

Emotional and meaning arcs of stories

Last updated: 2026/02/19, 15:28:38 EST

Principles of Complex Systems,
Vols. 1, 2, 3D, 4 Fourever, V for Vendetta

Prof. Peter Sheridan Dodds

Computational Story Lab | Vermont Complex Systems Institute
University of Vermont | Santa Fe Institute



Licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)



These slides are brought to you by:

The PoCSverse

Meaning arcs

2 of 27

Stories

References

Sealie & Lambie Productions



These slides are also brought to you by:

Special Guest Executive Producer

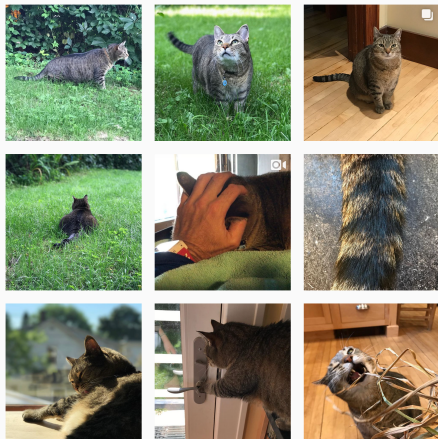
The PoCSverse

Meaning arcs

3 of 27

Stories

References



 On Instagram at [pratchett_the_cat](https://www.instagram.com/pratchett_the_cat) 



Outline

The PoCVerse

Meaning arcs

4 of 27

Stories

References

Stories

References



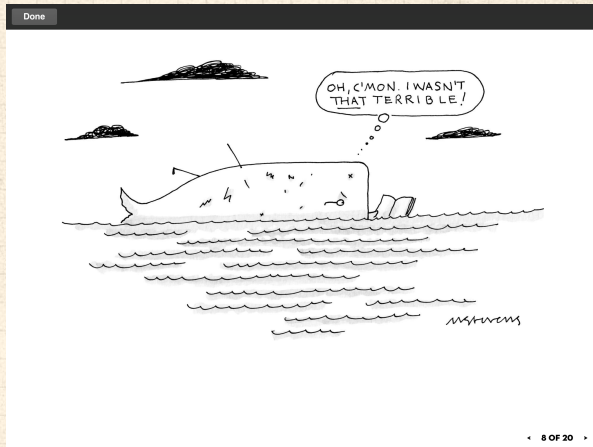
Kurt Vonnegut on the shapes of stories



Source: Kurt Vonnegut on the Shapes of Stories .

Longer piece  with bonus stories (Metamorphosis and Hamlet).





The New Yorker, December 16, 2013, p. 56.



Ron Swanson on metaphors



“I hate metaphors. That’s why my favorite book is Moby Dick. No frou-frou symbolism. Just a good, simple tale about a man who hates an animal.”



Aside: From a 2013 Believer Magazine interview with Maurice Sendak :

BLVR: Did the success of *Where the Wild Things Are* ever feel like an albatross?

MS: It's a nice book. It's perfectly nice. I can't complain about it. I remember Herman Melville said, "When I die no one is going to mention *Moby-Dick*. They're all going to talk about my first book, about forking maidens in Tahiti." He was right. No mention of *Moby-Dick* then. Everyone wanted another Tahitian book, a beach book. But then he kept writing deeper and deeper and then came *Moby-Dick* and people hated it. The only ones who liked it were Mr. and Mrs. Nathaniel Hawthorne. *Moby-Dick* didn't get famous until 1930.



Sendak named his dog Herman.

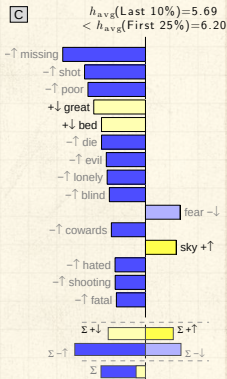
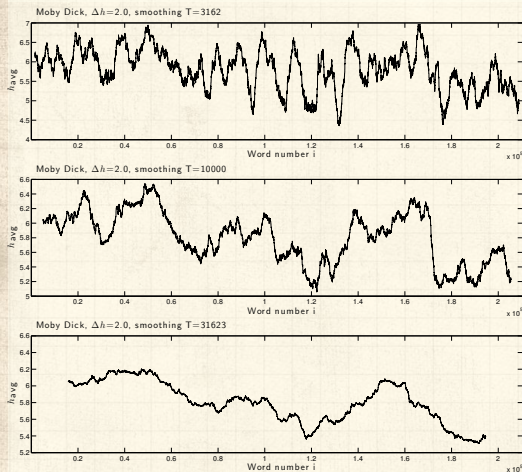


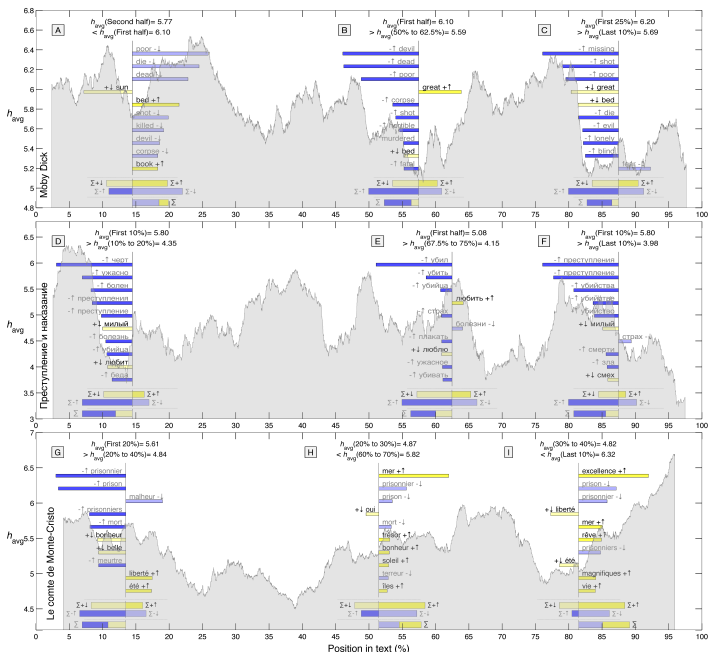
The essential (true) Colbert interview:

Pt. 1  and Pt. 2 .



The emotional shapes of stories—Moby Dick:





Online, interactive Emotional Shapes of Stories for 10,000+ books:

Frankenstein; Or the Modern Prometheus [\(wiki\)](#)

by Mary Shelley

Search Gutenberg Corpus

by Title ▾

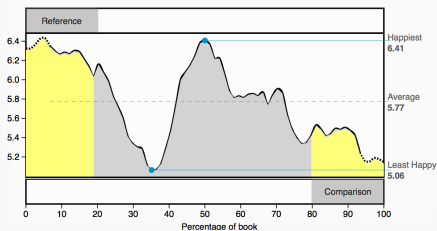
Classics ▾

Harry Potter ▾

Random

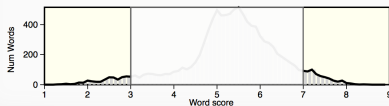
Book happiness time series:

Explore the work's emotional dynamics by sliding and resizing the reference and comparison sections.



Lens (for advanced users):

Slide and resize the stop-window to change the lens:

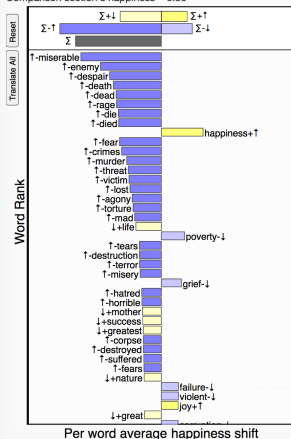


Word Shift:

Why comparison section is less happy than the reference one

Reference sections's happiness = 6.31

Comparison section's happiness = 5.35



Online, interactive Emotional Shapes of Stories for 10,000+ books:

Harry Potter (all books together)

by J.K. Rowling

Search Gutenberg Corpus

by Title ▾

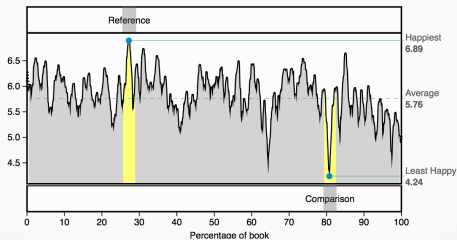
Classics ▾

Harry Potter ▾

Random

Book happiness time series:

Explore the work's emotional dynamics by sliding and resizing the reference and comparison sections.

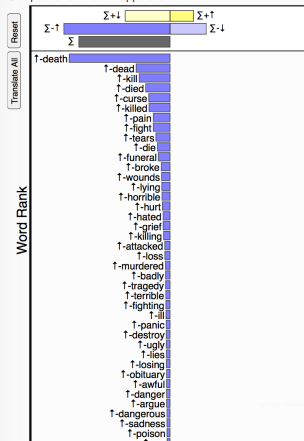


Word Shift:

Why comparison section is less happy than the reference one

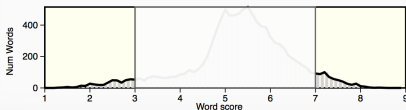
Reference sections's happiness = 6.13

Comparison section's happiness = 5.14



Lens (for advanced users):

Slide and resize the stop-window to change the lens:



Per word average happiness shift

Online, interactive Emotional Shapes of Stories for 1,000+ movie scripts:

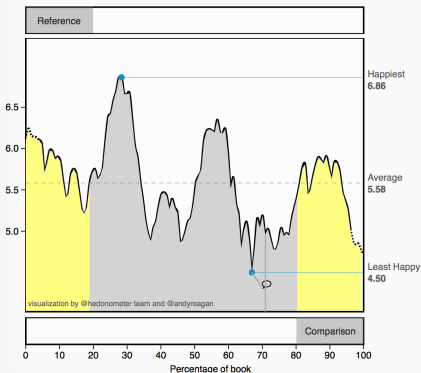
Pulp Fiction

directed by Quentin Tarantino

[Classics ▾](#)[Team Picks ▾](#)[Random](#)

Movie happiness time series:

Explore the work's emotional dynamics by sliding and resizing the reference and comparison sections.



Movie script:

Portion of script scored for each point in timeseries.

Zed takes the chair, sits it in front of the two prisoners, then lowers into it. Maynard hands The Gimp's leash to Zed, then backs away.

MAYNARD
(to The Gimp)
Down!

The Gimp gets on its knees.

Maynard hangs back while Zed appraises the two men.

MAYNARD
Who's first?

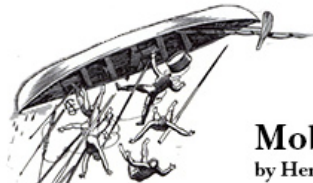
ZED
I ain't fer sure yet.

Then with his little finger, Zed does a silent "Benie, meany, miney, moe..." just his mouth mouthing the words and his finger going back and forth between the two.

Butch are Marsellus are terrified.

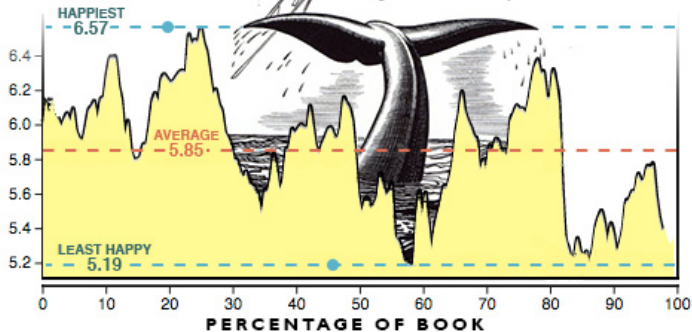
Maynard looks back and forth at the victims.

The Gimps's eyes go from one to the other inside the mask.



Moby-Dick

by Herman Melville



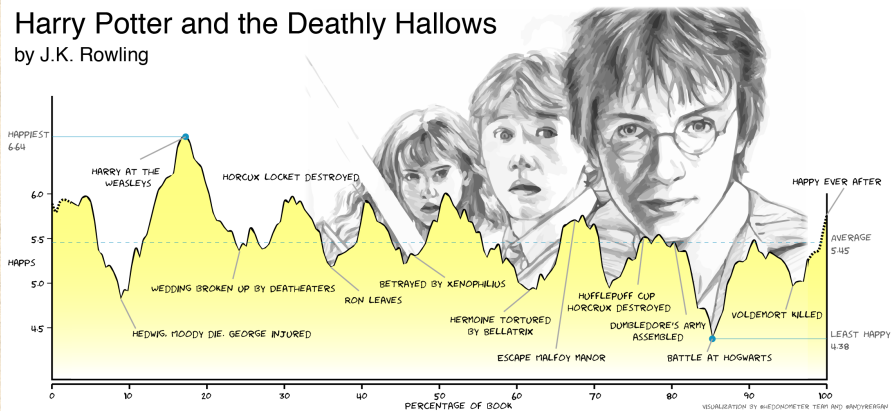
Moby-Dick illustration by Rockwell Kent, 1930

<http://whyfiles.org/2015/in-10-languages-happy-words-beat-sad-ones/>



Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows

by J.K. Rowling



VISUALIZATION BY @ECONOMETER TEAM AND @ANDYBERGAN
ILLUSTRATION BY KRESCH (STRAY-CATS, @HOTYRNE.COM)



“The emotional arcs of stories are dominated by six basic shapes” [↗](#)

Reagan, Mitchell, Danforth, and Dodds.

EPJ Data Science, 5, 31, 2016. ^[1]

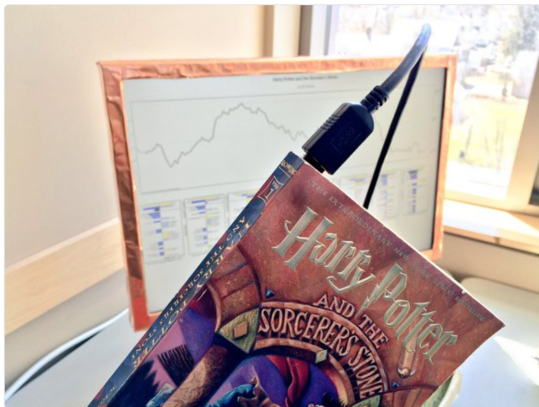


UVM 
@uvmvermont



Following

USB in a book? What is this wizardry? Check it out at the Student Research Conference creative lounge. [#uvmresearch](#)



RETWEETS

8

LIKES

14



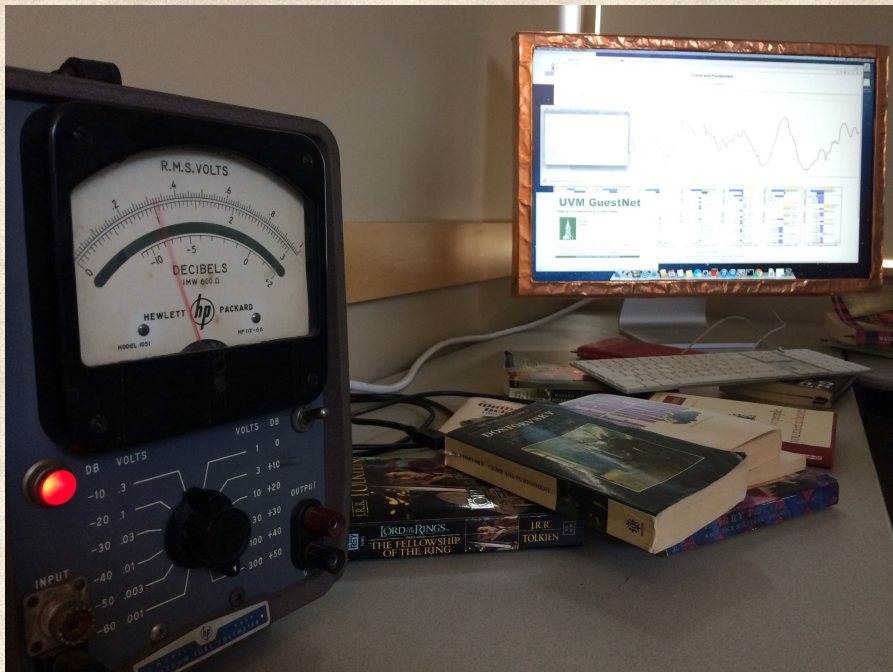
9:30 AM - 28 Apr 2016

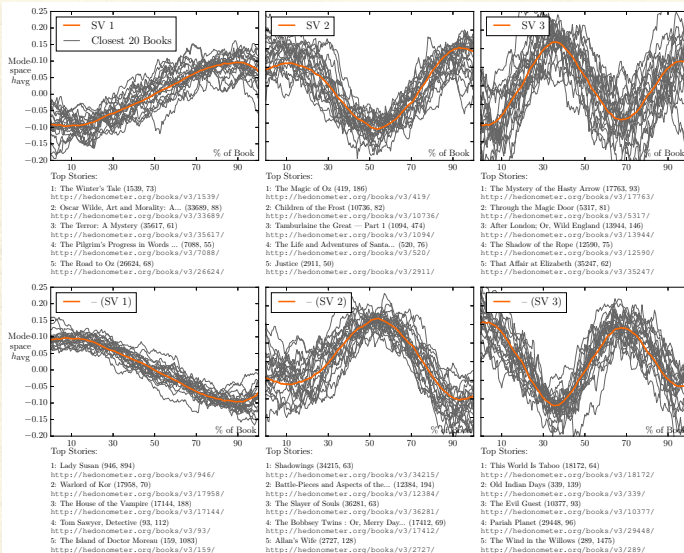
The PoCVerse
Meaning arcs
16 of 27

Stories

References







Six basic shapes: Rags-to-Riches, Man-in-a-hole, Cinderella, Tragedy, Icarus, Oedipus.



Selina's un-super Tuesday

Senator Crash Out

Selina suspends campaign

⏮ Skip Intro

Icarus (and then it's ups and downs over and over)



The story of Jermaine and Bret



Rags-to-rags. Full scene here.

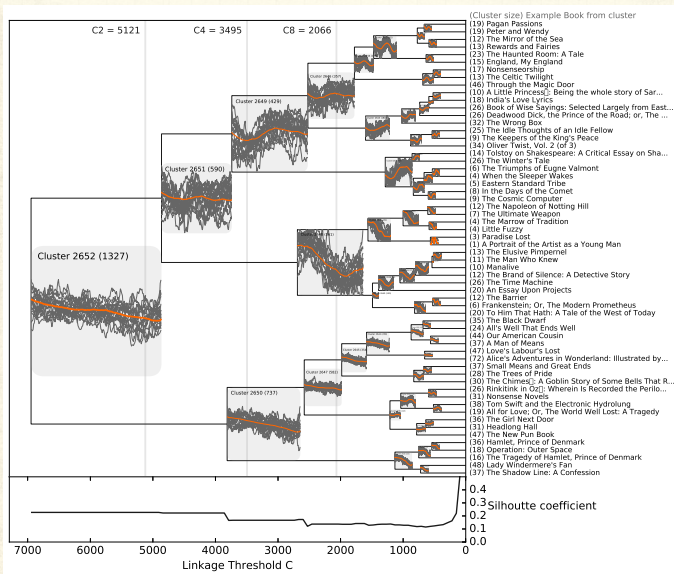


Emotional arcs for 1748 books from gutenberg.org

The PoCVerse
Meaning arcs
22 of 27

Stories

References



Stories with a few ups and downs most downloaded:

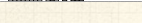
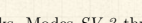
Mode	Mode Arc	N_m	N_m/N	DL Median ▼	DL Mean ▽	DL Variance	Download Distribution
SV 1		263	15.1%	295.0	644.3	2207201	
-SV 1		442	25.3%	337.5	636.0	913464	
SV 2		230	13.2%	314.0	630.3	1058916	
-SV 2		169	9.7%	296.0	569.1	780365	
SV 3		104	6.0%	298.0	874.5	7826797	
-SV 3		108	6.2%	298.0	748.7	2517822	
SV 4		108	6.2%	316.0	848.8	2763060	
-SV 4		50	2.9%	292.0	770.7	1546202	
SV 5		48	2.7%	280.0	421.7	182443	
-SV 5		48	2.7%	263.5	462.0	211259	

FIG. 6: Download statistics for SVD Modes with more than 2.5% of books. Modes *SV 3* through *-SV 4* (both polarities of modes 3 and 4) exhibit a higher average number of downloads and more variance than the rest.

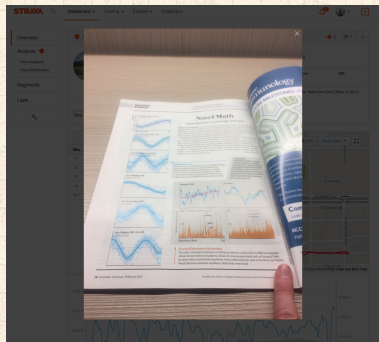
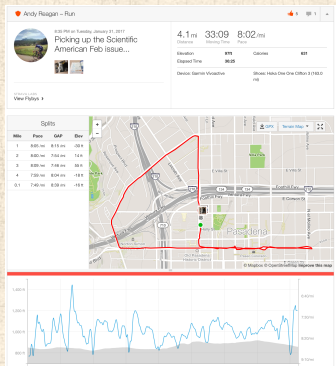


Another Great Moment in being Andy Reagan:

The PoCVerse
Meaning arcs
24 of 27

Stories

References





"So, in writing, there are six basic plots, and their sequels and derivative franchises."

The PoCVerse
Meaning arcs
25 of 27
Stories

References



Stories matter:

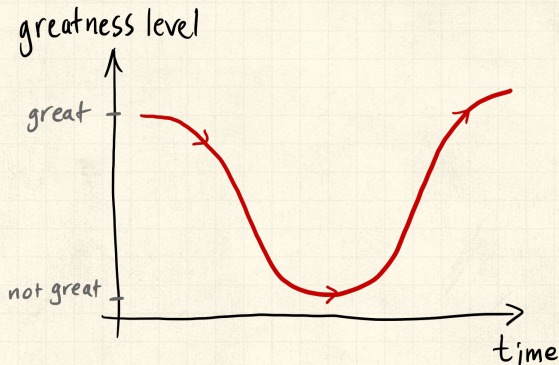
The PoCverse

Meaning arcs

26 of 27

Stories

References



Used in advertising for Reagan and Bush in 1980.



Template used by many others including Bill Clinton.



- [1] A. J. Reagan, L. Mitchell, C. M. Danforth, and P. S. Dodds.
The emotional arcs of stories are dominated by six basic shapes.

EPJ Data Science, 5:31, 2016.

Available at <https://arxiv.org/abs/1606.06820>. pdf ↗

