

## Experiments With Pacing

At first thought, the idea of “pacing” might appear to be synonymous with 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 time the reader is taking 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 between the lines 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 space 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 slogging through the prose.

In *The Man Who Was Thursday*, we get lots of elaborate dialogue and description taking place during comparatively frantic chase scenes and sword fights. And at other times, we get sober analysis that jumps from five o'clock one afternoon to seven the next morning. This contradiction in pacing and narrative is part of what makes the book so strange. In Stephen Dixon's “Love Has Its Own Action,” on the other hand, 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. This quality of constant multiple accelerations is part of what makes the story so hilarious.

For this exercise, see if you can't:

- 1) Write 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) Write a piece about a quick succession of brief events using long, complicated sentences.
- 3) Write a piece about a gradual, evolving process using only sentence fragments.
- 4) Write something fragmentary that takes forever to read. Write one big page-long sentence that a reader can dispense with in ten seconds.