage of time – more specifically, the amount of concentration that is required to read each page.

Think of a short story or novel as being laid out on a large sheet of graph paper, with each of the spaces representing a block of time. In general, it is neither desirable nor possible to make the story progress evenly through time – we compress or telescope it at will, according to what elements of the story we wish to focus upon. On this graph, the lines would, at times, be squeezed together so closely as to obliterate the spaces between them; at other times the lines would be spread far apart.

Overlay this, however, with a second graph. The principle is the same, but now the spaces represent the *perceived* passage of the *reader's* time. This graph might end up looking entirely different, with the reader's time passing more quickly than the narrative time, or vice-versa.

How might this manifest itself in a story? A three-page passage describing five intense seconds of action might be written using sharp, straightforward prose presented in short sentences, or sentence fragments. The reader is taking a fairly long time (three pages) to read five seconds of story – but she feels as though she's reading a page-turner. Or maybe a span of 100 years of a town's history is dispensed with in a single page – but the prose is complex, thoughtful, and laden with tricky metaphors. Then, the reader would be flying through narrative time, while feeling as though he's moving doggedly through the prose.

In Stephen Dixon's "Love Has Its Own Action," the silly, snowballing plot picks up speed as it goes – and so does the sentence structure, and so does the time Dixon takes to tell you the story. These simultaneous multiple accelerations are part of what makes the story funny. Rebecca Dart's "RabbitHead" simultaneously speeds up time in the main narrative even as it slows it in the strange domestic subplots (the beetle, the grub), while using the same number of panels in each; the result is a narrative impossibility that leaves us feeling displacement and unease.

For this exercise, see if you can't write:

- 1) a piece in which 100 years takes the same amount of time to read about as a fraction of a second – all in the form of a coherent narrative.
- 2) a piece about a quick succession of brief events using long, complicated sentences.
- 3) a piece about a gradual, evolving process using only sentence fragments.
- 4) something fragmentary that takes forever to read.
- 5) one big page-long sentence that a reader can dispense with in ten seconds.
- 6) something with two parallel plots, each with its own scheme for the passage of time and prose style.
- 7) something featuring two characters, whose free-indirect narrative styles divert along lines of narrative pacing.
- 8) a story in which differently paced, but related, narratives unfold in discrete areas of the page.