

## The Cycle of Oliver Quick's New Equilibrium in *Saltburn*: A Todorov's Narratology

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### Abstract:

This research aims to study the narrative of Oliver Quick in the movie *Saltburn* (2023) utilizing the theory of Structuralism, focusing on its narratology. Class inequality and the illusion of social mobility shaped Oliver Quick's, a middle-class man, narratives into deception to seize Catton's fortune, including their mansion in Saltburn, and examined how Oliver Quick's achieve his new luxurious life. To understand this study further, there is one research question arise from this research, that is, how does the narrative build around Oliver Quick help him to reach his goal? The theory of narratology by Todorov (1971) where a narrative being constructs into five stage of repeated cycle and how they functions will be utilized for this research, as it is suited for the researcher to analyze closely and it focuses on the narrative deeply. Qualitative textual analysis will be used to analyze the film's narrative and characters in order to find the data. As a result, this research studies Oliver's narrative through narratology theory showing how the narrative was utilized to build a new equilibrium cycle.

**Keywords:** social mobility; narrative; equilibrium

### Abstrak:

Penelitian ini tertuju pada naratif pada karakter utama dalam film *Saltburn* (2023) dengan menggunakan teori Strukturalisme yang berfokuskan pada naratologi. Ketidaksetaraan tingkat kelas ekonomi dan mobilitas sosial membentuk karakter Oliver Quick sebagai remaja kelas tingkat menengah dalam mengambil alih kekayaan keluarga Catton termasuk rumah mewah mereka di pedalaman Saltburn, serta menilik bagaimana Oliver dapat mencapai tujuan mewahnya. Untuk menelaah lebih dalam penelitian ini, terdapat satu masalah utama, yakni, bagaimana naratif Oliver dibentuk sehingga dapat membantu meraih tujuannya? Teori naratologi dari Todorov (1971) dimana naratif tersebut terbentuk menjadi lima tahapan berulang dan bagaimana fungsinya akan digunakan untuk penelitian ini yang dapat membantu penulis untuk menganalisa naratif secara lebih mendalam. Tekstual analisis kualitatif digunakan untuk meneliti naratif dan interaksi karakter yang terdapat dalam film sebagai data. Sebagai hasilnya, penelitian ini menunjukkan bagaimana naratif Oliver digunakan sebagai pondasi dalam membentuk ekuilibrium baru.

**Kata kunci:** mobilitas sosial; naratif; ekuilibrium



## INTRODUCTION

Film or movie is a spectacular display of drama in the form of a screenplay. Nicoll (1936) claims that “...and the cinema is sufficiently akin to the theatre to require, normally, stories of a cognate sort” indicating that movie is similar to a drama theater, film includes a narrative, character, setting and it has audience, except it is played inside of a theater on a big screen rather than on stage as drama does. Moreover, a movie can have more variety as it is not limited by stage and it offers a wide combination of settings. With its potential, a filmmaker could pour their creativity into play, and the main thing about film is its narrative. That said, Emerald Fennell’s *Saltburn* (2023) has her way to narrate the story of young Oliver Quick.

Released in 2023, *Saltburn* is a modern Gothic psychological thriller directed by Emerald Fennell. The narrative introduces its character, Oliver Quick, as an anti-hero who is seemingly a sympathetic and poor outsider, forcing the audience to see the lavish and eccentric world of the Catton family it led us to believe that Oliver is the victim of circumstances, he is astonished by the golden aura of his friend Felix Catton and his unattainable life. However, this fascination quickly warps into an incomprehensible and grotesque obsession. Oliver is driven more than simply by envy; he shows his true self to not only join the upper class, but rather to consume and eventually replace them.

Narrative is an important fundamental in building a story, as Fludernik (2009) suggested that “Narratives are based on cause-and-effect relationships that are applied to sequences of events”. The writer of *Saltburn*, Emerald Fennell, built Oliver’s narrative around his life. Multiple events are happening across *Saltburn*, which later on developed Oliver and eventually reach his goal. Naturally, this chain of events is precisely a cause-and-effect and not a random occurrence. Moreover, these events are a series of disruptions Oliver creates to sabotage the Catton. Each narrative functions as a step that helps Oliver develop as a parasite within the estate, which eventually reaches his goal.

Furthermore, the significance of this study’s narrative of Oliver Quick’s characters shows that a narrative not only applies to a literary work but also in real life. After all, everything narrative-related starts from real life, as Fludernik (2009) stated in her book, where narrative surrounds us as it is found wherever or when someone narrates about something. In other words, everything told is a narrative and it is an essence of life which

cannot be separated from one another. It also contributes to the discussion of literary devices, focusing on the value of narrative as it centers the storytelling and characterization of a literary work.

Overall, this study captures the importance of narrative in literary context and goes to show how it properly used in Emerald Fennell's *Saltburn* through Oliver Quick. The narrative of Oliver Quick is orchestrated and calculated by him designed to took over Catton's world. Studying Oliver's structure through narratological lens shows how each scenario is a step closer to attain his goal in acquiring the estate.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Previous Study

The previous study of this work critically explored its margin with various perspectives, yet the discussion of Oliver's narrative structure was limited, especially how unique his character. Costa & Sylvestre (2024), as an instance, discuss the Gothic theme of *Saltburn* and parallel it with Poe's work entitled "*The Fall of the House of Usher*". The article established how the Gothic genre continues its tradition in *Saltburn*, portrayed by the large atmospheric house of Saltburn itself. On the other hand, Lucy Esslemont's work in Aberdeen (2024, p.173) explores the connection between the film and an iconic artwork, "*The Garden of Earthly Delights*" by Bosch, as it significantly reflects the aesthetic of *Saltburn*. Many symbols and imagery found in *Saltburn* depict the nature of the character in the movie. It focuses on its art perspective and how Bosch's work correlates with the movie aesthetically. Though the previous study has discussed the Gothic elements and aesthetic, a narratological examination of Oliver's character arc offers a distinct perspective in examining his narrative, which emphasize the power of narrative construction in shaping his character.

### Theoretical Framework

#### *Narratology Theory*

The base theory of this study is narratology, an assembly of theories of narrative texts, events, spectacles, and images that tell a story, as mentioned in (Bal, 2017). This theory helps construct narratives systematically, such as narratology developed by Todorov (1971). It is a framework to analyze narrative as the main focus to gain a better comprehension of elements and events that develop the narrative as its goal. This research employed Todorov's (1971) theory of narratology, where there are five elements imbued



in narratives start from equilibrium, disruption, recognition, repair, and new equilibrium. The first cycle is called equilibrium, where the narrative is introduced in this current state and everything is normal and balanced. Disruption is the state which the equilibrium intervened by a certain event that breaks it, causing obstruction to its initial balance and set the narrative in action. Recognition is the moment of realization that the disruption interferes with the equilibrium and it needs to be dealt with. Repair is a process or an attempt to restore the balance and deal with the conflict ahead. It usually when the main plot advances as an act to fix the problems. New equilibrium is the last stage; it is either the same equilibrium as the first cycle or an entirely new equilibrium. Although, new equilibrium has been built since there are many changes throughout the narrative and the world. Finally, the disruption had been resolved and leads to its stable state once again.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This research utilizes a qualitative approach as it allows an in-depth research of the narratives thoroughly in Emerald Fennell's *Saltburn* and acts as its primary data source. The researcher analyzed the movie's dialogue and narrative to gain a deeper understanding of Oliver's experiences and challenges throughout the story. This study is supported by secondary sources relevant to the study, including academic articles, journals, and books. The researcher acts as the main instrument of this study and collecting the data through a close reading of the movie's script to uncover the narrative structure.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Implementation of Todorov's Narratology Structure in *Saltburn*

The theory offers a various amount of framework to work with, it typically leads to these five stages: the beginning of equilibrium, fractured by a disruption, recognition of said disruption, repair the damage caused by the disruption, and finally forming of a new equilibrium. In the movie *Saltburn*, Fennell naturally serves Todorov's structure on Oliver's character as well. The way Oliver's narrative constructed are revealed at the end of the movie, everything he orchestrate leading up to his main goal. The audience are not meant to see through Oliver's deed but they are led to believe that Oliver is a victim of circumstances. This study demonstrates how the structure applies in Fennell's carefully construct narrative of Oliver Quick.

### *Equilibrium*

The equilibrium began with the introduction of Oliver Quick, a freshman at Oxford University in the year of 2006. He is portrayed as a shy, socially awkward, lower-middle-class student who try to navigate his life amongst the elite. Oliver pretty much feels separate from the other students, judging how he was portrayed and only manage to make a friend with a nerdy type of student named Michael during the first night of dinner.



**Figure 1: Oliver and Michael first encounter 00:05:27**

This scene portrays how the first equilibrium is, it captures Oliver in this current state where he is most likely stuck in this lifestyle for the rest of his freshmen year. Nothing has set in action just yet, not until Oliver catch a glimpse of Felix Catton's circle. Felix Catton, unlike Oliver, is a pretty well-known and full of charm, everybody loves Felix. He is the embodiment Oliver sought exactly how he wanted to be, his ideal life. Oliver sees an opportunity and ready to set his plan in motion, this is the beginning of Oliver's game.

### *Disruption*

Shortly after Oliver set his sight onto Felix, he began to orchestrate an "encounter" with Felix. On his way, Oliver saw Felix by the side of the road and learn that Felix's bike had a puncture and had an appointment, so he offers his bike to Felix and sent him to his way. Naturally, Felix being very grateful to Oliver and shower him with compliments. However, this encounter is not just merely coincidence, Oliver had already planned this very moment for Felix to had a puncture and nail his rear tire. His grand scheme starts here. At the same night, Oliver and Michael went to the pub and coincidentally, Felix was there as well along with his friends and invite Oliver over to his table and left Michael.



**Figure 2: Oliver abandoning Michael to be with Felix's circle 00:13:35**

To celebrate Oliver in helping Felix, they had a toast which the group forced him to chug an unhealthy amount of beer that he could not afford. Recognizing another opportunity to get Felix's pity, he acts as if he could not pay and got himself in trouble with the barkeep. Felix notice this and helps Oliver indirectly by saying Oliver dropped some cash which obviously not the case. "Thought you might need a hand with these ones, mate. Oh, and you dropped this." (00:14:56) Felix claims that Oliver dropped some money, although, the fact is that it was Felix way of helping Oliver by using his own money to pay the drinks. In this instance, Oliver knew that Felix is the savior type. Willing to help a friend in need, he sees this as a chance to get close to him by selling Felix a sympathy. After their encounter at the pub, they became friend and hangout casually.

At some point, Oliver begun to open up about his current situation and talks about his family. "Mental health. And addiction and stuff... Dad was, kind of, dealing and stuff." (00:17:22) Oliver emphasize his family problem he had to deal with to Felix, creating an empathy on Felix. Oliver creates this very disruption to get a clear direction to where his goals are. The initial balance of the equilibrium has been broken by the disruption the way Oliver intended. This caused the event to start in motion, where he infiltrate the Catton territory starts from Felix.

### ***Recognition***

To get Felix's sympathy, Oliver took advantage of Felix and told him a complete fabrication of a story. He even goes so far and told Felix that his father died because of his addiction to alcohol. "Cracked his head on the pavement. Probably drunk, knowing Dad." (00:25:11) this only strengthen Oliver's story and make Felix to be more sympathetic to Oliver situation. Felix bought Oliver's story and led him to invites Oliver to his mansion over in Saltburn, Felix does not want Oliver to spend the summer in the current situation

he is in. Oliver recognizes this is the perfect opportunity for him to get even closer to his goal.



**Figure 3: Oliver's break down 00:25:11**

Oliver spends his summer break with the Catton; they grew fond of Oliver and intent to celebrate Oliver's upcoming birthday. At some point, Felix wanted to surprise Oliver with a road trip and having fun outside of the mansion. Unknowingly to Oliver, Felix drove him to back to his parent's house which he deliberately told Felix that it is a bad idea. Felix on the other hand, in hope to settle things with Oliver's mother who was very unhealthy and ask of Oliver to have a word with his mother. Only for Felix to finds out that Oliver story was utter fabrication and very disappointed in him. "Honestly, I don't even know where to start. I mean, you're a fucking liar, Ollie... Why would you lie?" (01:21:55) Oliver defend himself by saying that they could still be friend and forget everything that has happened that breaks their so-called bond. Oliver claims that he just wanted to be friend with Felix. It is an important scene because Oliver recognize that this significantly disrupt his flow and something had to be done.



**Figure 4: Felix smiling and having a conversation with Oliver's parents 01:20:32**

Felix's perception towards Oliver changes dramatically. Oliver is nothing but a liar to him and it sicken him. This recognition of disruption only upset Oliver because his cover is blown and breaks the equilibrium entirely. This is because Oliver relationship with Felix

is in crumble and to fix the issue, he had to cover his secret from everyone else. All these event leads to Oliver attempt to fix the equilibrium, albeit, with the new one.

### *Repair*

During this stage, the narrative started to get a bit hairy with its conflict. In an attempt to start the new equilibrium, his choice is to go on a rampage. Tonight is Oliver's birthday party, devastated with the current circumstances, he desperately seeks an apology to Felix whom tired of Oliver's façade. However, an opportunity comes and it is time for an explanation from Oliver side, he lashes out and admit that he lied his way in just to be friend with Felix. Oliver understand that everybody loves Felix and claims that everyone does the same thing for him. "Look, I just gave you what you wanted. Like everyone else does! Everyone puts on a show for Felix. So I'm sorry if my performance wasn't good enough." (01:30:24)

After their confrontation, Oliver handed out a champagne bottle to Felix. However, its content was already mixed with a poisonous substance before he confronts Felix. The purpose of this scheme is to weaken the Catton family, start by poisoning Felix to death. All the events revolving beforehand led him to this very moment, if anything, Felix finding out the truths about Oliver only sped up the process. The reason Oliver start with Felix was that he is beloved by everyone. Creating a chance to strike the Catton at their lowest. Naturally, the Catton are in the state of shock and now weaken.



**Figure 5: Felix lying unconsciously in the maze, morning after the party 01:35:50**

To cope with their feeling, Catton's are having a normal breakfast and act as if nothing were ever happened. This tension put everyone unease, especially Farleigh. He freaks out and questioning Oliver's presence. "Wait, does no one else find it weird?.. No one else finds that weird?" (01:40:10) in this scene, Oliver implies that Farleigh was indirectly involved in killing Felix by doing drugs. In shock, Farleigh was kicked out of the house by Sir James. This bluff by Olivier work in his favor since he got Farleigh out of

the vicinity, another one down. However, there are still obstacle Oliver needs to take out; Venetia, Sir James, and Elspeth.

After the funeral was held, he already set his eyes on Venetia whom in deep depression after losing someone very important to her. Oliver encounter Venetia in a bathtub by an accident. Venetia vent everything at Oliver saying things that Oliver barely knew Felix unlike others, yet he weeps away as if he knew Felix for years. She also mentioned that he resembles moth attracted to shiny things. “Hey, Ollie, Ollie, don’t be upset. I don’t think you’re a spider. I think you’re a moth. I’m right, aren’t I! Quiet. Harmless. Drawn to shiny things. Batting up against the window... just desperate to get in.” (01:49:27) this accusation was true, Oliver was stunned by the life of the upper-class, that is why he befriend Felix in the first place. He put on a show to earn his place in Felix’s life. He sapped away their life and consume them to become one himself. Later in the morning, Venetia body was found by the bathtub full of blood, turns out Venetia cut herself with the razor placed by Oliver right beside her. She cannot live without Felix, Oliver knew of this and killing Venetia indirectly by making her cut herself.



**Figure 6: Venetia lying in the bathtub 01:51:47**

However, Oliver’s plan had to put on hold because Sir James bribe him to leave the mansion immediately without Elspeth knowledge who has grown fond of Oliver, saying that this is the moment for the family to mourn. Oliver left and it takes fifteen years to carry on his plan after he read about Sir James passing. Shortly after, Oliver had an unexpected encounter with Elspeth at a coffee shop. Elspeth then feeling nostalgic converse with Oliver and invites him once more at Saltburn. Oliver’s patience paid off since it is just Elspeth left and is easily manipulated her to make Oliver inherit their fortune. This marks the beginning of the new equilibrium as he inherited Catton’s fortune including Saltburn all to himself.

### *New Equilibrium*

The start of the new equilibrium starts here; Elspeth is unfortunately fall ill and Oliver had to take care of her. Knowing Oliver however, it is not enough, he had to ensure that Elspeth wound up the same as the other Catton. Before declaring his victory, he plugged off all the life support Elspeth needs to stay alive confess everything to Elspeth before her passing and admit that Oliver loathed them and make themselves an easy target. “I hated all of you... And you made it so easy.” (02:01:15)



**Figure 7: Oliver and four stones with each family member’s name on it 02:05:29**

The narrative ends with Oliver dance in an unusual manner, naked all around the mansion, declaring that he had won in gaining the life he wanted for years. He had achieved his new equilibrium and it ended with a happy ending on Oliver’s side. Successfully face all the disruptions and put everything into balance in his life once again, surrounded with harmony.

## CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the movie *Saltburn* demonstrated Todorov's five stages of narrative structure through Oliver point of view. It confirms that the narrative is not just a random occurrence but constructed chain of events, it is a journey formed to achieve Oliver's ultimate goal that is Saltburn. This study discovers Oliver from a sympathetic students disrupting his own equilibrium to acquire a new one through fabrication story and a critical recognition of other form of disruption out of Oliver's control which he needs to repair. To restore the balance once more, he orchestrated to consume the entirety of Catton and successfully form a new equilibrium where Oliver achieves a new stable life.

This study shows that Oliver's structure is the primary instrument of his success, how Fennell build the narrative surround him is calculated. This research focused solely on how the narrative is built around Oliver, there are still plenty of ground to cover in future studies, such as what could drive Oliver to his action and his motive whether it is



psychologically or driven by class. All in all, this study covers how Todorov's structure applies on Oliver's character in *Saltburn* and highlight the importance of narrative in building a character.

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