THEORY AND INTERPRETATION OF NARRATIVE
James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, Series Editors
Experiencing Fiction

Judgments, Progressions, and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative

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In memoriam
Sheldon Sacks and Wayne C. Booth
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In the spring of 1973, when I was a very green M.A. student at the University of Chicago, I walked into the first session of Sheldon Sacks’s course in the Eighteenth-Century Novel and heard him ask a question that has stayed with me ever since: “Do we read the same books?” Sacks wanted to point to a paradox: While most of us in that room, including him, would instinctively answer yes (critical orthodoxy in 1973 was much different than it is in 2007), once we set about discussing the meaning of any one novel—Sacks’s example that day was *Pride and Prejudice*—our interpretations would suggest the opposite conclusion. We students started to express the meaning in thematic terms: *Pride and Prejudice* is a statement about marriage in an acquisitive society; it’s a warning about the risks of putting too much stock in first impressions; it’s an exploration of the vices named by the title. Sacks surprised me and, I believe, most of my classmates, not by explicitly disagreeing with these accounts but by saying that they all missed something crucial to the experience of reading Austen’s novel: the pleasure and satisfaction it offered in the culminating marriage of Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy. In my case at least, the surprise was also a revelation: for the first time in my five years of formal study of literature someone was putting the experience of reading at the center of the interpretive enterprise. As the course went on, it opened up for me an entirely new way of doing criticism that made it both more appealing and more challenging: in this criticism my experiences as a reader matter a great deal and so do yours—but both mine and yours are responsible to the text as it has been constructed by an author who guides us to experience it in one way rather than another.
Experiencing Fiction is my attempt to lay out my principles and methods for connecting readerly experience to interpretation and theory, and to model the interpretive practice that follows from these principles and methods. My endeavor has its roots in Sacks’s class (and its continuation in a three-quarter seminar the next year) and in my later engagement with the work of Wayne C. Booth—though neither Sacks nor Booth would agree with everything I argue here. To put this all another way, Experiencing Fiction is my effort to provide a persuasive affirmative answer to Sacks’s initial question thirty-some years later when presumably I’ve learned a few more things.

Over time I’ve reformulated Sacks’s question as I have encountered other takes on it. Both the empirical evidence provided by almost any poll of randomly selected readers and the theoretical evidence provided by post-structuralist thinking demonstrate that we have excellent reasons for concluding that, left to their own devices, readers do not respond in the same ways to the same books. Consequently, I began posing the question as “can we read the same books?” Then, as I became increasingly interested in accounting for the multi-leveled nature of our experience of narratives (we respond intellectually, emotionally, ethically, aesthetically), I came to articulate the question as “can we experience the same books in similar ways?” These changes in the overarching question, then, acknowledge the insights of post-structuralist theory without becoming committed to post-structuralist modes of interpretation, because I also have accumulated evidence throughout my many years of discussing narrative with others that often different readers do share (not totally but nontrivially) responses to the same narrative. I do not want to start, as Sacks did, with the underlying assumption that readers always have the same experience of a book, but I also do not want to start by assuming that language is inevitably indeterminate or that our reading experiences are wholly determined by our interpretive communities, or that they are only a function of the way ideology controls the production, dissemination, and consumption of discourse. Instead, I assume that, though shared experiences are far from inevitable, they are both possible and desirable, and from that assumption, as I note above in slightly different terms, I seek to identify and elaborate the theoretical principles underlying a viable and valuable reading practice that follows from that assumption and to exemplify the consequences of that practice in the analysis of individual narratives.

Although the theory behind the reading practice has multiple elements, I have chosen to focus here on the two concepts that I believe are most central to it: (1) judgments, which I break down into three main types, inter-
pretive, ethical, and aesthetic; and (2) progressions, which I break down into twelve aspects that I describe in the Introduction. One consequence of this focus is that I bring in other concepts of narrative theory such as character, voice, focalization, and temporality not as part of a pre-existing checklist for all analyses but as they are relevant to the examination of judgments and progressions in my chosen texts. I believe that judgments and progressions are central to accounting for the possibility of shared experience because they are closely tied to the very concept of narrativity (that which makes a given text a narrative), and because they both depend on and influence every other element of narrative. I have also found that the best way to demonstrate their centrality, and, thus, the powers of the reading practice I want to advocate, is by formulating theoretical principles and then employing them in interpretations that demonstrate, test, and refine those principles.

Indeed, as I shall explain at greater length in chapter 3, I believe that the best test of the theoretical approach is its consequences for our understanding of individual narratives. For that reason, the Introduction focuses on the key principles about progressions and judgments that will allow me to get the detailed analysis of individual narratives underway. This strategy, in turn, means that I defer two other theoretical discussions until later chapters. The first, in chapter 3, characterizes my project as the development of a “rhetorical poetics” of fiction, and it offers accounts of how the reading practice that follows from it relates to the one I learned during my training at Chicago many years ago and to the currently widespread practice of what I call cultural thematics. The second, in chapter 6, expands and refines an aspect of this rhetorical poetics whose complex nature deserves special attention even after several exemplifications of the reading practice: aesthetic judgments and their relation to interpretive and ethical judgments.

Although focused on progressions and judgments, the interpretive analyses are not designed to give a blow-by-blow account of the experience of reading or even to offer comprehensive accounts of every element of each narrative. Instead, these analyses aim to give articulate expression to the multiple layers of what is sometimes explicit but just as often tacit, intuitive, and even inchoate in our reading experience and to do so through the focus on issues of judgment and progression that each narrative makes particularly salient. Given these analytical purposes, I have selected a group of ten fictions that collectively constitute a very broad range of interpretive challenges and an equally broad sample of the ways in which narratives deploy judgments and progressions to affect (and,
indeed, to effect) our experience of them. Furthermore, I divide these ten fictions into two groups, one whose members have a high degree of narrativity and the other whose members synthesize narrativity with what I call lyricality (that which makes something lyric) or portraiture (that which makes something a character sketch).

Thus, after the Introduction, which makes extensive use of Ambrose Bierce’s very short fable, “The Crimson Candle,” to illustrate seven theses about narrative judgments, Part One looks at four different narratives with four very different progressions. Since a focus on progression means paying attention to the movement of a narrative from beginning to middle through ending, I pay some attention to all three parts in my discussion of each of these novels. Nevertheless, my own progression in Part One goes from primary attention to beginning and early middle in Jane Austen’s *Persuasion*, to beginning and middle in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, and to ending in Edith Wharton’s “Roman Fever.” My fourth narrative, Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*, makes judgment itself a major thematic issue, while employing a tour de force progression the effect of which depends heavily on a disclosure that is delayed until almost the ending. Consequently, the analysis of *Atonement* calls upon most of the tools I develop in Part One.

Part Two then looks at how our experiences and our corresponding accounts of judgments and progression change when we leave the realm of texts dominated by narrativity and encounter hybrid forms that use principles of both narrativity and lyricality or narrativity and portraiture. My first two examples, Ernest Hemingway’s “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” and Sandra Cisneros’s “Woman Hollering Creek,” are lyric narratives, though I pair them because they demonstrate two significantly different ways to synthesize elements of narrativity and lyricality into an effective hybrid. My second examples, Alice Munro’s “Prue” and Ann Beattie’s “Janus,” are what I call portrait narratives. These two stories by North American women written in the 1980s (reproduced in the Appendix) do not show any significant change in their women protagonists’ situations, but effectively use narratives as part of the gradual unfolding of those protagonists’ characters. In the final chapter of Part Two, I turn to Robert Frost’s “Home Burial,” because the powerful experience its offers provides a provocative demonstration of what a skillful poet can do with progression and judgment in a lyric narrative hybrid. In the Epilogue I reflect further on the relation between the rhetorical poetics of fiction and this corpus of narratives, and I offer brief accounts of how this poetics could be extended to both metafiction and to nonfictional narrative.
In shifting from a descriptive (do we read the same books?) to a normative question (can we experience the same books in similar ways?), I also take on the obligation of demonstrating what is to be gained by an affirmative answer. My brief answer here, which I elaborate in different ways throughout the book, is that attending to the various layers of our experience (especially the intellectual, the emotive, the ethical, and the aesthetic) and recognizing the sources of those experiences in authorial strategy and textual phenomena allow us to understand and value the power of fictional narrative. The reading practice and the associated critical approach ultimately want to give a plausible account of fictional narrative’s ability to reinforce, extend, challenge, or sometimes change what we know, think, believe, and value—and to that extent, its ability to reinforce, challenge, or even change who we are.

*Experiencing Fiction* is also a fifth chapter in my ongoing effort to write a comprehensive account of the rhetorical theory of narrative. This book both draws on and seeks to go beyond the inquiries and conclusions in the previous four chapters: *Worlds from Words*, a study of style; *Reading People, Reading Plots*, a study of character and narrative progression; *Narrative as Rhetoric*, an articulation of the general theory and an illustration of how it would solve a number of interpretive problems; and *Living to Tell about It*, a study of character narration that also develops a more systematic approach to rhetorical ethics. This book seeks to expand the insights in *Reading People, Reading Plots* about narrative progression by elaborating the concept in several ways, and it seeks to develop much further that strand of the argument in *Living to Tell about It* concerned with the interrelations between (rhetorical) ethics and (rhetorical) aesthetics.

In the course of writing those four previous books, I have staged encounters with other theoretical positions from deconstruction to semiotics, from psychoanalysis to cognitive constructivism. I do not adopt a similar strategy here for two reasons. (1) Although I have no illusions that whoever reads this book will also have read the previous four, I have not found it productive to return to the same theoretical ground and till it once more. I invite those readers who would like more direct comparisons with other approaches to look at the earlier books. (2) As noted above, I believe that the best test of my rhetorical poetics as a way to account for the possibility of shared reading experiences lies in my engagements with individual narratives, and, I therefore want to keep the focus on those engagements.
Since I can locate the genesis of this book in an event that happened more than thirty years ago, it is not surprising that I have more people to thank than even the increasingly lenient rules of decorum for the genre of Acknowledgments will allow. Consequently, I focus primarily on those whose influence has been more direct and more recent. My research assistant, Elizabeth Marsch, has provided significant material assistance through her sharp-eyed copyediting and her thoughtful indexing. Lecture audiences at Peking University, the University of Tampere, Aarhus University, the University of Hamburg, the University of Bergen, the Centre for Advanced Study in Oslo as well as at Case Western University, the University of South Florida, and Auburn University have offered questions and comments that led me to rethink and revise important points of theory and interpretation. I am especially grateful for the invitations and responses from my hosts at those institutions, Dan Shen, Pekka Tammi and Markku Lehtimaki, Henrik Skov Nielsen and Stefan Iversen, Harry Muller, Randi Koppen, Willy Østreng and Jakob Lothe, Gary Lee Stonum, Susan Mooney, and Miriam Marty Clark. At the Centre for Advanced Study, I had the opportunity to try out my ideas with and learn from an excellent research team on Narrative Theory and Analysis assembled by Jakob Lothe: Jeremy Hawthorn, Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan, Beatrice Sandberg, J. Hillis Miller, Susan Suleiman, and Anniken Greve. I owe a debt to many friends and colleagues in the Society for the Study of Narrative Literature, especially the participants in the Contemporary Narratology Seminars, whose sessions continue to provide a wonderful environment in which to try out ideas. For careful readings of several parts of this manuscript and for almost thirty years of conversation, much of it conducted in the margins of my drafts, I am deeply grateful to my friend and colleague, James L. Battersby. My successor as chair of the English Department at Ohio State, Valerie Lee, has been so supportive that I would hope she would stay in the job until I retire—if my own experience in the chair’s office didn’t make me believe that I would be hoping for cruel and unusual punishment. My colleagues in Project Narrative at Ohio State, Frederick Aldama, David Herman, and Brian McHale, are so smart, generous, and funny that I can’t imagine a better place to be doing narrative theory. I have been very fortunate in the Press’s choices of readers for the manuscript, Harry Shaw and David H. Richter, who provided such healthy combinations of receptivity and skepticism that I couldn’t help but feel motivated to write a better book. Above all, I am grateful to my friend and fellow rhetorical
theorist, Peter J. Rabinowitz, whose ideas and ways of thinking about both narrative and theory have significantly influenced mine, and whose incisive reading of the manuscript—and many of its revisions—has improved it immeasurably. Once again, Peter has given me a vision of what ideal rhetorical reading looks like.

This book would not have been written at all, if I were not so fortunate as to live in the environment of generosity and thoughtfulness, kindness and understanding, laughter and love provided by my wife, Betty Menaghan. Being able to share experiences with her has been the greatest blessing of my life.

In living with this book over the last several years, I have spent many hours thinking about my intellectual and personal debts to my two extraordinary graduate school teachers at the University of Chicago, Sheldon Sacks and Wayne C. Booth. These debts go beyond anything I can register in this Preface or in my occasional direct discussions of their work in the later chapters. So I will just say that they taught me not just bodies of knowledge and ways of reading but what intellectual inquiry was all about: the pleasures and challenges of engaging with literature one cares about, the value of grappling with significant questions one does not have the answers to, the joys of arguing not to win (or not only to win) but to learn. For these lessons, and so much else, I dedicate this book to their memories.

Earlier versions of much of the material in this book have previously appeared in print, and though I have revised much of it, I am grateful for permissions from the publishers to draw on it here:


“Prue,” from *The Moons of Jupiter and Other Poems* by Alice Munro, copyright © 1982 by Alice Munro. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc. and of the Virginia Barber Literary Agency.


Judgments, Engagements, and Narrative as Rhetoric

When we first begin reading narratives (or have them read to us), we learn both that they typically have good guys (or gals), e.g., Cinderella and the Prince, and bad guys (or gals), e.g., Cinderella’s stepmother and her stepsisters, and that the narrative itself signals which characters are which. In one version of “Cinderella,” for example, the narrator tells us on the first page that Cinderella is a young woman “of unparalleled goodness and sweetness of temper, which she took from her mother, who was the best creature in the world” and that her stepmother is “the proudest and most haughty woman who ever lived.” To put the effects of the narrator’s comments in the terms that David Hare uses in the first epigraph, we become engaged on the side of Cinderella before the narrative introduces the nature of the conflict implicit in this contrasting description (and in our understanding that we are reading a fairy tale). We become engaged on Cinderella’s side because, to borrow the terms that Gérard Genette uses in the second epigraph, we judge Cinderella positively and her stepmother negatively—we value her traits of character and do not value those of her stepmother. As “Cinderella” proceeds beyond its first paragraph, the narrative not only reinforces these initial judgments but also relies on them to influence significantly our hopes and desires for Cinderella.
to escape from the tyranny of her stepmother. When we become more advanced readers and encounter more sophisticated narratives, we meet characters for whom the simple labels “good guys” and “bad guys” are no longer adequate, but we continue to make ethical judgments of them and, indeed, of the authors and narrators who tell us about them. One of the main arguments of this book will be that these judgments are as crucial for the kinds of engagements we make with these sophisticated narratives as our judgments in “Cinderella” are for our engagement with the fairy tale.

To take another example, consider this passage from Ring Lardner’s “Haircut,” in which Lardner’s narrator, Whitey the barber, tells his new customer from out of town a little about Jim Kendall and his wife:

As I say, she’d of divorced Jim, only she seen that she couldn’t support herself and the kids and she was always hopin’ that some day Jim would cut out his habits and give her more than two or three dollars a week.

They was a time when she would go to whoever he was workin’ for and ask them to give her his wages, but after she done this once or twice, he beat her to it by borrowin’ most of his pay in advance. He told it all round town, how he had outfoxed his Missus. He cer-tainly was a caution! (25)

What stands out here is not only that we judge Jim much more negatively than Whitey does (we recognize Jim’s selfishness and meanness; Whitey regards him as an entertaining trickster), but also that we judge Whitey negatively too (though not mean and selfish himself, he is so morally imperceptive that he does not recognize Jim’s meanness and selfishness). But as we judge this character and this narrator negatively, we are also approving the moral vision of the implied Ring Lardner because we feel he is guiding us to make those judgments. In addition, we are tacitly registering Lardner’s skill in communicating these judgments to us while using only Whitey’s discourse. Consequently, our engagement is similar to but more complicated than it is in “Cinderella.” We regard Kendall as cruel and therefore dangerous, Whitey as obtuse and perhaps therefore dangerous, and Lardner as a skilled practitioner with whom we’d like to collaborate further.

We could of course continue up the ladder of sophisticated narratives to look at cases in which our moral discriminations among characters and our corresponding engagements are much more nuanced than they are in “Haircut”—and even to narratives that don’t seem to give sufficient signals
for us to make clear and firm discriminations. Later in this book I will climb that ladder, but now I want to pause at Lardner’s rung because it is sufficiently high to allow me to lay out the threefold thesis of this book. (1) The judgments we readers of narrative make about characters and tellers (both narrators and authors) are crucial to our experience—and understanding—of narrative form. By form I mean the particular fashioning of the elements, techniques, and structure of a narrative in the service of a set of readerly engagements that lead to particular final effects on the implied audience.1 (2) Narrative form, in turn, is experienced through the temporal process of reading and responding to narrative. Consequently, to account for that experience of form we need to focus on narrative progression, that is, the synthesis of both the textual dynamics that govern the movement of narrative from beginning through middle to end and the readerly dynamics—what I have so far been calling our engagement—that both follow from and influence those textual dynamics. (3) As key elements of narrative experience, narrative judgments and narrative progressions are responsible for the various components of that experience, especially the significant interrelation of form, ethics, and aesthetics—even as judgments and progressions do not totally explain everything we might want to know about ethics and aesthetics.

This threefold thesis itself is best understood within a broader rhetorical approach to narrative that can be sketched through a discussion of its five main principles.2 The first principle is that narrative can be fruitfully understood as a rhetorical act: somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened. In fictional narrative, the rhetorical situation is doubled: the narrator tells her story

1. By “readerly” here I mean something different from Roland Barthes (1974) in his distinction between “readerly” (lisible) and “writerly” (scriptible) texts. Barthes uses “readerly” to refer to texts whose meanings appear fixed and conventional and “writerly” to refer to texts whose meanings are open-ended, I use “readerly” to refer simply to the activities of audiences. In the pages that follow, I often discuss “readerly dynamics” as a major element of narrative progressions.

2. The following discussion draws on material from the introduction to my previous book, Living to Tell about It, an introduction that also looks at what I call “redundant telling,” the recounting of events and information that the audience already knows. Readers familiar with that introduction will find the next few paragraphs an instance of redundant telling. In Living to Tell I also address the debate about the utility of the concept of the implied author (38–49). I argue that the concept is a good fit for the rhetorical approach, and redefine it as “a streamlined version of the real author, an actual or purported subset of the real author’s capacities, traits, attitudes, beliefs, values, and other properties that play a role in the construction of the particular text” under consideration (45). In Experiencing Fiction, my references to “the author” and to the last names of the particular authors whose works I discuss are references to the implied author defined in this way. If I want to refer to the author as historical figure, I shall use the term “flesh-and-blood author.”
to her narratee for her purposes, while the author communicates to her audience for her own purposes both that story and the narrator’s telling of it. As I argue in Living to Tell about It, recognizing the consequences of this doubled communicative situation (one text, more than one teller, more than one audience, more than one purpose) is fundamental to a rhetorical understanding of character narration. (In nonfictional narrative, the extent to which the narrative situation is doubled will depend on the extent to which the author signals her difference from or similarity to the “I” who tells the story.) In the fictional “Haircut,” Lardner uses Whitey’s telling of his story about Jim’s exploits and his “accidental” death to the new customer as a way to convey a quite different story to his (that is, Lardner’s) implied audience. While Whitey’s purpose is to entertain the customer with his tales of Jim’s pranks and his unfortunate end, Lardner’s is to convey the chilling consequences that follow from the inability of Whitey—and the group of men he represents—to recognize either the depth of Jim’s cruelty or the very rough justice Doc Stair and Paul Dickson mete out separately and together.

Second, the approach assumes a recursive relationship (or feedback loop) among authorial agency, textual phenomena (including intertextual relations), and reader response. In other words, for the purposes of interpreting narratives, the approach assumes that texts are designed by authors in order to affect readers in particular ways; that those designs are conveyed through the words, techniques, structures, forms, and dialogic relations of texts as well as the genres and conventions readers use to understand them; and that reader responses are a function of and, thus, a guide to how designs are created through textual and intertextual phenomena. At the same time, reader responses are also a test of the efficacy of those designs.

Third, the model of audience behind the approach’s conception of reader response is the one developed by Peter J. Rabinowitz that I have modified slightly (Rabinowitz 1977; Phelan 1996: 135–53). This model identifies four main audiences: the flesh-and-blood or actual reader, the authorial audience (the author’s ideal reader or what I have called the implied reader above), the narrative audience (the observer position within the narrative world that the flesh-and-blood reader assumes), and the narratee (the audience addressed by the narrator). The model assumes that the flesh-and-blood (or actual) reader seeks to enter the authorial audience; hence, when I speak of what “we” readers do in response to a narrative text, I am referring to the activities of the authorial audience. In “Haircut,” I as individual flesh-and-blood reader am distinct from the customer in
Whitey’s barber chair, the narratee, but I enter both the narrative audience, which believes in the real existence of Whitey, the customer, Jim and the other characters (hence, the narrative audience is in the position of observing Whitey tell the story to the customer), and the authorial audience. The authorial audience recognizes Lardner’s careful communication through Whitey’s generally haphazard speech. The concept of the flesh-and-blood reader allows the rhetorical approach to recognize that differences among individual readers can lead to their different responses and interpretations, while the concept of the authorial audience allows the rhetorical approach to consider the ways in which readers can share the experience of reading narrative. Indeed, sometimes, the rhetorical theorist will use differences among flesh-and-blood readers as a way of identifying difficulties in the construction of a progression, a way, that is, of pointing to the sources of interpretive disagreement in the textual dynamics.

Methodologically, the feedback loop among author, text, and reader means that the rhetorical critic may begin the interpretive inquiry from any one of these points on the rhetorical triangle, but the inquiry will necessarily consider how each point both influences and can be influenced by the other two. With “Haircut,” we might start with the way the text juxtaposes Jim’s behavior and Whitey’s judgments (“He told it all around town how he’d outfoxed his missus. He certainly was a caution!”) in order to call attention to the incongruity between them. From there, it’s a short step to Lardner as the designer of that incongruity and to the audience’s judgments of Jim, Whitey, and Lardner himself. Alternatively, we might start with our overall sense that neither Jim nor Whitey is a character to be admired and then return to the text for the sources of that effect and then move from those sources to their designer. Or we might start with Lardner’s agency, focusing on his clear judgments of his narrator and his protagonist, then moving to the textual phenomena by which he conveys those judgments despite his not having a spokesperson for his views in the narrative itself, and finally, considering the consequences of those judgments for readerly response to Jim’s behavior and Whitey’s reports of it.

Fourth, audiences will develop interests and responses of three kinds, each related to a particular component of the narrative: mimetic, thematic, and synthetic. Responses to the mimetic component involve an audience’s interest in the characters as possible people and in the narrative world as like our own, that is, hypothetically or conceptually possible; responses to the mimetic component include our evolving judgments and emotions, our desires, hopes, expectations, satisfactions, and disappointments. Responses to the thematic component involve an interest in the ideational function
of the characters and in the cultural, ideological, philosophical, or ethical issues being addressed by the narrative. Responses to the synthetic component involve an audience’s interest in and attention to the characters and to the larger narrative as artificial constructs. The relationship among an audience’s relative interests in these different components will vary from narrative to narrative depending on the nature of its progression. Some narratives are dominated by mimetic interests, some by thematic, and others by synthetic, but developments in the progression can generate new relations among those interests. Furthermore, there is no necessary reason why a narrative cannot make two or even all three interests important. Still, a few generalizations are possible. In most realistic narratives, the audience has a tacit awareness of the synthetic while it focuses on the mimetic and the thematic components, but, as metafiction since *Don Quixote* has taught us, that tacit awareness can always be converted into something explicit. Furthermore, in metafiction that foregrounds the synthetic component from the beginning, the mimetic typically recedes into the background. In “Haircut,” our main interest is in the mimetic and thematic components with the synthetic remaining in the background. The story is chilling both because we judge Jim, Whitey, and the others as if they were real people and because we recognize that Lardner also wants us to view them as representative inhabitants of the American small town in the 1920s. As noted above, the story’s aesthetic effectiveness depends on Lardner’s ability to foreground the mimetic—Whitey’s story to the customer, told with artlessness and moral obtuseness—while tacitly using the details of that story in the synthetic construction of a very artful and thematically significant narrative.

Fifth, the approach assumes that the rhetorical act of telling a story entails a multileveled communication from author to audience, one involving the audience’s intellect, emotions, and values (both moral and aesthetic), and that these levels interact with each other. In “Haircut,” we interpret Lardner’s meanings behind Whitey’s communication, and then we judge the characters and become emotionally engaged with them; at the same time, we respond to the artfulness of Lardner’s design. Again, one of the main points of my argument in this book is that judgments are crucial to the activation of our multileveled responses and to our understanding of the interrelations among form, ethics, and aesthetics. To develop these points further, I now offer the following seven theses about narrative judgments.
INTRODUCTION

Narrative Judgments: Seven Theses

Thesis one (a recapitulation and extension of the argument so far): narrative judgments are the point of intersection for narrative form, narrative ethics, and narrative aesthetics.

To substantiate this thesis further I turn to a rhetorical understanding of narrativity, one that is tied to both the rhetorical definition of narrative (somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose that something happened) and the concept of narrative progression. From this perspective, narrativity is a double-layered phenomenon, involving both a dynamics of character, event, and telling and a dynamics of audience response. The phrase “somebody telling . . . that something happened” gets at the first layer: narrative involves the report of a sequence of related events during which the characters and/or their situations undergo some change. As I have discussed elsewhere (Phelan 1989), the report of that change typically proceeds through the introduction, complication, and resolution (in whole or in part) of unstable situations within, between, or among the characters. These dynamics of instability may be accompanied by a dynamics of tension in the telling—unstable relations among authors, narrators, and audiences—and the interaction of the two sets of dynamics, as in narratives that employ unreliable narration, may have significant consequences for our understanding of the “something that happened.”

Turning to the second layer, the dynamics of audience response (or, in terms of the definition, the role of the “somebody else”), narrativity encourages two main activities: observing and judging. The authorial audience perceives the characters as external to themselves and as distinct from their implied authors, and the authorial audience passes interpretive and ethical judgments on them, their situations, and their choices. The audience’s observer role is what makes the judgment role possible, and the particular judgments are integral to our emotional responses as well as to our desires about future events. In short, just as there is a progression of events there is a progression of audience response to those events, a progression rooted in the twin activities of observing and judging. Thus, from the rhetorical perspective, narrativity involves the interaction of two kinds of change: that experienced by the characters and that experienced by the audience in its developing responses to the characters’ changes.

To turn from this abstract theorizing to its practical consequences, consider the relative narrativity of the following two short narratives.
A man lying at the point of death said these words to his wife who had been constantly by his side throughout his long illness.

“I am about to say good-bye forever. I hope you know that I love you very much. In my desk you will find a crimson candle, which has been blessed by a High Priest. It would please me if, wherever you go and whatever you do, you would keep this candle with you as a small reminder of my love.” The wife thanked him, assured him that, because she loved him too, she would do as he asked, and, after his death, she kept her word.

A man lying at the point of death called his wife to his bedside and said:

“I am about to leave you forever; give me, therefore, one last proof of your affection and fidelity, for, according to our holy religion, a married man seeking admittance at the gate of Heaven is required to swear that he has never defiled himself with an unworthy woman. In my desk you will find a crimson candle, which has been blessed by the High Priest and has a peculiar mystical significance. Swear to me that while it is in existence you will not remarry.”

The Woman swore and the Man died. At the funeral the Woman stood at the head of the bier, holding a lighted crimson candle till it was wasted entirely away. (Bierce 1946)

Both versions of “The Crimson Candle” fit the rhetorical definition of narrative, since both involve a teller and an audience, a progression of instability-complication-resolution (each husband seeks the promise, each wife gives it, and each fulfills it in her own way), and a series of developing responses by the audience. But Bierce’s version has a higher degree of narrativity, and it does so for two reasons, only the first of which is typically given a lot of attention: (1) Bierce’s version introduces a more substantial instability and resolves it with more ingenuity; and (2) Bierce’s version represents and invites two more substantial sets of judgments: one set made by the characters and the other set by the audience. Furthermore—and these are my most basic claims—(1) we experience the story as involving the syn-
thesis of the pattern of instabilities and the sequence of judgments; and, therefore, (2) the set of judgments made by the audience is at least as fundamental to the higher degree of narrativity as the set involving the characters.

In other words, we can’t locate the difference between Bierce’s version and my version only by pointing to the presence or absence of the progression by instability itself. We get closer to locating the difference by noting that the progression by instability is accompanied by narrative judgments and that those judgments, in turn, significantly affect our emotive, ethical, and aesthetic engagements with the narrative. This point brings me to my second thesis.

Thesis two: readers make three main types of narrative judgment, each of which has the potential to overlap with or affect the other two: interpretive judgments about the nature of actions or other elements of the narrative, ethical judgments about the moral value of characters and actions, and aesthetic judgments about the artistic quality of the narrative and of its parts. This thesis has two corollaries: Corollary 1: a single action may evoke multiple kinds of judgment. Corollary 2: because characters’ actions include their judgments, readers often judge characters’ judgments.

In Bierce’s version of “The Crimson Candle,” for example, the man’s initial request is based on a so-called religious principle which he interprets in his own way, and our judgment of that interpretation will have consequences for our ethical judgment of him. He interprets the principle to say that the test of whether he has “defiled himself with an unworthy woman” is not his behavior while alive but rather his wife’s behavior after his death. Not only do we judge his interpretation as off-base, we can, in retrospect, legitimately wonder whether his wife made a similar judgment and so felt freer to act as she did. In addition, we can see that the husband’s interpretation fits with his ethical character as someone who assumes that his wife’s role is to serve him in both life and death.

The husband and wife also make different interpretive judgments about the nature of the commitment entailed by her oath, and these interpretive judgments overlap with ethical ones. In fact, their interpretive judgments are about the ethical obligation the wife incurs with her sworn promise. The husband assumes that her promise binds her to remain unmarried indefinitely. The wife finds a loophole in the language of the promise, one that allows her to fulfill its letter at the funeral and then be liberated from it. We readers need to make an interpretive judgment about the characters’ judgments; we need, that is, to decide about the validity of the wife’s interpretation of her oath.
Not surprisingly, since the characters’ interpretive judgments overlap with ethical judgments, the audience’s judgments are also overlapping. Indeed, it is possible that the force of one judgment will determine the other. If, for example, we say that the wife has found a valid loophole in her promise, we may also be inclined to say that it is an ethically just fulfillment of that promise. And the other way around. Similarly, if we say that the wife’s interpretive judgment is not valid, we may also be inclined to say that she is guilty of breaking her promise. And, once again, the other way around. However, since it is possible to separate the legal and the ethical, we may also separate the interpretive and the ethical judgments at least to some extent: we may decide that the wife’s interpretive judgment is not valid because she knew that her husband would not regard her burning the candle at the funeral as a fulfillment of her promise. But we may also make a positive ethical judgment of her action, because we see it as an appropriate response to the husband’s ethically deficient actions of misinterpreting the principle for his selfish ends and of insisting on her promise.

The decisions we make about these ethical questions will have consequences for our aesthetic judgments, by which I mean our assessments of a narrative’s quality. Indeed, a large part of the aesthetic difference between Bierce’s version and my version of “The Crimson Candle” stems from the relative blandness of the ethical judgments in my version when compared with Bierce’s version. I will return to this issue of aesthetic judgments in thesis six; for now I want to say more about ethical judgments.

Thesis three: individual narratives explicitly or more often implicitly establish their own ethical standards in order to guide their audiences to particular ethical judgments. Consequently, within rhetorical ethics, narrative judgments proceed from the inside out rather than the outside in. It is for this reason they are closely tied to aesthetic judgments.

The rhetorical theorist, in other words, does not do ethical criticism by applying a pre-existing ethical system to the narrative, however much he may admire the ethics elaborated by Aristotle, Kant, Levinas, or any other thinker; instead the rhetorical theorist seeks to reconstruct the ethical principles upon which the narrative is built. To be sure, the rhetorical theorist does bring values to the text, but he or she remains open to having those values challenged and even repudiated by the experience of reading. More

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3. I recognize that there are other valid ways to do ethical criticism, including proceeding from the outside in. The efficacy of such criticism depends on both the soundness of the ethical system upon which it is based and the skill and sensitivity with which that system is brought to the narrative.
generally, then, ethical judgments work through the application of the ethical principles underlying the work to the specific behavior of a character (or narrator). Sometimes the underlying principles will be coherent and systematic, but at others they may be ad hoc and unsystematic, and at still others they may be inconsistent.

In Living to Tell about It, I identified four ethical positions, one involving the ethics of the told (the character-character relations); two involving the ethics of the telling (the narrator’s relation to the characters, the task of narrating, and to the audience; and the implied author’s relation to these things); and one involving the flesh-and-blood audience’s responses to the first three positions. In this book, I want to make explicit an ethical relation that I left implicit in Living to Tell: the ethics of rhetorical purpose, that is, the ethical dimension of the overall narrative act. Here I will focus on how the narrative guides us to judge the character-character relations. When I discuss thesis four, I will attend to the other ethical relations.

Bierce reveals his underlying ethical principles through his stylistic choices, his use of the narrator, and his management of the progression. The stylistic choices reveal that the husband acts in violation of such basic values as love, generosity, and justice, as a comparison of his speech with that of the corresponding character in my version of the story indicates. To take just one prominent contrast, Bierce’s character does not make requests; he issues commands. He “calls” his wife to his bedside and delivers a series of additional imperatives: “give me one last proof”; “swear that you will not remarry.” The ethical subtext of his speech, which, as noted above, is also evident in his interpretation of the religious principle he cites, is “because I am your superior and my fate matters more, you should do what I command regardless of the personal consequences for you.” All of these elements of the language are reinforced by the inescapable phallic symbolism of the crimson candle. Consequently, we make—tacitly and automatically—a negative ethical judgment of him.

Bierce manages the progression so that we make no significant interpretive or ethical judgments of the woman until the last sentence, when the narrator’s simple report of her behavior at the funeral prompts not only the resolution of the instability in this unexpected way, but also our simultaneous interpretive and ethical judgments of her and our aesthetic judgment of the whole. When we read, “The Woman stood at the head of the bier, holding a lighted crimson candle till it was wasted entirely away,” we simultaneously recognize and endorse her unexpected interpretive and ethical judgment of her promise. The simultaneity of these responses gives the ending its kick and contributes substantially to our positive aesthetic
judgment of the story. To put the point another way, given our ethical judgments about the husband, we approve of the wife's insight and her values in finding the loophole and acting upon that finding so swiftly and dramatically; in addition, we find the sudden revelation of her judgments and actions aesthetically satisfying. We may or may not decide that the loophole is technically valid—that is, whether she is fulfilling the promise in a legalistic sense or simply manipulating it for her own ends—but our negative ethical judgment of the husband allows us to leave this question open without detracting from the effect of the story.

The woman’s acting out her release from the promise during the husband’s funeral is also a telling commentary on her view of this promise (whether she regards the husband’s interpretation of the principle as off-base or not) and, we are invited to extrapolate, of the marriage itself. Indeed, the inferences packed into the final sentence are so many that we can’t help moving from the wife’s manipulation of the promise back to Bierce’s management of the narrative. And that move brings me to thesis four.

**Thesis four: ethical judgments in narrative include not only the ones we make about the characters and their actions but also those we make about the ethics of storytelling itself, especially the ethics of the implied author’s relation to the narrator, the characters, and the audience.**

This thesis highlights the point mentioned above: there is an ethics of the told and an ethics of the telling, which includes the ethics of rhetorical purpose. In considering the ethics of the telling, we again want to identify the author’s implicit ethical principles and apply them to the particular techniques of the telling. With “The Crimson Candle,” we can start with Bierce’s relation to the narrator. While narrators typically serve three main functions—reporting, interpreting, and evaluating (see Phelan 2005)—Bierce restricts his narrator to the single function of reporting, and relies on his audience’s being able to infer interpretations and evaluations through the progression and the style. These inferences here include symbolic meanings of the candle that go beyond its phallic appearance to its long tradition of religious significance. Thus, the wife’s burning of the candle at the funeral enhances the subversive and comic quality of her action.

As the sudden flurry of inferences surrounding the last sentence indicates, the technique is at once straightforward—the narrator is a reliable and efficient reporter—and coy: the narrator neither prepares us for the wife’s maneuver nor gives us any inside view of her. This technique of restricted narration has consequences for Bierce’s ethical relation to his
characters and to his audience. He lets the characters speak and act for themselves, and he assumes that, through our inferential activity, we can stand with him and take satisfaction in the interpretive, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions of his narrative. Identifying this assumption brings me to thesis five.

*Thesis five: individual readers need to evaluate the ethical standards and purposes of individual narratives, and they are likely to do so in different ways.*

The point here is that rhetorical ethics involves a two-step process: reconstruction and evaluation. That is, it attempts to identify the relevant underlying ethical principles, to apply them to specific behavior of the characters and techniques of the telling, and, ultimately, to determine the ethics of the overall narrative purpose. Then, having done that reconstruction, rhetorical ethics moves to evaluation. Bierce’s handling of the characterization and the progression, with its emphasis on the husband’s selfishness and the wife’s brilliant manipulation of her promise, may receive the total approval of some readers, while it may make others uneasy about the way Bierce treats the husband. For these readers, including me, the issue is not that Bierce may be unfair to his own creation but rather that he delights in exposing the husband’s ultimate futility. I discover that this delight borders on a gleeful embrace of the impotence conferred by death that I find emotionally chilling and ethically deficient. At the same time, I can recognize that other readers may not evaluate Bierce’s underlying ethical stance in this way and that this difference provides an opportunity for productive dialogue about ethics (what Wayne C. Booth [1988] calls coduction)—why do I evaluate one way and you the other?—rather than an opportunity for me to convince you of the error of your evaluation.

*Thesis six: just as rhetorical ethics proceeds from the inside out, so too does rhetorical aesthetics. And just as rhetorical ethics involves a two-step process of reconstruction and evaluation, so too does rhetorical aesthetics.*

Doing aesthetics from the inside out means identifying the nature of the work’s narrative project and analyzing the skill with which it executes that project. Just as rhetorical ethics does not start with a particular ethical system or a finite list of approved ethical values, rhetorical aesthetics does not start with a hierarchy of pre-approved aesthetic principles. Instead, it seeks to understand the aesthetic principles upon which the individual work is constructed (including, at times, the work’s explicit deviation from a dominant aesthetics) and the particular execution of those principles, and it then moves to make an evaluation of the overall aesthetic achievement. This evaluation can include an idea of relative achievement, one rooted
in the concept of aesthetic ambition: that is, what is finally achieved is connected not only to the particular execution of the project but also to where the author sets the bar for the project itself. In “The Crimson Candle,” Bierce sets the bar lower than he does in, say, “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,” and he sets the bar lower there than, say, Morrison does in Beloved. But even as rhetorical ethics and rhetorical aesthetics can be distinguished from each other, they also interact, and for that reason I will defer further comment on the aesthetic achievement of “The Crimson Candle” until I introduce the seventh and final thesis.

Thesis seven: individual readers’ ethical and aesthetic judgments significantly influence each other, even as the two kinds of judgments remain distinct and not fully dependent on each other.

We have already seen how the interpretive, ethical, and aesthetic judgments to which Bierce guides us overlap—and reinforce each other—in the ending of his tale. But I want to emphasize that ethical judgments we make about storytelling have consequences for our aesthetic judgments and vice versa—even as the two kinds of judgment remain distinct. In my overall response to “The Crimson Candle,” I find that my ethical judgment about Bierce’s pleasure in the husband’s futility detracts from my otherwise positive aesthetic judgment of the narrative. Similarly, aesthetic judgments can have consequences for ethical ones. If, for example, Bierce had employed an intrusive narrator who imposed explicit ethical judgments on the characters, he would not only have introduced an aesthetic flaw that reduced our pleasure in inferring those judgments, but that flaw would also lead to a negative judgment about the ethics of his telling, since the technique would communicate his distrust of his audience.

There are nevertheless aspects of narrative ethics and narrative aesthetics that are not adequately captured by focusing solely on their mutual dependence. If we find the values underlying our ethical judgments of characters or narrators to be deficient but nevertheless deployed with great skill, we will judge the aesthetics of the narrative more highly than its ethics. Similarly, an admirable underlying value structure and ethical purpose may be deployed and achieved well or badly, and the difference will have major consequences for our overall experience of the work. In addition, individual works may work with relatively simple value structures but work with them with such skill that they constitute significant ethical and aesthetic achievements. I shall argue that such a situation prevails in Sandra Cisneros’s “Woman Hollering Creek.”

Putting together theses six and seven, I conclude that “The Crimson Candle” is a relatively slight achievement in both ethical and aesthetic
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terms—arguably as valuable for my heuristic expository purposes as for its intrinsic merit. Its value structure is sound but simple: it relies on a conventional, widely accepted set of values and reinforces them rather than explores or challenges them. Its narrative project is also simple—to construct a pleasurable reversal narrative involving tyrannical husband and apparently submissive wife—even as its execution shows Bierce’s high level of narrative skill. Though the story packs a lot of satisfying readerly activity into its short space, its ambition is otherwise modest and so, we can say from our vantage point of more than one hundred years after its publication, is its importance. Nevertheless, Bierce’s high level of narrative skill, his ability to pack so much readerly activity into such a short space, suggests that his modest achievement here is beyond what many—perhaps even most—of us who are reading this book could accomplish.

Narrative Progressions:
Beginnings, Middles, and Endings

I turn now to relate these theses about narrative judgments to my ideas about narrative progression. In this section, I shall describe a rhetorical model for analyzing progression and shall offer brief illustrations of how the model applies to Edith Wharton’s “Roman Fever.” In chapter 4, I shall offer a detailed analysis of judgments and progression in Wharton’s story as I consider the ethics and aesthetics of her use of a surprise ending. The model of narrative progression I propose here strives to be specific enough to use for analyzing individual narratives but flexible enough for analyzing narrative progressions in all their variety. The model is not designed to predict (or prescribe) how progressions must proceed but rather to give us tools for unpacking how they have proceeded. But there is one important assumption that is worth stating at the outset: while the elements of a progression are themselves key components of our experience of a narrative, they are themselves governed by the overarching purpose(s) of that narrative. Let’s then turn to the model and start—where else?—with beginnings.

Previous narrative theory, for the most part, has emphasized the textual rather than the readerly side of narrative beginnings. Aristotle tells us in his wonderfully logical way that a beginning is that which is not itself necessarily after anything else and that which has naturally something else after it. Structuralist theorists, following Propp (1968 [1928]), identify the beginning with the introduction of a lack. Emma Kafalenos’s analysis
of causality in narrative (2006) identifies the first move as the introduction of disequilibrium. Psychoanalytic critics such as Peter Brooks (1984) view the beginning as the initiation of narrative desire. In my previous work on narrative progression (1989; passim), I have identified the beginning as that which generates the progression of the narrative by introducing unstable relationships between characters (instabilities) or between implied author and authorial audience or narrator and authorial audience (tensions). Local instabilities are those whose resolution does not signal the completeness of the progression; global instabilities are those that provide the main track of the progression and must be resolved for a narrative to attain completeness. (Of course not all narratives seek completeness in this sense.) The first chapter of *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, uses local instabilities—the dialogue between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet about whether Mr. Bennet will visit the new tenant of Netherfield Park—even as it communicates the global instability: the arrival of the single man of good fortune into the neighborhood. The one theorist who has emphasized the readerly side of beginnings, Peter J. Rabinowitz, has been less concerned with identifying beginnings proper than with pointing out that, before reading, we are already equipped with conventional Rules of Notice that mark the initial features of texts—titles, epigraphs, first sentences, first chapters—as deserving special emphasis (1998: 47–75). These different perspectives obviously have much in common and suggest that beginnings not only set the narrative in motion but also give it a particular direction.

Indeed, beginnings do more than initiate the action, as becomes apparent when we look more closely at readerly dynamics. Elements of exposition matter because they influence our understanding of the narrative world, which in turn influences our understanding of the meaning and consequences of the action, including our initial generic identification of the narrative and the expectations that follow from that identification. Furthermore, we need to include in a broadened concept of beginnings narrative discourse and the readerly dynamics associated with it. Sometimes the forward movement of a narrative is generated by the tensions arising in narrative discourse, but even when the forward movement is generated primarily by instabilities, our processing of the narrative discourse is a crucial component of our entry into the narrative world.

Given these considerations, I propose the following conception of narrative beginnings. The initial distinction is between *opening* and *beginning*. I will use *opening* as the general, inclusive term that refers to the first few

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4. This account of beginnings is a revision and extension of the brief account I offer in my entry on “Beginnings and Ending” in *The Encyclopedia of the Novel*. 
pages and the first chapter (or other initial segment) of a narrative, including the front matter. Beginning is the technical, precise term, referring to a segment of a narrative defined by four aspects. The first two aspects focus on the “aboutness” of the narrative and on the textual dynamics, while the second two focus on the activity of the authorial audience, what I will call readerly dynamics.

(1) Exposition: everything, including the front matter, that provides information about the narrative, the characters (listings of traits, past history, and so on), the setting (time and place), and events of the narrative. The front matter, in addition to the title page, may include such things as illustrations (as in Orlando), epigraphs (as in Beloved), preludes (as in Middlemarch), notices (as in Huckleberry Finn), and author’s or editor’s introductions (such as John Ray, Jr.’s introduction to Lolita). Exposition is of course not limited to an opening but may appear anywhere in a narrative; exposition that is part of a beginning includes anything prior to or immediately following and directly relevant to what I call the launch. Wharton’s story begins in a fairly leisurely manner because she frontloads so much exposition. The first paragraph, for example, is entirely given over to it, introducing the main characters, and something about the time and place of their meeting:

From the table at which they had been lunching two American ladies of ripe but well-cared for middle-age moved across the lofty terrace of the Roman restaurant and, leaning on its parapet, looked first at each other, and then down on the outspread glories of the Palatine and the Forum, with the same expression of vague but benevolent approval. (3)

The expository nature of the paragraph is enhanced by its emphasis on the similarity between the two ladies: the narrator is describing a stable

5. See Sternberg (1978) for an impressive account of the relation between exposition and a narrative’s handling of time. Sternberg uses the fabula/sjuzhet distinction, i.e., the distinction between the chronological sequence of events and the order and representation of those events in the narrative text, to identify exposition as “the first part” of the fabula (14), and he sees its function as providing the reader “with the general and specific antecedents indispensable to the understanding of what happens in [the fictive world of the story)” (1). Sternberg’s understanding of exposition informs my own, but my interest in the phenomenon here is different (and more limited): I want to account for the role of exposition in that part of the sjuzhet that I am calling the beginning.
rather than an unstable situation. Frontloading this exposition means that Wharton can later let the narrative progress largely through the narrator’s reporting of the dialogue between these two American ladies, Alida Slade and Grace Ansley. By starting with an emphasis on the similarity between the two women in this time and place, Wharton also prepares for the dramatic effects of her later revelation of their differences.

(2) **Launch:** the revelation of the first set of global instabilities or tensions in the narrative. This moment in the narrative marks the boundary between the beginning and the middle. The launch may come early or it may come late, but I set the boundary at the first global instability or tension because until then a narrative has not established a clear direction. This way of identifying the launch also means that, from a first-time reader’s perspective, the identification will initially be a tentative one, something for which the reader will seek confirmation or disconfirmation in the subsequent progression. The tentative nature of our initial identification helps us recognize that authors can play with the launch, sometimes offering false starts. I’ll return to this last point during the discussion of Hemingway’s “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” in chapter 5. In “Roman Fever,” the launch is completed at the end of Part I with Grace’s thought that “on the whole [Alida] had had a sad life. Full of failures and mistakes; Mrs. Ansley had always been rather sorry for her. . . .” Grace’s thought completes the launch because it establishes a global tension about why Grace regards Alida this way and because it complements Alida’s thoughts about being superior to Grace, whom she regards as old-fashioned, conventional, and a “nullity.” Wharton then uses exposition to underline the launch with her narrator’s comment, “So these two ladies visualized each other, each through the wrong end of her little telescope.” Thus, at the end of Part I, we have both a significant instability between the characters—each feels superior to the other—and a global tension about the past and its effect on their current estimations of each other.

(3) **Initiation:** the initial rhetorical transactions among implied author and narrator, on the one hand, and flesh-and-blood and authorial audience on the other. Rabinowitz’s Rules of Notice (1998: 47–75) are especially relevant to the reader’s experience of the initiation. In Wharton’s first paragraph, for example, we get introduced to a formal narrator who keeps her emotional distance from both characters, a distance underlined in the comment at the end of Part I about each woman’s view through “her little telescope.” As we proceed through the beginning, we discover that the narrator more readily offers us inside views of Alida than of Grace; this element of the initiation makes the revelation of Grace’s thoughts to complete the launch stand out. More generally, this initiation also keeps the
authorial audience somewhat distant from the characters and encourages us to align ourselves more with the implied Wharton as the designer of the story.

(4) Entrance: the flesh-and-blood reader’s multileveled—cognitive, emotive, ethical—movement from outside the text to a specific location in the authorial audience at the end of the launch. When the entrance is complete, the authorial audience has typically made numerous significant interpretive, ethical, and even aesthetic judgments, and these judgments influence what is arguably the most important element of the entrance: the authorial audience’s hypothesis, implicit or explicit, about the direction and purpose of the whole narrative, what I will call its configuration. This hypothesis about configuration is of course subject to revision in light of developments in the middle and even the ending. In “Roman Fever,” we enter with an awareness of a coming clash between the protagonists, with an expectation that the clash will be painful, but with no clear sense of its outcome. Narratives such as “Roman Fever” that offer surprise endings deliberately seek to move our configuration in one direction only to reveal to us in their final moments that a different direction and purpose has been guiding the progression all along.

This conception of a beginning means that it is a unit whose length will vary considerably from narrative to narrative, since some beginnings will include more exposition than others and some will take longer to establish the first set of global instabilities or tensions. In addition, this conception of a beginning naturally leads into similar conceptions of middles and endings, conceptions that also identify four aspects of each, two concerned with textual dynamics and two with reader dynamics.

Middles have the following aspects:

(5) Exposition: again, information relevant to the narrative (e.g., chapter titles), setting, characters, and events. In “Roman Fever,” the exposition in the middle focuses primarily on the setting, on how the advancing evening affects the characters’ views of Rome, and on Grace’s handling of her knitting. Both kinds of exposition influence our understanding of the conversational dynamics.

(6) Voyage: the development of the global instabilities and/or tensions. Sometimes the initial set of global instabilities or tensions becomes more complicated, as it is in “Roman Fever”; sometimes, as in many picaresque narratives, the global instabilities remain largely as they are or get only mildly complicated as the characters deal with a series of local instabilities. In Wharton’s story, as we shall see in more detail in chapter 4, the conflict between the characters in the present escalates as the tensions about the past slowly get resolved.
(7) Interaction: the ongoing communicative exchanges between implied author, narrator, and audience. These exchanges have significant effects on our developing responses to the characters and events as well as to our ongoing relationship with the narrator and implied author. In “Roman Fever,” the narrator continues to maintain her emotional distance from the characters, and she reverts to giving us inside views only of Alida. We trust the narrator but remain aware that she is not telling us all, and we continue to align ourselves with the implied author, following the sequence of inferences she builds into the story.

(8) Intermediate configuration: the evolving responses of the authorial audience to the overall development of the narrative. During this stage our initial hypothesis about the configuration of the whole will become more fully developed, though that development may either largely confirm or substantially revise the hypothesis formed at the entrance. Although our immediate configuration has the potential to shift with each new sentence of the middle, sometimes the textual and readerly dynamics will collaborate to have a particular configuration—or key elements of it, at least—remain in place for a good stretch (in Great Expectations, for example, we’re invited to believe for a long time that Pip’s benefactor is Miss Havisham) and sometimes those dynamics will give a special emphasis to a particular shape of an evolving configuration. In “Roman Fever,” once Alida inflicts on Grace the knowledge that Alida forged the note from Delphin, we have such an emphasis as we infer that the present is repeating the past: Alida is the aggressor and Grace is the victim.

Endings have the following four aspects:

(9) Exposition/Closure: when this information about the narrative, characters, or action includes a signal that the narrative is coming to an end, regardless of the state of the instabilities and tensions, it becomes a device of closure. In “Roman Fever,” closure is explicitly signaled when the narrator tells us, after Grace’s last line of dialogue, that she “began to move ahead of Mrs. Slade toward the stairway,” because that movement signals the end of the conversation. In narratives that are constructed around a character’s journey, closure is signaled by the character’s reaching the appointed destination. Just as beginnings may include such paratextual material as epigraphs and authors’ notes, endings may include epilogues, afterwords, appendixes, and the like.

(10) Arrival: the resolution, in whole or in part, of the global instabilities and tensions. Grace’s last line of dialogue, “I had Barbara,” constitutes the arrival in Wharton’s story because it resolves both the final tensions about the events of the previous twenty-five years and the instabilities in
Grace’s and Alida’s relationship as revealed and complicated by their conversation. This arrival of course causes us to reconfigure our understanding of the events; I will say more about the details of that reconfiguration in chapter 4.

(11) *Farewell*: the concluding exchanges among implied author, narrator, and audiences. The farewell may or may not involve a direct address to the narratee, but the final exchanges always have the potential to affect the audience’s response to the whole narrative. The narrator and Wharton maintain the same stance as they have throughout the beginning and middle, but because they trust us to infer the meaning and consequences of the reconfiguration, we are likely to feel that the last lines actually bring us closer together.

(12) *Completion*: the conclusion of the reader’s evolving responses to the whole narrative. These responses include our ethical and aesthetic judgments of the narrative as a whole. I will discuss the completion of “Roman Fever” at some length in chapter 4, since I can do better justice to it after a more detailed look at its progression.

Another way of presenting this model is in rows and columns so that, reading across, one can see how the two aspects of textual dynamics and the two aspects of readerly dynamics develop.

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These twelve aspects of narrative progression provide a way to track textual and readerly dynamics, but they do not offer any specific predictions about the specific trajectory of any individual narrative progression or set any strong constraints on what any one beginning, middle, or ending will do. The model does not seek such prediction or constraint because the rhetorical approach contends that the specifics of any given progression are themselves determined by the overall purpose(s) of the individual narrative. Consequently, my analyses of individual narratives will not be directed
toward arguing that their beginnings, middles, and endings are representative of all narratives, but rather toward showing how their specific ways of working with these elements of progression serve their individual purposes.

Progression and Judgment in Lyric Narratives and Portrait Narratives

In Part One of this book, I shall attempt to show how attention to judgments and progressions can help identify and resolve some significant interpretive problems in a range of narrative texts. But in order to expand the scope and usefulness of the rhetorical theory of narrative, in Part Two I take up the different experiences offered by hybrid forms, specifically lyric narratives, which combine elements of narrative with elements of lyric, and what I call portrait narratives, which combine elements of narrative with elements of the character sketch. In order to describe these hybrid forms more adequately, I offer rhetorical accounts of lyricality and portraiture that parallel the rhetorical account of narrativity I offer in the first section of this introduction.

With lyricality, I start with a rhetorical definition of lyric that identifies two main modes: (1) somebody telling somebody else (or even himself or herself) on some occasion for some purpose that something is—a situation, an emotion, a perception, an attitude, a belief; (2) somebody telling somebody else (or even himself or herself) on some occasion about his or her meditations on something; to put it another way, in this mode, the poem records the speaker’s thoughts. Furthermore, in both kinds of lyric, the authorial audience is less in the position of observer and judge and more in the position of participant. While we recognize that the speaker is different from us, we move from that recognition toward fusion with the speaker—or, to put it in more measured terms, toward adopting the speaker’s perspective without any irritable reaching after difference and evaluation. This element of lyricality also depends on the absence of distance between the implied

6. My ideas about lyric and portraiture have been significantly influenced by Ralph Rader. His essay, “The Dramatic Monologue and Related Lyric Forms,” offers a highly insightful way to think about the relations among (implied) author, the “I” of the poem, and the (authorial) audience. For a sampling of other good work on lyric and narrative, see Friedman, Gerlach (1989, 2004), and Dubrow (2000, 2006). Friedman seeks to make connections between the two forms and gender. Gerlach seeks to identify similarities and differences among the short story, the prose poem, and the lyric. Dubrow points to the contested nature of the concept of lyric and notes the value of understanding the mode within specific historical contexts. I am especially grateful for conversations with Dubrow about the intersections of lyric and narrative.
author and the “I” of the poem. Furthermore, the standard tense for lyric is the present. Lyricality, then, in contrast to narrativity is neutral on the issue of change for the speaker—it may or may not be present—and invested not in character and event but in thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, emotions, specific conditions. Furthermore, the dynamics of audience response stem from adopting the speaker’s perspective without judging it. Thus, the double movement of lyric is toward fuller revelation of the speaker’s situation and perspective and, on the audience’s part, toward deeper understanding of and participation in what is revealed.

The space between narrativity and lyricality is occupied by what I call portraiture, a rhetorical design inviting the authorial audience to apprehend the revelation of character. Since portraiture is manifest most commonly—though not exclusively—in one form of the dramatic monologue, I will draw on that form to illustrate its main principles. In the dramatic monologue, somebody tells somebody else whatever the speaker judges to be relevant in that rhetorical occasion; as the speaker’s discourse progresses, the author gradually reveals to her audience the nature of the speaker’s character. In other words, the double movement of the form involves a double logic: the speaker’s telling progresses according to the logic of the dramatic situation, while the author’s construction of that telling progresses in order to give her audience a gradually deepening knowledge and understanding of the speaker. Thus, portraiture is neutral on both change and stasis, since its point is neither event nor condition but character. Regardless of what is told, however, the implied author and the speaker are distinct figures, and so are the speaker and the authorial audience. Furthermore, as the audience remains in the observer role, that role will typically involve judging the character: the judgment, however, will not be directed toward our developing expectations or hopes that are important for the text’s progression but instead will be part and parcel of our coming to know the character. In a sense, the purpose of portraiture is to evoke in the audience a response much like that of Browning’s Duke to Fra Pandolf’s painting: “There she stands as if alive.”

This account of portraiture allows us to recognize the dramatic monologue as only one mode in which it occurs. Portraiture can also be achieved through the reporting of a noncharacter narrator to an uncharacterized narratee, who is not part of the dramatic situation, provided that the author designs that reporting to reveal a character whom we observe from the outside.

Now there is no theoretical or practical reason why, in any specific text, the relationships among events, character, attitude/thought/belief/, change, and audience activity need to stay within the boundaries of narrativity,
lyricality, and portraiture. Indeed, for more than a century, writers have been combining elements of all three modes in order to create effects that are not possible by remaining within the boundaries of any one. To this point, narrative theory, including rhetorical theory, has only begun to come to terms with these hybrid forms. By devoting Part Two of this book to the way judgments and progressions work in some highly effective experiments in hybridity, I hope to advance our understanding of not only those texts but also of these fascinating forms.

As I noted in the Preface, in the chapters that follow I will use the ideas about judgments and progression I have offered here as a way to identify and approach some significant interpretive problems in a range of fictional narratives (for a sketch of the specifics see pp. xi–xii). In building on the principles outlined here in the analysis of this diverse body of narratives, Experiencing Fiction seeks to demonstrate the power of the rhetorical theory of narrative, even as it develops new aspects of that theory such as its accounts of narrativity, the relations between ethics and aesthetics, and of the hybrid genre of portrait narrative. More generally, it attempts to show the myriad ways in which a focus on narrative judgments and narrative progressions can help us understand the links and the distinctions among rhetorical conceptions of form, ethics, and aesthetics.
Although *Experiencing Fiction* has focused primarily on five fictional narratives and five narrative hybrids, I doubt anyone will be surprised by the observation that the corpus on which it is based is actually much larger. While each of the ten texts raises its distinctive challenges, my analyses of each tacitly draws on my knowledge of other literary fictions, and the principles I develop across the ten analyses are designed to be relevant to our understanding of numerous other narratives and hybrid forms, including ones that I (and you) have not yet read. These assumptions operate right from the beginning of the Introduction, where I set out and develop the seven theses about judgments in connection with the six sentences of Bierce’s “Crimson Candle.” Indeed, the grand ambition of *Experiencing Fiction* is to have the reading practice it models be relevant to as wide a range of literary fiction as possible. At the same time, as I noted in chapter 3, the project of rhetorical poetics is always under construction precisely because it is committed to an a posteriori method, the idea that its concepts and principles follow from rather than dictate the dynamics of individual works. A corollary to this thesis is that rhetorical poetics, like any theory designed to account for a range of data, is significantly influenced by the corpus from which it develops its principles. Consequently, as I move toward the end of this study, I would like to reflect on the relation between the corpus I have worked with and the principles about progressions and judgments I have developed by considering two kinds of narrative not represented so far: (a) nonfictional narratives and (b) fictional narratives that foreground their synthetic component at the expense of the mimetic. Although nonfictional narrative is beyond the boundaries I have set for this study, it is not beyond the boundary of rhetorical poetics.
more generally. Therefore, it is worth at least glancing at the main issues a rhetorical poetics of nonfictional narrative would need to contend with. Synthetic fictions, on the other hand, represent a possible lacuna within the boundaries of this study, and, therefore, I would like to take steps to close up that space before I end.

The project of extending the principles and concepts of rhetorical poetics to nonfictional narrative entails accounting for a significant new variable in the rhetorical communication: referentiality. The project is a formidable one, requiring as it does an engagement with such issues as (a) whether the border between fiction and nonfiction is rigid, permeable, or, for all practical purposes, nonexistent, and (b) how what we might call local referentiality in fiction, that is, the presence of historical figures or events, compares with the global referentiality implicitly claimed by nonfiction, that is, the claim that the entire narrative refers to actual people and events. In addition, the task of accounting for referentiality also involves identifying the relevant differences in referential claims among the various genres of nonfictional narrative, including history, biography, autobiography, memoir, and such hybrid forms as historical essay and memoiristic essay. In short, the project of developing a full-fledged rhetorical poetics of nonfictional narrative is well beyond the scope of this epilogue.1 Nevertheless, sketching the key principles of such a poetics will identify the starting points for such a poetics, including some of its continuities with and departures from the rhetorical poetics of fiction.

1. The presence of global referentiality provides the basis for a qualitatively different reading experience from that offered by fictional narrative. Global referentiality not only ties both implied author and authorial audience more closely to people and events external to the narrative itself but it alters rhetorical purposes. A text that purports to tell it like it was is different from one that purports to tell it like its author imagines it to be, even if the texts are otherwise identical. If Great Expectations is not a novel but Dickens’s autobiography (with Pip becoming Chuck?), then its claim to be the account of the novelist’s life changes both our engagement with it and our understanding.

1. There is of course a substantial body of work on nonfiction narrative relevant to the project of developing a rhetorical poetics of nonfiction, including the large body of theory and interpretation that addresses autobiography. For a sample of this work, see Cohn, Smith and Watson, Lehtimaki, Heyne (1987), Lehman (1998), and the dialogue between Heyne and Lehman in Narrative (2001).
of its purpose. Rather than being a narrative that offers us a strong affective experience of Pip’s trajectory to maturity even as Dickens explores so many issues in Victorian culture, it becomes an account of how Dickens got to be Dickens. Conversely, if Angela’s Ashes is not a memoir but a novel, then the implied McCourt’s persistent good humor about the grim realities his narrative depicts takes on a wholly different character. Rather than being a reassuring sign of his own successful overcoming of those grim realities, it is likely to be a sign of his lack of empathy for his own creations.

2. Although this way of talking suggests that rhetorical poetics favors a rigid border between fiction and nonfiction, the a posteriori principle trumps any such hard and fast conclusion. There is no restriction on language or on narrative that necessitates a rigid border. While some narratives do clearly reside on one side of the border or the other, another group may move back and forth across the border or even straddle it altogether. Texts such as Tim O’Brien’s “The Things They Carried” operate on the premise that the events and experiences they represent cannot be firmly classified as fictional or nonfictional and that making the border between them permeable or blurry offers their audiences richer ethical and aesthetic engagements.

3. Referentiality means that nonfictional narratives can be contested in ways that fictional ones cannot, whenever the nonfictional narrative refers to public figures and events. If you read my account of the 2004 U.S. Presidential election in Ohio and then do your own research and find that the public record contradicts key points of my narrative, you can not only write a new narrative that is more in line with the public record but that is also very likely to displace mine. When Jean Rhys writes Wide Sargasso Sea and gives a new history for the wife of Charlotte Brontë’s Rochester, she does not displace Jane Eyre—indeed, the shelf life of Rhys’s novel is crucially dependent on the continued vitality of Brontë’s.

4. Referentiality has a significant ethical dimension. To continue with the previous example, in writing my account of the 2004 election in Ohio, I claim to offer not an objective view of the events and people I refer to (narrative’s necessary processes of selection and emphasis render objectivity an irrelevant concept even for historical narrative) but one that is responsible to the
historical record. If I am not responsible to that record, I not only run the risk of having my narrative dislodged by one that is more responsible but I also violate the ethics of referentiality, the tacit understanding between author and audience in historical narrative that the historian’s narrative is rooted in the events and facts that have an existence independent of that narrative.

Similarly, if I write a memoir, I claim to offer not an objective view of my life and its events but one that corresponds to my experience of that life. I may find that I can serve that purpose better by employing some techniques usually associated with fiction such as the verbatim presentation of dialogues or even internal focalization of characters other than my former self. But again my narrative as a whole needs to be responsible to my actual experience. If, like James Frey in *A Million Little Pieces*, an example I will return to below, I invent major events in my memoir, then I have violated the ethics of referentiality.

5. Positive judgments about the ethics of referentiality are a necessary but not sufficient condition for positive second-order aesthetic judgments of nonfictional narrative. In *A Million Little Pieces* Frey tells a story about his recovery from addictions to drugs and alcohol, and he tells it well enough for Oprah Winfrey to have made it a selection of her book club. (To be sure some readers offered negative Level Two aesthetic judgments of it, but these readers were in the minority.) When, however, the website thesmokingun.com revealed that Frey had not experienced but invented some of the more spectacular events in the book, *A Million Little Pieces* lost both its reputation for being an honest confrontation of the difficulties of addiction and recovery and its status as a worthy aesthetic achievement. The irony of course is that Frey included the inventions in order to make the memoir more compelling. But once the ethical judgments about Frey’s inventions came into play, these inventions made the book more embarrassing than compelling. At the same time, being responsible to the demands of the ethics of referentiality is not a sufficient condition for aesthetic success. Such success also requires skill with the craft of narrative, and an ability to exercise that skill in the service of a significant set of rhetorical purposes.
6. As cases like Frey’s show, nonfictional narrative always has the potential for some conflict between the ethics of referentiality and the aesthetics of narrative purpose. Using techniques more typically associated with fiction; collapsing several small events into a single scene; combining several different people into a single character: such choices are typically made to enhance the aesthetic quality of the narrative. And they can succeed without violating the ethics of referentiality. But they also move the author toward the road taken by Frey and others who violate that ethics. A full-fledged rhetorical poetics of nonfiction would focus a great deal of attention on this potential for conflict not in order to fix permanently a dividing line between ethically sound and ethically unsound techniques but in order to see how and why individual works set that line for themselves and what the different ethical and aesthetic consequences of those settings are.

Turning to narratives that foreground the synthetic at the expense of the mimetic, I would like to note why the corpus so far has not included one (Atonement, to be sure, does make its synthetic component prominent, but its effects also depend on our strong engagement with its mimetic component). The gap follows from my choice between two different principles of selection, each designed to generate a diverse corpus for the study. The principle I didn’t choose would have generated that diversity by employing the criterion of selecting narratives with different dominant readerly interests: mimetic, thematic, synthetic, mimetic-thematic, mimetic-synthetic, thematic-synthetic, and mimetic-thematic-synthetic. Such a group would have afforded a considerable range of progressions and an extensive range of interpretive, ethical, and aesthetic judgments. But I opted for a principle that would generate a sample that would meet three other criteria I deemed necessary for an adequate study of judgments and progressions. In brief, the sample would require (1) close attention to different aspects of progression (beginning, middle, ending); (2) it would require the analysis of some particularly complex and difficult ethical judgments and their affective consequences; and (3) the sample would require an engagement with the complications to narrative dynamics presented by hybrid forms. The one negative consequence of my choice is that it did not lead me to a narrative with the synthetic component dominant. In choosing such a narrative at this stage of the study, I can ask not simply, “what judgments does this text invite us to make and what is the underlying logic of its progression?” but rather “how do the principles of rhetorical poetics developed in the earlier
chapters help us understand the dynamics of this text, and how might this text complicate those principles?” And in a rhetorical theory equivalent of a harmonic convergence, I choose to ask these questions about Margaret Atwood’s “Happy Endings.”

Atwood’s story is set up as a lesson from a creative-writing-teacher narrator to neophyte students (the implied narratees) about plot in general and endings in particular. It begins this way:

John and Mary meet.
What happens next?
If you want a happy ending, try A.

A
John and Mary fall in love and get married. They both have worthwhile and remunerative jobs which they find stimulating and challenging. They buy a charming house. Real estate values go up. Eventually, when they can afford live-in help, they have two children to whom they are devoted. The children turn out well. John and Mary have a stimulating and challenging sex life and worthwhile friends. They go on fun vacations together. They retire. They both have hobbies which they find stimulating and challenging. Eventually they die. This is the end of the story. (213–14)

The middle of “Happy Endings” consists of five variations on A (B through F) that all have the same ending as A. “Happy Endings” itself ends as follows:

You’ll have to face it, the endings are the same however you slice it. Don’t be deluded by other endings, they’re all fake, either deliberately fake with malicious intent to deceive, or just motivated by excessive optimism if not by downright sentimentality.

The only authentic ending is the one provided here:

John and Mary die. John and Mary die. John and Mary die.

So much for endings. Beginnings are always more fun. True connoisseurs, however are known to favor the stretch in between, since it’s the hardest to do anything with.

That’s about all that can be said for plots, which anyway are just one thing after another, a what and a what and a what and a what.

Now try How and Why. (216; emphasis in original)
If we plunge right in and apply the main concepts of rhetorical poetics, our analysis would look something like this: The synthetic clearly trumps the mimetic in the six variations of the plot. John and Mary are counters that the implied Atwood licenses the narrator to move around at will. In each story they—and the other characters who sometimes replace them as the focus of the main action (Madge, James, and Fred)—are all stereotypes (conventional happy couple, exploitative male, woman who allows herself to be exploited, etc.). Their lives also play out according to formulaic patterns. For this reason, although A appears to be that rare thing, a narrative without instabilities, it has much the same function as B through F: it takes its stereotypical characters through one conventional trajectory to the predictable ending. Indeed, by E, the narrator is flaunting the triumph of the synthetic over the mimetic:

Yes, but Fred has a bad heart. The rest of the story is about how kind and understanding they both are until Fred dies. Then Madge devotes herself to charity work until the end of A. If you like, it can be “Madge,” “cancer,” “guilty and confused,” and “bird watching.” (215)

As often happens, the foregrounding of the synthetic brings the thematic component into greater prominence, and at this stage we can hypothesize that Atwood’s purpose is to persuade her audience of the limitations of writing for—and reading for—the plot. Indeed, attending to our interpretive and ethical judgments seems to support that hypothesis. Given the stereotyped characters and plots, our interpretive and ethical judgments are very clear and straightforward, but there is not much at stake in them: they have no significant affective consequences. Strikingly, however, that very lack of affective consequence itself points to the positive function of the judgments, the way they contribute to the achievement of Atwood’s thematic purpose. Along with the larger thematic point about endings, the story makes many local thematic points through its satirical send-ups of a range of cultural ideas about such matters as relationships, sex, self-image, what constitutes happiness, and the language we use to describe these things, but none of these is especially startling. Consequently, the interpretive and ethical judgments point to a positive if limited aesthetic achievement, since the thematic points are those that many would already agree with. In other words, although the story effectively deploys our interpretive and ethical judgments in the service of its thematic points, the stakes of the story are not particularly high and so the story’s aesthetic
achievement is less than that of any of the short stories we have examined in Part One or Part Two.

Now while that commentary employs the concepts I have been using in a reasonably intelligent way, the analysis is flawed from the beginning because it misses one of the story’s major affective components and thus one of its primary effects: its contagious sense of play with these stereotypes of character and plot, and, indeed, with the whole idea of the lesson. One way to get at this effect is to note that, although the narrator insists on the inevitability of the single ending “John and Mary die,” the story’s mood is far more upbeat than that insistence would lead us to expect. If we want to apply not just the concepts of rhetorical poetics but also its principles, then we should start with the a posteriori principle and reason back from effects to causes.

How does the foregrounding of the synthetic help create the story’s playful spirit? First, because that foregrounding itself involves a lot of play. Notice, for example, the repetition in A (above) of the phrase “stimulating and challenging” to describe John and Mary’s jobs, sex life, and hobbies. Such repetition would normally be a sign of an incompetent, even lazy, writer, but given the insistence on the characters as synthetic counters, the repetition has a different and double-layered effect. The first effect is that it adds to our understanding of the narrator’s general disdain for plot. She is conducting a demonstration of the way all plots inevitably converge on a single ending (even if some plots pretend to end happily by stopping before they reach their true conclusion), and, wanting to get to that ending, she can’t be bothered with the niceties of style. The second effect is to call attention to the implied Atwood’s performance as the constructor of this narrator, a performance that conveys a certain wicked delight in that construction because it allows her to use the narrator’s formulaic repetition of “stimulating and challenging” to cue the audience to her own play with that formula: this is an odd threesome to apply that same formula to. In particular, what exactly does it mean to have a sex life that is at once “stimulating and challenging”? In this way, Atwood’s play points to the ultimate poverty of what appears to be a strong positive description.

In other words, the foregrounding of the synthetic allows us to focus not simply on the thematic point of the narrator’s lesson for her fledging writers but even more on the implied Atwood and her performance. That performance suggests that she is playing a deeper game for her audience than the narrator is for her narratees. Perhaps the most obvious and compelling sign of the distance between the narrator and the implied Atwood and of Atwood’s deeper game is that, despite the narrator’s insistent lesson,
“Happy Endings” does not end with “John and Mary die” but rather with “Now try How and Why.”

That ending also appropriately contains the most important clue to Atwood’s deeper game. That game is to have “Happy Endings” exemplify what can be done with How and Why without calling attention to what she is doing because doing so would spoil both the fun and her more serious point about reading for How and Why rather than What. In other words, when the narrator says “Now try How and Why,” the connoisseur readers—Atwood’s authorial audience—can see the line as the conclusion of Atwood’s own successful try and, thus, her arrival at her distinctive happy ending. Atwood’s trick—and the source of her contagious joyful play—is the old one of hiding something in plain sight, in this case her exemplification of what can be done with How and Why as the narrator carries out her denigration of What. If we focus only or even primarily on the narrator’s point about What, as in my initial analysis, we miss the fun—and the achievement. But if we look past the What to the How and Why of “Happy Endings,” we recognize how inventive Atwood is with “the stretch in between” “John and Mary meet” and “Now try How and Why” and how deceptively easy she makes that invention seem.

These points can be illuminated by recalling the discussions of the surprise ending of “Roman Fever” and *Atonement* in Part One. My initial analysis of “Happy Endings” not only misses its playful spirit, but by not registering the distance between implied author and narrator, it also misses the way in which “Now Try How and Why” is not simply a straightforward farewell in the form of the narrator’s instruction to her students. The story’s last line is also the completion of the implied author’s performance, appropriately surprising us by violating the narrator’s dictum about all endings, and cuing us to find the value added in the story’s own handling of How and Why.

The How resides not in the stereotypical characters and events of the John-and-Mary stories but rather in both the attitude of play Atwood conveys in the double-voiced telling (as with “simulating and challenging”) and in the unpredictability of the moves between one variation and the next. To put this point another way, the implied Atwood asks her connoisseur audience—her dropping that term into the narrator’s concluding remarks is another case of hiding in plain sight—to engage with her performance at every level from the style to the use of stock characters to the sudden shifts in events and the anticlimaxes within each variation. In D, for example, Fred and Madge’s “charming house”—all houses in “Happy Endings” are “charming”—is “by the seashore and one day a tidal wave approaches. Real estate values go down” (215).
In other words, we move from section to section not because we are invested in the characters and their fates: John and Mary (or Fred and Madge) die and we don’t feel much one way or the other; nor do we hope against hope that in the next section they will avert this fate. Instead, we are invested in discovering what new variation on the underlying pattern of “John and Mary meet, John and Mary live together, John and Mary die” the implied Atwood will come up with and what local satiric points she’ll make within that variation. The principle of progression gives Atwood a fair amount of leeway—about the specifics of the variation (in teaching the story, one can help the students grasp the principle of progression by inviting them to invent two other variations), and even, to some extent, the numbers of them (she could do, say, five or seven, rather than the six she gives us, though fewer than five will reduce the story’s effect and more than seven will likely yield diminishing returns). The order of the variations follows the principle of increasing emphasis on the synthetic quality of the material.

I have quoted variation E above, and Variation F begins “If you think this is all too bourgeois, make John a revolutionary and Mary a counter-revolutionary and see how far that gets you” (215). How does one make a high-spirited and sophisticated story out of a focused demonstration by a narrator that attention to plot is limiting? This is How.

And Why would the implied Atwood undertake that How? In her own terms, to show that effective stories can—and by extension often do—depend more on their How than on their What. If the narrator’s lesson is about the tyranny of the single ending, “John and Mary die,” Atwood’s lesson is not just that it is possible to escape that tyranny, but also that the power of stories resides not in their events but in the treatment of these events. Translating Atwood’s Why into the terms of this study, we can say that her How is designed to show that effective progressions can depend as much on the dynamics of the relationship between implied author and authorial audience as on the dynamics of instability-complication-resolution. Thus, the lack of the affective consequences for our interpretive and ethical judgments of the characters in the six variations of the John-and-Mary plot is a sign of how those judgments matter so much less than the ones associated with the dynamics of the implied author-authorial audience relationship.

At this point, then, we can see one of the ways in which “Happy Endings” adds to the principles of rhetorical poetics. The story displays a new way of generating narrativity. It contains but subordinates the standard elements—the introduction and complication of instabilities involving the characters and the judgments associated with those instabilities—to a different kind of narrative movement: that of the implied author’s dynamic
performance, the logic of which only gradually emerges as the other kind of narrativity continues to recede, and our judgments of it.

“Happy Endings” offers us a set of interpretive judgments about the implied author’s moves that are—I can’t resist—stimulating and challenging. The implied Atwood is asking, “can you keep up with me?” and much of the pleasure of the story comes from our satisfaction in being able to answer yes—but only in the sense of following closely behind. To the extent that we were able to anticipate Atwood’s every move, we would find these judgments much less stimulating and challenging. Our ethical judgments are closely connected to our interpretive ones. Atwood’s performance is built on the values of trust and reciprocity—I will hide but I will trust you to find me because I am hiding in plain sight; I will require some effort to be found, but that effort will make the finding more rewarding. But just as important, her performance affirms the value of sharing in high-spirited play with and about the dynamics of narrative. For these reasons and for Atwood’s mastery of the requisite craft, “Happy Endings” is an impressive aesthetic achievement.

Now the class of works that foreground the synthetic at the expense of the mimetic is itself diverse, so I do not mean to suggest that this analysis of “Happy Endings” provides a clear template for analyzing all such works. Instead, it is to suggest that the concepts of rhetorical poetics, when subordinated to the principles for employing these concepts, especially the a posteriori principle, are well-suited for dealing with such metafictions. More extensive work with more texts of this general kind (or indeed, even with “Happy Endings”) might very well lead to some new or revised concepts. But, as I noted in chapter 3, the same can be said about more extensive work with more texts that foreground the mimetic. The more general point, which I have expressed before, also brings me to the happy ending of Experiencing Fiction: rhetorical poetics always has the “Construction in Progress” sign out, even as it remains open for business 24/7.


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