Greimas's Actantial Model and the Cinderella Story

- The Simplest Way for the Structural Analysis of Narratives -

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0. Introduction

Narrative is "the recounting (as product and process, object and act, structure and structuration) of one or more real or fictional events communicated by one, two, or several (more or less overt) narrators, to one, two, or several (more or less overt) narrators." It doesn't matter whether narrative is fictional or not: in a fictional narrative, some characters and events are narrated by the narrator, while, in non-fiction such as history, the explanation of historical events is given by the writer as a mediator. Even someone, who has reached the retirement age of 60 and is reviewing his life in retrospect, has his own narrative. Narrative, therefore, is seen in a person's everyday life. Texts like "Mt. Everest is the highest mountain in the world" and "seawater is salty", are not narratives, because they do not reproduce any event. Texts like "the stage actor died" and "snow has fallen for a week," on the other hand, are narratives. These narratives represented in a general form are considered literature. Therefore, narratives are not only novels in prose style, but also epic poetry or lyrics. Narratology is the theory of narrative with which we can analyze narratives from the viewpoint of their structures.

The word 'narratology' was first used in *Grammaire du "Décaméron*" by the Franco-Bulgarian philosopher Tzvetan Todorov². Since then, narratology has made remarkable progress due to the works of such narratologists as Bremond, Greimas, Barthes, and Genette. It is also deeply indebted to many previous works. It can be traced from Propp's study of Russian forktales and the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss, who had revaluated the Russian formalism of the 1910s to the 1930s. Before the word 'narratology' appeared, the word 'poetics' had been generally applied to literary studies. Narratology, generated by structuralism, made an attempt to construct a science of literature. Claude Lévi-Strauss had originally applied the structural analysis of language by Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson to humane studies, and had elicited a general rule

¹ Gerald Prince, Dictionary of Narratology (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 58.

² Tzvetan Todorov, Grammaire du "Décaméron" (The Hague: Mouton, 1969)

utilizing the concept 'structure'. Among structuralists, Roland Barthes, a French literary theorist and Todorov's direct supervisor, was the greatest contributor to narratology. His article 'An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative' is concerned with the practice of examining the correspondence between the structure of a sentence and that of a larger narrative. Linguistics "found its proper footing and proceeded with giant steps"³, so Barthes suggested that 'a hypothetical model of description'⁴ was needed in the analysis of narrative, as faced with millions of narrative acts. He also proposed 'to distinguish three levels in narrative works'; 'functions', 'actions' and 'discourse'. The former two are those of Propp and Greimas, while the latter is that of Todorov and Genette.

In this article, the actantial model of Greimas, and its effective application to narratives will be examined through the Cinderella story.

1. Structural Narratology—Propp and Bremond

1.1 Propp's morphology

During the age of Propp, '[s]cholarly literature concerning the tale[was] not especially rich' and '[t]here were no general works on the tale.' M. Speránskij laid the blame on an insufficiency of material Propp, however, did not agree with this opinion because an 'enormous amount of tale material has not yet been published, and in part, not even described'. So he considered that the problem lay in the methods of investigation, not the amount of material E.

The tales were so diverse that the tale materials required classification. 'The most common division' till then was 'a division into tales with fantastic content, tales of everyday life, and animal tales.' But some tales about animals contained elements of the fantastic, and in some fantastic tales, animals actually played a major role. Therefore, some tales involved the both contents and some did not fit at all within the described classification categories. Propp considered that such a contradictory classification could be attributed to the way of classifying tales on the basis of their content¹⁰. He referred to Wundt's division as follows¹¹: (1)

Roland Barthes, 'An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative' Trans. Lionel Duisit New Literary History 6 (1975) 238.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 239.

Vladímir Propp, Morphology of the Folktale. 2nd ed. Trans. Laurence Scott (1968; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

mythological tale-fables; (2) pure fairy tales; (3) biological tales and fables; (4) pure animal fables; (5) "genealogical" tales; (6) joke tales and fables; (7) moral fables. The 'joke tales' in the number (6) can be treated both 'heroically and comically.' Still further, 'the question is raised as to the difference between a "pure animal fable" and a "moral fable." Propp also examined the classification of the tale on the basis of the themes. Professor Vólkov stated that the fantastic tale comprised fifteen themes as follows¹⁴: (1) about those unjustly persecuted; (2) about the hero-fool; (3) about three brothers; (4) about dragon fighters; (5) about procuring brides; (6) about a wise maiden; (7) about those who have been placed under a spell or bewitched; (8) about the possessor of a talisman; (9) about the possessor of magic objects; (10) about an unfaithful wife; etc. Propp found out the contradiction could be found in the division: 'the first class is determined by the complication'; 'the second class is determined by the character of the hero; 'the third, by the number of heroes; the fourth, by one moment in the course of the action, and so forth.' Propp had his doubts about how the tale in which three brothers procured brides for themselves would be classified.

Propp then suggested that the formal and structural features, which had not been taken into consideration, should provide the basis of any classification. He also tried to discover a general rule of the tale by a morphological approach, and 'to explain the similarities of the tale about the frog queen in Russia, Germany, France, India, in America among the Indians, and in New Zealand.' His way of thinking exerted an enormous influence over Lévi-Strauss. It also helped scholars to discover the historical root of the tale and to study it by the comparative method, so that the close similarities between tales were made clear from a morphological point of view.

Propp proposed the following four theses and tried to prove them¹⁷:

- (1) Functions of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. They constitute the fundamental components of a tale.
- (2) The number of functions known to the fairy tale is limited.
- (3) The sequence of functions is always identical.
- (4) All fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure.

After reading a hundred fairy tales in a collection of Russian folktales, Propp found that the same event or

¹² *Ibid.*, 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁵ Ibid., 8.,

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 21-23.

character recurred several times throughout the tales: 'identical acts can have different meanings, and vice versa.' Propp therefore set functions at the center of his analysis, because every character had a function. These functions consisted of given acts. Propp discerned a basic chain of functions in the development of each story. As a result, he discovered that the number of functions in Russian fairy tales was limited to thirty-one. Many functions were logically joined together into certain *spheres*, and these functions corresponded to their respective performances. Propp considered those as *spheres of action*. The number of the *spheres of action* in Russian tales are seven²⁰:

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1. The villain. Functions (A), (H), (Pr).
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- 2. The *donor* (provider). Functions (D), (F).
- 3. The *helper*. Functions (G), (K), (Rs), (N), (T).
- 4. A princess (a sought-for person). Functions (M), (J), (Ex), (Q), (U), (W).
- 5. The *dispatcher*. Function (B).
- 6. The *hero*. Functions (C ↑), (E), (W).
- 7. The *false hero*. Functions (C \uparrow), (E), (L).

1.2 Claude Bremond's rearrangement of Propp's 'functions'

Propp studied Russian folktales from the viewpoint of 'functions.' Bremond, who believed that Propp's method had possibilities of being applied to other genres such as literature and art, then tried to find universal rules that applied to something all narrated in words or on film²¹. Bremond first applied Propp's thirty-one functions to one sequence, and came to the conclusion that all folktales, abstracted and analyzed to some extent, could consist of one structure. He found that 'la nécessité de ne jamais poser une fonction sans poser en même temps la possibilité d'une option contradictoire'²² during the process of probing a universal generalization regarding Propp's method. In his method, 'Chez lui, la fonction *Lutte avec le méchant*, par exemple, rend possible la fonction *Victoire, du héros sur le méchant*, mais non pas la fonction *Echec du héros devant le méchant*.' ²³ Bremond considered 'structure du récit' as 'comme la jaxtaposition d'un certain nombre de séquences,' '[a]u lieu de figurer la structure du récit sous forme d'une chaîne unilinéaire de termes se succedant selon un ordre constant.' ²⁴

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 26-63. As for Propp's thirty-one functions, see APPENDIX.

²⁰ Ibid., 79-80.

²¹ Claude Bremond, 'Le message narratif' *Logique du récit*. (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1966), 11-47.

²² Bremond, 25.

²³ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

Bremond proposed a logic of narrative possibility, because the basic components in narrative created their respective developmental processes. This is how choices appear in every moment, and a narrative is hatched out of several possibilities of narrative: 'Certaines se présupposent l'une l'autre.' Thus, the following dichotomy becomes feasible: 27

Trying to generalise Propp's thirty-one functions, Bremond submitted a proposal to replace his 'functions' with 'role.'

2. Greimas's Actantial Model

2.1 In mythical structures.

A. J. Greimas, a linguist and semioticist, considered Propp's morphology in connection with Lévi-Strauss's structural analysis of myth. On the basis of Propp's thirty-one functions, *actant* is 'a fundamental role at the level of narrative deep structure.' Actantial model' schematically shows functions and roles characters perform in a narrative. Greimas replaced Propp's syntagmatic structure of narrative with a paradigmatic one: Tinstitution des acteurs par la description de leurs functions et la réduction des classes d'acteurs à des actants du genre.' 29

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁸ Prince, 1.

A. J. Greimas, sémantique structurale: recherché de méthode. (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1966), 175. English translation is as follows: 'the establishment of the actors by the description of the functions and the reduction of the classification of actors to actants of the genre' (Structural Semantics. Trans. Daniele McDowell, Ronald Schleifer, and Alan Velie (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 201).

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1° the villain;
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2° the donor (provider);

3° the helper;

4° the sought-for person (and her father);

5° the dispatcher;

6° the hero;

7° the false hero.

Greimas, who paid attention to Souriau's 'le catalogue des « fonctions » dramatiques'³⁰, found that the actantial interpretation could be applied to a narrative, different from a folktale, and that his results could be compared with Propp's. Souriau's inventory is presented as follows³¹:

Lion la Force thématique orientée;

Soleil le Représentant du Bien souhaité, de la Valeur orientante;

Terre l'Obtenteur virtuel de ce Bien (celui pour lequel travaille le Lion);

Mars 1'Opposant;

Balance l'Arbitre, attributeur du Bien;

Lune la Rescousse, redoublement d'une des forces précédents.

Greimas also found and identified 'les deux actants syntaxiques'³² in the two inventories of Propp and Souriau.³³

syntaxe	Sujet		Objet
Propp	Hero	VS	Sought-for person
Souriau	la Force thématique orientée	VS	le Représentant du Bien souhaité, de la Valeur orientante

³⁰ *Ibid*., 175

³¹ Étienne Souriau, les deux cent mille situations dramatiques. (Paris: Flammarion, 1950), 83-104.

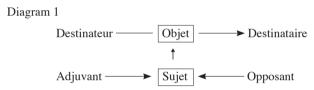
³² Greimas, 176.

³³ *Ibid.*, 176-80.

syntaxe	Destinateur		Destinataire
Propp	Dispatcher	VS	(the sought-for person and) her father
Souriau	l'Arbitre, attributeur du Bien	VS	l'Obtenteur virtuel virtuel de ce Bien

syntaxe	Adjuvant		Opposant
Propp	Helper (Donor)	VS	Opponent
Souriau	la Rescousse, redoublement d'une des forces précédentes	vs	Opposant

Greimas's actantial mythical model³⁴:



Destinateur is an actant which sends the *sujet* on its quest for the object. The king is a *destinateur* in the folklore in which a king promises to give his princess over to a person who will rescue her: this starter who allows the *sujet* carry out an action in a narrative text is a *destinateur*. The *destinataire* is one who eventually receives the *objet* sought after by the *sujet*. In a text where God sends the Savior to save humanity to give them happiness, the *destinataire* is humanity. The *objet* is placed between the *destinateur* and the *destinataire*, and is sought by the *sujet*, and is finally sent to the *destinataire*. The *adjuvant* helps the hero or the *sujet*. The *opposant* is placed in opposition to the *adjuvant* and is denied at the end of the sequence. The *sujet* is the chief actor in a narrative or a discourse.

The *sujet* and *objet* here are Propp's hero and sought-for person respectively. As for the *destinateur* and *destinataire*, in a simple love story where a couple gets married, for example, without their parents' intervention, the *sujet* may function as both the *sujet* and the *destinataire* of love, and the *objet* may function as both the *objet* and the *destinateur* of love. 'In a more recent version of Greimas's actantial model,' *adjuvant* and *opposant* 'are taken to be auxiliants and not actants.'³⁵

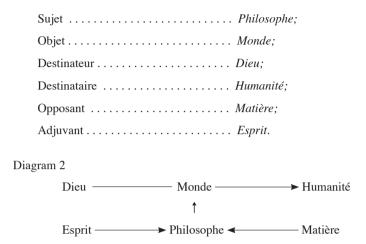
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³⁴ *Ibid.*, 180.

³⁵ Prince, 2.

2.2 The thematic investment in the actantial model.

For 'un savant philosophe des siècles classiques,' for example, 'la relation du désir étant précisée, par un investissement sémique, comme le désir de connaitre, les actants de son spectacle de connaissance se distribueraient à peu près' in the following manner³⁶:



The foundation of the actantial model in *sémantique structurale* is that the actant-sujet can get the actant-objet through a trial. In more recent model, the structure of relations such as <sujet> - <objet>, <destinateur> - <destinataire>, and <adjuvant> - <opposant> was revised to that of <sujet> - <objet>, <sujet> - <anti-sujet>, and <destinateur> - <sujet (destinataire)>. Although both models are the same to the point where the *sujet* as *destinataire* seeks the *objet-valeur*, the latter differs from the former in respect to the main part of the *opposant* being an *anti-sujet*. The *adjuvant* and *opposant* being put together as an auxillant are regarded as *competence modale: sujet's pouvoir-faire or non-pouvoir-faire*. In Propp's morphology, a subject has to fight against an opponent, who interferes in the narrative. In Greimas's model, he gives the opponent as *anti-sujet* a position, equivalent to the *sujet*'s, in which there is a story about a traitor, and two narratives about the *sujet* and the *anti-sujet* develop in opposite directions. Thus, his model shows that there can be at least two plots even in a simple narrative.

As his model is centered on the *objet* of desire pursued by the *sujet*, it is considered that there are as many actantial models as plots of desire in a narrative. The model is, therefore, effective in analyzing a narrative like a novel, which has multiple plots. It also has the possibility of having allowing universal application to

³⁶ Greimas, 181. English translation is as follows: 'for a learned philosopher of the classical age the relationship of desire would be specified, by a semic investment, as the desire of knowing, and the actants of his drama of knowledge would be distributed' (207-8).

every narrative. We will examine this by analyzing the Cinderella story which appears to be a simple narrative.

3. An Analysis of the Cinderella Story through the Actantial Model

Cinderella stories have been written by a myriad of writers including Basil, Perrault, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm.³⁷ The outline of the standard Cinderella story is as follows:

After her father's death, the beautiful Cinderella has been abused as a maid by her stepmother and stepsisters. One day the prince invites all the ladies in the realm to choose one as a wife. Her step-sisters leave to attend the royal ball, but Cinderella, who has no dress, is left behind. Through some magical power (fairy godmother, wishing tree, mice, pigeons) she is assisted in attending the ball with the admonition that she must return before midnight. At the ball, the prince is enchanted by Cinderella, but at the stroke of midnight she remembers she must leave. She loses one of her glass slippers on the steps of the palace. The prince decides to marry the lady who can fit her foot into the tiny slipper. He tries to put the slipper on all the ladies in the realm. The stepsisters try to put it on in vain. Naturally, the slipper fits Cinderella perfectly. The story ends with the marriage of Cinderella to the prince, and the humiliation of her step-relatives.

In Greimas' actantial model, Cinderella's desire to go to the ball would be as follows:

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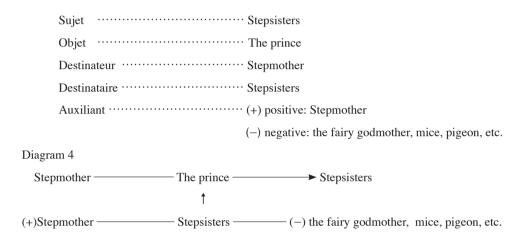
³⁷ See Cinderella: A Casebook. Ed. Alan Dundes (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1982)

Diagram 3

The fairy godmother, mice, etc. —— The prince —— Cinderella

(+)The fairy godmother, mice, etc. —— Cinderella —— (-) Stepmother and stepsisters

In the surface structure, Cinderella would go to the ball to have an audience with the prince, capture his heart and in the end get married to him. In the deep structure, the ideologies that of an abused beautiful girl with low-status who gains happiness and high-status would be shown.³⁸ As *anti-sujet*, the story of stepsisters' desire to marry the prince would be as follows:



Like Cinderella, the stepsisters also want to have an audience with the prince at the ball and to marry him. However, the proud and lazy stepsisters are not able to capture his heart (sometimes disturbed by magical powers). Thus, their desire is not to be fulfilled. In the deep structure, the ideology that the world of evil and vanity results in being expelled from the world of goodness, humbleness and industriousness is shown.

Apart from both *sujets* (Cinderella and her stepsisters) above, another important character who makes it possible for the story to begin is the prince. The prince wants to marry a lady suitable to be queen of his kingdom. He assembles all the ladies in the country in order to choose one as his wife. In the actantial model the story of the prince's desire to get married with a suitable wife is as follows:

Sujet ···· The prince

David Pace, 'Lévi Strauss and the Analysis of Folktales' Cinderella: A Casebook. 245-58. Pace analyzed the Cinderella story from the viewpoint of that of Lévi-Strauss.

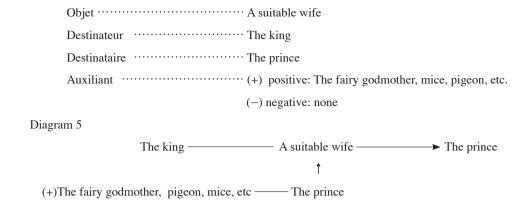


Diagram 5 shows that the prince seeks a suitable wife, not for a Cinderella. The prince's goal is attained as he has no opponent (or no negative auxiliant), like that the wolf's desire to eat the little girl is accomplished in Charles Perrault's *Little Red Riding Hood* (1697). Although he sees Cinderella's face at the ball, the prince tries to choose a suitable wife using the glass slipper. The possibility remains that the stepsisters could become his wife. The slipper, in the end, fits the Cinderella's foot, and the prince decides to marry Cinderella. Cinderella's desire is coincident with that of the prince, while the stepsisters' desire is not satisfied. In the deep structure of the story, the ideology is altered by the treatment of the stepsisters: while Cinderella raises her status in society after her marriage to the prince, the stepsisters remain at or lose their social status. In the former case, the Cinderella story becomes a girl's success story, a kind of American dream, like the American movie *Pretty Woman*. In the latter one, it becomes a moral lesson about a social mobility, where Cinderella raises her status while the stepsisters lose theirs.

4. Conclusion

As we have seen above, the use of the actantial model of Greimas, and its effective application to narratives can be proved. If you make use of the Greimas model, you can analyze the structure of narrative simply and easily. Therefore, this model enables readers to simply and clearly analyze long and complicated novels with multiple plots, like the Victorian novel. This, however, awaits a future solution.

*APPENDIX: Propp's thirty-one functions

- I. ONE OF THE MEMBERS OF A FAMILY ABSENTS HIMSELF FROM HOME. (Definition: absentation. Designation: β.)
- II. AN INTERDICTION IS ADDRESSED TO THE HERO. (Definition: interdiction. Designation: γ.)
- III. THE INTERDICTION IS VIOLATED. (Definition: *violation*. Designation: δ .)
- IV. THE VILLAIN MAKES AN ATTEMPT AT RECONNAISSANCE. (Definition: reconnaissance. Designation: £.)
- V. THE VILLAIN RECEIVES INFORMATION ABOUT HIS VICTIM. (Definition: delivery. Designation: ζ .)
- VI. THE VILLAIN ATTEMPTS TO DECEIVE HIS VICTIM IN ORDER TO TAKE POSSESSION OF HIM OR OF HIS BELONGINGS. (Definition: trickery. Designation: η .)
- VII. THE VICTIM SUBMITS TO DECEPTION AND THEREBY UNWITTINGLY HELPS HIS ENEMY. (Definition: complicity. Designation: θ .)
- VIII. THE VILLAIN CAUSES HARM OR INJURY TO A MEMBER OR A FAMILY. (Definition: *villainy*. Designation: A.) VIIIa. ONE MEMBER OF A FAMILY EITHER LACKS SOMETHING OR DESIRES TO HAVE SOMETHING. (Definition: *lack*. Designation: a.)
- IX. MISFORTUNE OR LACK IS MADE KNOWN; THE HERO IS APPROACHED WITH A REQUEST OR COMMAND; HE IS ALLOWED TO GO OR HE IS DESPATCHED. (Definition: *mediation, the connective incident*. Designation: B.)
- X. THE SEEKER AGREES TO OR DECIDES UPON COUNTERACTION. (Definition: beginning counteraction. Designation: C.)
- XI. THE HERO LEAVES HOME. (Definition: departure. Designation: 1.)
- XII. THE HERO IS TESTED, INTERROGATED, ATTACKED, ETC., WHICH PREPARES THE WAY FOR HIS RECEIVING EITHER A MAGICAL AGENT OR HELPER. (Definition: the first function of the donor. Designation: D.)
- XIII. THE HERO REACTS TO THE ACTIONS OF THE FUTURE DONOR. (Definition: *the hero's reaction*. Designation: E.)
- XIV. THE HERO ACQUIRES THE USE OF A MAGICAL AGENT. (Definition: *provision or receipt of a magical agent*. Designation: F.)
- XV. THE HERO IS TRANSFERRED, DELIVERED, OR LED TO THE WHEREABOUTS OF AN OBJECT OF SEARCH. (Definition: *spatial transference between two kingdoms, guidance*. Designation: G.)
- XVI. THE HERO AND THE VILLAIN JOIN IN DIRECT COMBAT. (Definition: struggle. Designation: H.)
- XVII. THE HERO IS BRANDED. (Definition: branding, marking. Designation: J.)
- XVIII. THE VILLAN IS DEFEATED. (Definition: victory. Designation: I.)
- XIX. THE INITIAL MISFORTUNE OR LACK IS LIQUIDATED. (Designation: K.)
- XX. THE HERO RETURNS. (Definition: return. Designation: ↓.)
- XXI. THE HERO IS PURSUED. (Definition: pursuit, chase. Designation: Pr.)
- XXII. RESCUE OF THE HERO FROM PURSUIT. (Definition: rescue. Designation: Rs.)
- XXIII. THE HERO, UNRECOGNIZED, ARRIVES HOME OR IN ANOTHER COUNTRY. (Definition: unrecognized arrival. Designation: o.)
- XXIV. A FALSE HERO PRESENTS UNFOUNDED CLAIMS. (Definition: unfounded claims. Designation: L.)
- XXV. A DIFFICULT TASK IS PROPOSED TO THE HERO. (Definition: difficult task. Designation: M.)
- XXVI. THE TASK IS RESOLVED. (Definition: solution. Designation: N.)
- XXVII. THE HERO IS RECOGNIZED. (Definition: recognition. Designation: Q.)
- XXVIII. THE FALSE HERO OR VILLAIN IS EXPOSED. (Definition: exposure. Designation: Ex.)
- XXIX. THE HERO IS GIVEN A NEW APPEARANCE. (Definition: transfiguration. Designation: T.)
- XXX. THE VILLAIN IS PUNISHED. (Definition: punishment. Designation: U.)
- XXXI. THE HERO IS MARRIED AND ASCENDS THE THRONE. (Definition: wedding. Designation: W.)