

Case Study - “Uncanny Emmett Till”

Step 0: This poem is from *Games for Children* (Milkweed Editions, 2025). When reading poems from a book, look for context leading up to the poem. There are 3 poems before “Uncanny Emmett Till”—how do they prepare you for this poem? What are they about? Some poems have paratext: materials surround the main text like footnotes or endnotes that frame or guide the reading of the poem. *Games for Children* has a notes section, and “Uncanny Emmett Till” has an extensive entry. See the next page for that entry.

The poem also has a “legend” or “key.”

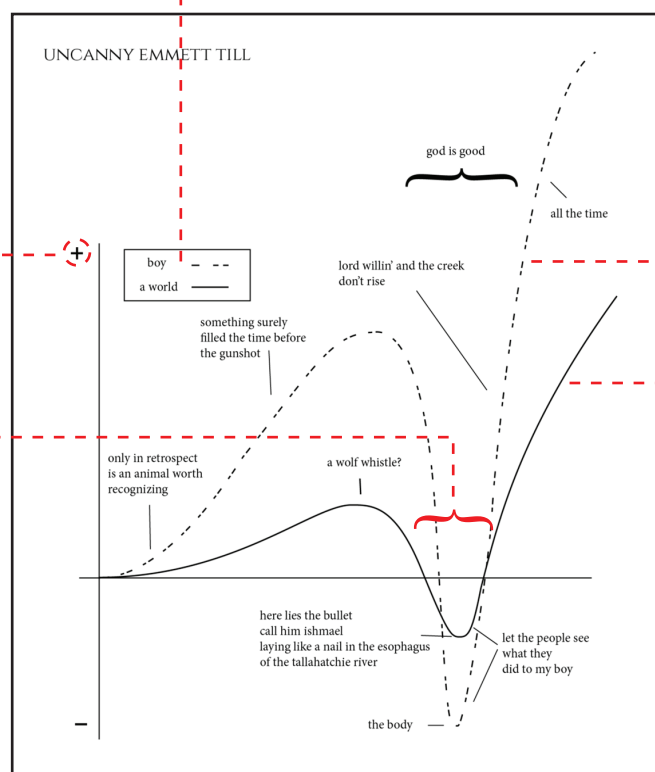
Try reading the poem aloud. Have someone mark the order you choose (or mark it yourself)

We know from the notes what the graph represents. Do lines correspond to categories from the original graph?

Do parts of the narrative correspond to “positive” or “negative?”

What if we imagine the graph as a drawing of a river?

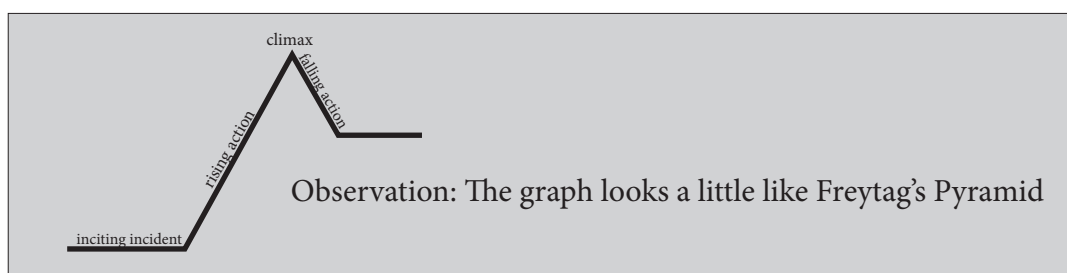
Does the poem work “out of order?”



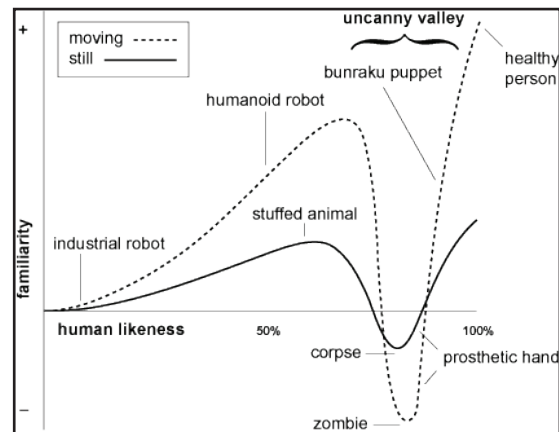
Graph lines might function as one set of reading orders. Do they seem like the “right” ones? Why or why not?

What is the effect on you, emotionally, with having this story told with a graph. What are associations you have with graphs?

Are there any parts of the poem which seem like they might be in a “different voice” from others?



Observation: The graph looks a little like Freytag's Pyramid



UNCANNY EMMETT TILL

Image created by author, based on the Wikimedia Commons image (shown here) created by user Smurrayinchester, which itself was based on the original image created by Masahiro Mori and Karl MacDorman.

A philosophical concept first described by robotics professor Masahiro Mori and widely used in the fields of robotics and computer graphics, the uncanny valley concerns human representation. It posits that people are most comfortable when they know for certain that something they are looking at is definitely not human, or when they have been fully convinced something that is not human is human.

Represented on the graph: on the far left are visuals easily identifiable as not human. On the far right are representations that look so human that we are “tricked” into believing we are looking at a true human (think: very well done computer graphics from a Marvel movie). The dip—the valley—are things that are not quite human enough.

Emmett Till (July 25, 1941–August 28, 1955) was a Black child who, in 1955, was accused by Carolyn Bryant of whistling at her in her family’s grocery store. Bryant was 21 at the time; Till, 14.

Roy Bryant, Carolyn’s husband, and his two brothers Leslie Milam and J. W. Milam, abducted Till. After three days, Till’s body was found in the Tallahatchie River. Two Black publications, *Jet* magazine and *The Chicago Defender*, published photos of Till’s mutilated body with the permission of his mother Mamie Till. She was quoted to have said: “Let the world see what I’ve seen.”

Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam were acquitted by an all-white jury and, protected from re-prosecution by double jeopardy, admitted to the murder in a 1956 *Look* magazine interview.

In June of 2022, Till’s family discovered a warrant addressed to Roy Bryant, J. W. Milam, and Carolyn Bryant that said the three “did willfully, unlawfully and feloniously and without lawful authority, forcibly seize and confine and kidnap” Emmett Till. While Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam had passed away (in 1994 and 1980 respectively), Carolyn Bryant was never prosecuted—the warrant notes that Bryant was never arrested because she could not be located. In August of 2022, a grand jury in Mississippi declined to indict Bryant, citing a lack of evidence. Less than a year later, Bryant died (April 25, 2023).