Mimetic Conventions, Ethics, and Homodiegetic Narration
What Hemingway and a Rhetorical Theory of Narrative Can Do for Each Other: The Example of “My Old Man”

This essay returns to some previous issues—progression, naive narration, the paradox of paralipsis—and looks at them in the context, first, of trying to solve some interpretive problems in the first short story Hemingway published in the United States and, second, of thinking about how those solutions might shed light on rhetorical theory. In addition, the essay continues some of the concerns of the analyses of voice by explicitly raising the question of the flesh-and-blood reader’s response to the ethics of the story.

My attempt to have theory and narrative be mutually illuminating here points to one important relation of theory and practice. More generally, this essay and the others in this volume seek not only to illustrate principles of my approach to narrative as rhetoric and to interpret the set of narratives under investigation but also to stretch my understanding of those principles and to suggest that the analyses of the interpretive issues in these narratives will have implications for our reading of others.
Chapter 4

Interpretive Problems in “My Old Man”

Just what happens at the end of “My Old Man”? And just how good is Hemingway’s first published story? According to such early commentators as Sheridan Baker, Carlos Baker, and Arthur Waldhorn, the ending reveals Joe Butler’s disillusionment with his father when Joe learns that he has mistakenly been admiring a crooked jockey. For them, the story is a rather unexceptional achievement, one derivative of Sherwood Anderson’s “I Want to Know Why,” another tale of boys and horses in which a naive narrator becomes disillusioned with an adult male whom he has valued above all others.

According to more recent commentators such as Sydney J. Krause, Robert Lewis, Gerry Brenner, and Paul Smith, the ending is more complicated than that; in their view, Hemingway has given Joe’s tale a “Jamesian” twist by providing evidence that Joe’s disillusionment is unfounded. Brenner, who pushes this line the furthest, maintains that Hemingway asks his reader to see that Joe’s father has been acting to reform the crooked world of horse racing and that the bettors’ final complaints about “what he pulled” are testimony to his honesty (9). For this group, the Jamesian twist adds to the sophistication and quality of the story; rather than being derivative of “I Want to Know Why,” “My Old Man” is a step beyond it.

According to Philip Sipiora, who has offered the most recent extended treatment, the ending suggests that Joe recognizes both that his father was involved in fixing races and that he has reformed, a dual recognition that allows Joe to retain his respect for his father. Although Sipiora does not explicitly address the question of the tale’s quality, his treatment everywhere implicitly testifies to his belief that it is a significant achievement.

These divergent views of the meaning and value of “My Old Man” present interpretive problems that constitute a theoretical opportunity. The divergence is sufficient to give me pause before simply going ahead and proposing another contender to the title of Most Perspicuous Reading. Instead, I would like to consider both the meaning and the value of the story in light of my approach to narrative as rhetoric, with special attention to the textual features most involved in the disagreement. At the same time, I would like to make not just the story
but also the approach an object of investigation so that theory and story can be mutually illuminating. That is, rather than simply invoke rhetorical theory to “solve” the interpretive problems of the story, I would like the theory itself to be open to revision or complication by Hemingway’s story. The traffic flow at this intersection of Theory and Story will become clearer as I proceed. For now, I want to consider the details of “My Old Man” that lead to its interpretive problems.

Two key elements of the tale are the sources of disagreement: Hemingway’s choice of a naive narrator, and the suddenness with which Joe’s feelings for his father alter at the end. Because the naïveté of Joe—the-narrator matches that of Joe—the-character (and this feature of the story is one that we must come back to), he never fully articulates his understanding of the final events of the story. Consequently, we are left to make our own inferences when we read the concluding sequence: the gamblers’ remarks that Joe’s father “got his all right”; George Gardner’s reassuring words, “Your old man was one swell guy”; and Joe’s final comments, “But I don’t know. Seems like when they get started they don’t leave a guy nothing” (129). We reach different conclusions depending on (1) the emphases we put on these final comments (is “But I don’t know” a repudiation of Gardner or an expression of genuine doubt?) and (2) the way we add up the previous evidence about Joe’s father’s behavior and Joe’s understanding of it.

Given these sources of disagreement, the story presents a twofold theoretical opportunity: to explore the nature and functions of naive narration and to investigate endings as the conclusions not just of plots—some sequences of events—but also of progressions: audience’s involvement with and response to such sequences. I begin with the larger, more overarching concern, the concept of narrative as a developing progression of readerly engagement. This discussion has some overlap with the account given in chapter 1 before my analysis of The Waves, but it has a slightly different emphasis.

Character, Progression, and Narrative as Rhetoric

In using a phrase such as “developing progression of readerly engagement,” I am calling attention to the way my rhetorical approach
focuses on the text as an invitation to an experience that is dynamic in at least two ways. First, the experience is crucially influenced by the movement of the narrative through time. Second, the experience is multilayered, one that engages a reader’s intellect, emotions, judgments, and ethics simultaneously. As noted in chapter 1, the general term I use to refer to the concept of narrative-as-dynamic-experience is progression. Since the discussion in chapter 1 began with character and moved toward progression, it will be helpful here to begin with progression and focus on response.

Progression refers to the way in which a narrative establishes its own logic of forward movement (and thus addresses the first sense of narrative as dynamic experience), and it refers to the way that movement carries with it invitations to different kinds of responses in the reader (and thus it addresses the second sense of narrative as dynamic experience). The structuralist distinction between story and discourse helps explain the way the logic of narrative movement can develop. Progressions can be generated through what happens with the elements of story, that is, through the introduction of instabilities—conflictual relations between or within characters that lead to complications in the action and sometimes eventually to resolution. Progressions can also be generated through what happens with the elements of discourse, that is, through tensions or conflictual relations—relations involving significant gaps in values, beliefs, or knowledge—between authors and readers or narrators and readers. Unlike instabilities, tensions do not need to be resolved for narratives to achieve closure. One typical consequence of naive narration is that it establishes some tension between the narrator and the reader.

For example, in the beginning of A Farewell to Arms, as I argued in chapter 3, Hemingway generates the movement of his narrative, first, by creating a tension between Frederic’s unreflective beliefs about the war and the ones Hemingway asks us to adopt and, second, by placing Frederic in the unstable situation of war and in his complicated relationship with Catherine. The progression then develops from the complications arising from the instabilities, and those complications eventually alter the tension so that, as Frederic’s beliefs gradually change, the tension is gradually resolved.

To account for the multiple layers of our responses to narrative, I
suggest that as we follow the movement of instabilities and tensions, we respond to the text's—and especially to the characters'—mimetic, thematic, and synthetic components. That is, we respond to the characters as human agents, as representing some ideas, beliefs, or values, and as artificial constructs playing particular roles in the larger construct that is the whole work. In *Farewell*, we respond to Count Greffi, for example, as an individual with specific traits, as representing a set of attitudes that illustrate how to deal with the world's essential emptiness, and as a device for instructing Frederic and the reader in those attitudes. These responses to Greffi become part of our larger experience because they interact with the dynamic sequences of responses we have been making to Frederic from the first page. That larger sequence influences our response to Greffi. Our judgments of his attitudes, for example, depend in part on the judgments we have made about the attitudes espoused by Frederic, Rinaldi, the priest, Catherine, and others. Furthermore, our response to Greffi becomes a new part of the whole sequence, one that adds further nuances to our complex experience of the whole narrative, and then influences our response to later events such as Frederic's final action in the narrative.

Count Greffi's role in *Farewell* illustrates another significant point: not every character or scene will *directly* contribute to the introduction, complication, or resolution of an instability or a tension, yet everyone will have some role in the progression. Nothing Greffi does affects the sequence of events, and nothing he does increases or resolves the tension between Frederic's views and Hemingway's. Nevertheless, his appearance allows Hemingway to introduce for Frederic and the audience one admirable way of living with the knowledge of the world's destructiveness. Greffi thereby contributes to the progression by contributing to the audience's understanding of Frederic's eventual response to his own knowledge of that destructiveness.

To avoid the trap of a priori analysis, I make no claims either about the kinds of progressions that narratives must follow or about the most effective or most frequent relationships among a text's mimetic, thematic, and synthetic components. Each progression will establish its own relationships, and different successful narratives can establish very different relationships.
Chapter 4

The Progression of “My Old Man”

Approaching “My Old Man” from this perspective, we can recognize something quite striking about its dynamics. Despite its apparent straightforwardness, the story actually develops from the intersection of two distinct paths: one created by the tensions in Joe’s narration and the other created by the instabilities in his father’s life as a jockey. The tensions focus our interest very strongly on Joe and his understanding of what he is telling us, whereas the instabilities focus our interest very strongly on Joe’s father and what happens to him. Again quite strikingly, the interaction of the tensions and instabilities makes the relationship between father and son a principal interest of the tale, but until the very end of the narrative that relationship is essentially stable: Joe loves and admires his father, and there is no conflict between them.

This understanding of the developing progression already points to some special features of Hemingway’s ending. He draws upon the previous tensions and instabilities, first, to make the relationship between father and son the most important focus of the whole story. The resolution of the instabilities in Butler’s life becomes subordinated to its effect on Joe’s relation to him. Second, Hemingway draws upon the previous tensions and instabilities to transform the father-son relationship from one stable entity into another. Admiration is replaced by some other feeling, which in turn complicates the love. Indeed, understanding more precisely how Hemingway transforms the progression of the whole after Butler’s death will not only lead to my proposal about the ending but will also provide the key to seeing what “My Old Man” can do for narrative theory. But before we can analyze that transformation, we need to look more closely at the interaction between the tensions and the instabilities in the beginning and the middle of the tale. I will focus on those elements that are most relevant to our understanding of Joe as naive narrator, of Butler as a moral agent, and of the ending: Joe’s opening account of how his father kept his weight down; the juxtapositions of Joe’s views with his father’s during their time in Milan; Joe’s commentary on George Gardner after the fixed Kzar-Kircubbin race at St. Cloud; Butler’s actions and reactions between that race and purchasing his own horse; and the final paragraphs of the story.
Joe's opening account does not introduce any instabilities, and, with the exception of minor indications of Joe's superior knowledge about what has happened to his father, it does not introduce tensions until its end. Instead, the account strongly establishes the initial stable situation between Joe and his father. It also introduces us to Joe as an unsophisticated narrator. His references to what he can "guess, looking at it now" and to what his father was like "toward the last" (151) indicate that he has a story to tell, but Joe does not begin that story at the beginning or explain why he begins with this account of how his father kept his weight down. Indeed, because he plunges into the narrative by telling us about habitual actions that do not lead to other actions in the story, he seems less interested in composing a narrative than in just talking about his father. But Hemingway, we realize, is using Joe's apparently unsophisticated narration in some sophisticated ways. To explain those uses more fully, it will be helpful to introduce another element of the rhetorical approach.

Implicit in the discussion of Joe as unsophisticated narrator and Hemingway as sophisticated implied author is a distinction between two audiences, between what Peter J. Rabinowitz has called the authorial and the narrative audiences. On Rabinowitz's account, which I shall examine more closely in chapter 7, the narrative audience is the one implicitly addressed by the narrator; it takes on the beliefs and values that the narrator ascribes to it, and in most cases it responds to the characters and events as if they were real. Joining the narrative audience is crucial for our experience of the mimetic component of the text and sometimes for the thematic and synthetic components as well. The authorial audience takes on the beliefs and knowledge that the author assumes it has, including the knowledge that it is reading a constructed text. Joining the authorial audience is crucial for our experience of all the invitations offered by the different components of the text. Engaging with the text involves entering both of these textually signaled audiences simultaneously; engaging also means that we bring our individual subjectivities, our flesh-and-blood selves to bear on our experience, a point I will pursue further when I discuss the evaluation of "My Old Man."

In the opening pages of Joe's narration, we respond strongly to Joe's voice and immediately start reading mimetically. At the same
time, as members of the authorial audience our covert awareness of the synthetic component of Joe's character helps us recognize how Hemingway uses Joe's talk as a brilliant beginning to the story, a beginning that performs four important functions.

First and most obviously, as Joe's narration establishes the initial stable situation, it reveals the strength and importance of his feelings for his father: "When I'd sit watching him working out in the hot sun I sure felt fond of him. He sure was fun and he done his work so hard" (116). Second, the account validates Joe's feelings—and contributes to the establishment of the audience's very positive initial evaluation of Butler. Joe's narration casually reveals how Butler included Joe in what he was doing, and it shows the way the two of them shared the pleasure of the workout: "I'd help him pull off his boots. . . . 'Come on, kid,' he'd say, 'let's get moving.' Then we'd start off jogging around the infield. . . . when he'd catch me looking at him, he'd grin and say, 'Sweating plenty?' When my old man grinned, nobody could help but grin too. We'd keep right on running out toward the mountains" (115). Third, the account reinforces this positive evaluation by linking Butler's workout with the elements of nature that surround it. (Roadwork has never sounded so appealing.) Joe and his father would start out "with the dew all over everything and the sun just starting to get going" (115). They'd be "running nice, along one of those roads with all the trees along both sides of them that run out from San Siro." They'd run out "toward the mountains" until Butler would decide to rest against one of the trees before beginning to skip rope in the sun (115–16).

Fourth, the account implies an equivalence between Butler's working out and his working, and at the end it suggests that the working out is superior to the working. In Joe's description, his father's jumping rope is very much like riding: he'd move "up and down a patch of road" with "the rope going cloppetty, cloppetty, clop, clop, clop" (116). As he jumped, he'd often draw spectators. Most important, the running and jumping would produce for Butler the effect that riding produced for other jockeys. "Most jocks can just about ride off all they want to. A jock loses about a kilo every time he rides, but my old man was sort of dried out and he couldn't keep his kilos down without all that running" (116).
David Lodge’s way of talking about metaphor and metonymy in his essay on “Cat in the Rain” provides a helpful first step in understanding this last point. At the level of story, the running has a metonymic relation to the riding: Butler runs in order to be fit to ride. The discourse, however, makes the running equivalent to—and hence puts it in a metaphorical relation to—the riding: Butler’s running resembles and produces the same (or better) effects than his riding. The second step is recognizing that the shift from metonymy to metaphor highlights the narrative’s first significant instability and tension—located in Joe’s remark that his father was “sort of dried out.” Joe has repeatedly stated that Butler sweats profusely when working out: Joe describes “the sweat pouring off his [father’s] face” (116) and says that Butler would finish jumping with a “whirring that’d drive the sweat out on his face like water” (116). In the authorial audience we cannot take Joe’s remark about Butler’s being dried out at face value, and so we begin to separate ourselves from Joe’s perspective. At the same time, the odd physiological reaction to the riding—as well as the implication that the running and jumping rope are a better substitute—suggests that there is something unstable in Butler’s relation to his work, that the psychological dimension of that relation is far more complicated than Joe knows.

This suggestion is immediately reinforced by the next several moves of the narrative. First, Joe reports the way his father, “looking tired and red-faced and too big for his silks,” stared at the “cool and kid-looking” Italian jockey, Regoli, as if Regoli had just bumped him and then in reply to Joe’s question “What’s the matter?” said, “Oh, to hell with it” (117). Second, Hemingway juxtaposes Joe’s perspective with his father’s in a single sentence: “San Siro was the swellest course I’d ever seen but the old man said it was a dog’s life” (117). Third, Hemingway juxtaposes Joe’s disquisition on how “nuts” he was about the horses with his father’s statement, “None of these things are horses, Joe. They’d kill that bunch of skates for their hides and hoofs up at Paris” (118).

These tensions between Joe’s understanding and the authorial audience’s and the corresponding hints at instabilities in Butler’s work situation prepare the way for our understanding of the first major instability in Butler’s life story: the events surrounding his winning the
Primo Comercio. We see that Butler has been going along with the fixing of races and has agreed to participate in the fix at this race, too. But going along with the system means going against his basic nature—it is drying him out and leaving him dissatisfied with his situation. Unable to take it anymore, he rebels and rides to win. The rebellion, however, gives him no satisfaction because it gives him no power. After the argument with Holbrook and the unnamed Italian, “his face was white and he looked sick as hell” (118) because he realizes that by rebelling he has jeopardized his livelihood. Every other event in Joe’s father’s life is a consequence of the resulting unstable situation.

As we infer the instabilities in Butler’s situation, we also begin to complicate our evaluation of his character. He is not the crook that early interpretations of the story have assumed, nor is he the crusading hero that Brenner depicts. Instead, he is a fundamentally decent man caught in a corrupt system, a man who has been complicit with that system but who also rebels against it. He tries not to undo the system but just to get out from under it.

When his flight to Paris does not prove to be an effective escape because he remains blackballed and unable to make a living, Butler uses the system to his own advantage, taking George Gardner’s inside information and betting heavily on the Kzar-Kircubbin race. This incident contributes to the progression by eventually making possible Butler’s effort to ride without being controlled by the fixers, when he uses his winnings to buy his own horse. I will discuss that development shortly, but for now I will focus on the more immediate effect of the incident itself on the progression: the further development of the tensions between Joe and the authorial audience, a development that has important implications for the ending. The development arises from Joe’s response to his first clear look at the corruption of horse racing.

When Butler reminds Joe that the race was fixed by saying that George had to be a “great jock” to keep Kzar from winning, Joe remarks: “I thought, I wish I were a jockey and could have rode him instead of that son of a bitch. And that was funny, thinking of George Gardner as a son of a bitch because I’d always liked him and he’d given us the winner, but I guess that’s what he is, all right” (124). By express-
ing his conclusion this way, Joe reveals his value system: a jockey who would hold back a horse as magnificent as Kzar is a "son of a bitch," regardless of whatever redeeming features he might have. Hemingway, however, has written the scene so that in the authorial audience we recognize the limits of that value system. Joe’s last sentence about Gardner indicates that he thinks he is admitting a difficult truth, but in the authorial audience we recognize that Joe’s conclusion is based on his partial view of the situation, a recognition that largely depends on the way the story builds a link between Gardner and Butler.

Hemingway links Gardner and Butler, first, by giving them a common voice: as Joe records their dialogue, he unwittingly shows how much knowledge the two men share—when Butler asks, “What’s the dope, George?” Gardner simply answers, “He won’t win” (121)—and how attuned they are to each other. Butler's first question is asked "in an ordinary tone of voice," and then when George replies in a low one, Butler asks his second question, "Who will?" in an equally low voice (121). Furthermore, they are comfortable enough with each other and with what they are doing to joke. In addition to linking them through voice, Hemingway also links them through action: once Butler uses George’s information to make his bet, he is again as complicit in the fixed system as George is. What Joe doesn’t see is that if Gardner is a son of a bitch, his father is, too. But just as we depart from Holbrook’s evaluation of Butler as a “son of a bitch,” we also depart from Joe’s judgment of Gardner. Gardner, too, is a man caught in the system. He is acting as Butler has acted many times in Milan, except that he is now also trying to help his friend beat the system. Above all, what we see is that Joe’s condemnation is misdirected. His moral sense rightly tells him that he should feel angry, but he understands the system so dimly that he condemns the jockey rather than those like Holbrook who control him. At the same time, neither Gardner nor Butler is off Hemingway’s hook: complicity is complicity, not necessity.

Butler’s actions after collecting his winnings further shade our evaluation of him. Brenner suggests that Butler’s motive has been noble: he takes advantage of Gardner's information to buy his own horse and battle the corrupt system. Had the progression been such that Butler’s next act was the purchase of Gilford, then Brenner would
be right on target. But Butler's winnings seem to create another variation of the basic instability established after the Primo Commercio: what will he do with his life now? Joe describes their days: "We'd sit at the Cafe de la Paix, my old man and me, and we had a big drag with the waiter because my old man drank whisky and it cost five francs, and that meant a good tip when the saucers were counted up. My old man was drinking more than I'd ever seen him, but he wasn't riding at all now and besides he said that whisky kept his weight down. But I noticed he was putting it on, all right, just the same. . . . he was dropping money every day at the track. He'd feel sort of doleful after the last race, if he'd lost on that day, until we'd get to our table and he'd have his first whisky and then he'd be fine" (125).

Butler's taking advantage of Gardner's information is the flip side of Butler's winning the Primo Commercio. There he asserted himself against the system of fixing by refusing to go along with it. Here he asserts himself against it by taking advantage of it. But each rebellion is an isolated act, and each one leaves him dissatisfied. He cannot take satisfaction in the first act because of its consequences for his work, and he cannot take satisfaction in the second because it has again made him complicit in the system. Buying his own horse, however, is clearly a step toward a positive resolution of these instabilities. Not only does Butler start his "running and sweating again," but when he stands in the place stall after his first race, he is "all sweating and happy"—as he is after working out (126, my emphasis). Now that he is outside the system of fixing, Butler is no longer dried out.

When Butler's brief happiness ends in the Prix du Marat, Joe is left to deal with the consequences, and like the situation after the Kzar-Kircubbin race, he assesses his situation as a result of the perspective offered by someone else, this time the bettors. But the situation—and our relation to Joe—is more complicated here. As I noted earlier, the ending suddenly and completely transforms the stable relationship between Joe and his father. It remains unstable only for as long as it takes Joe to assimilate the bettors' harsh words and react to George's comforting ones; then it takes a new—and apparently permanent—stable shape.

Hemingway is able to effect this transformation because the source of the tensions between narrator and authorial audience has also al-
ways been a potential source of instability between Joe and his father: the gap between the complex reality of Butler's life and Joe's limited understanding of it always had the potential to affect the relationship between the two of them, either through the misunderstanding itself or through the consequences of its diminishment. Hemingway uses the bettors' words to activate the potential. In a sense, then, the question about the ending is whether the activation and resolution of this instability also resolve the tensions between Joe and the authorial audience.

The analysis I've offered so far points to an answer. Joe reacts to the bettors' words the way he reacts to his father's words after the Kzar-Kircubbin race, that is, he believes that he now sees something that he had been blind to before. To be sure, the bettors' harshness is directed at "the stuff he's pulled"—at his not always going along with the fix. What Joe sees is that his father was, in some way or other, part of the corrupt world of horse racing. Thus, he finds no solace in George's words—"your old man was one swell guy"—because George only repeats Joe's old truth and because Joe believes that George himself is a son of a bitch. Although Joe stops short of fully repudiating Gardner's words and adopting the bettors' views, his "But I don't know" in combination with his final words does indicate that his admiration for his father is completely undermined—and that he has a new, deeper sense of the harshness of the world: "Seems like when they get started they don't leave a guy nothing."^2

In the authorial audience we recognize that Joe's understanding is still limited. The nuanced evaluation of Butler that we have developed through the course of the progression now functions as the standard against which we measure Joe's conclusions. In that measuring, we see that the tension is altered but not resolved. Joe rightly understands that there was more to his father than he knew, but he gets stuck on his father's participation in the crooked world of horse racing, blinding himself both to his father's rebellion and to his genuine love. Furthermore, following a point made by Robert Lewis, we can see that Joe's failure to appreciate Gardner's kindness to him here is itself a sign of Joe's occluded vision.

Strikingly, the tension between Joe and the authorial audience gives his final sentence, which he uses to thematize his experience, an
added twist. We are deeply moved by Joe’s devastation. In losing his father, he has essentially lost his world. Although he is now an adolescent, he has made only the smallest of steps toward establishing his independence—occasionally going off bumming with other kids and once showing interest in a girl. But Butler’s acquiring Gilford brought Joe completely back within the orbit of his father’s life. Now that life is gone and so is his sense of who his father was. Accompanying this loss is a new awareness of the world’s capacity for inflicting pain. Furthermore, the gap between Joe’s understanding of Butler and ours gives the loss an additional poignance. We see that although Joe has lost all his admiration for his father, there is still much about Butler to be admired. Thus, we agree with Joe’s last sentence because it captures something about the world’s potential for cruelty, but we also disagree with Joe’s needless overgeneralization: “Seems like when they get started they don’t leave a guy nothing.”

**Ethics, Evaluation, and the Flesh-and-Blood Reader**

Even as we participate in the authorial and narrative audiences, we never lose our identities as flesh-and-blood readers, and that fact adds a further layer to our experience. Just as the authorial audience evaluates the narrator’s values, so too does the flesh-and-blood audience evaluate the author’s. Entering the authorial audience allows us to recognize the ethical and ideological bases of the author’s invitations. Comparing those values to the ones we bring to the text leads us into a dialogue about those values. Sometimes our values may be confirmed by those of the text, sometimes they may be challenged, and sometimes they may be ignored or insulted. When our values conflict with those of the text, we either will alter ours or resist those of the text (in whole or in part). The ethical dimension of the story involves the values upon which the authorial audience’s judgments are based, the way those values are deployed in the narrative, and, finally, the values and beliefs implicit in the thematizing of the character’s experience.

Some of the values underlying “My Old Man” are time-honored ones in our culture: the importance of love between father and son, the superiority of honesty to dishonesty. Some indicate a more mod-
ern view: individual actions such as the jockeys' participating in the rigged system cannot be judged without regard to the whole context in which they occur. Yet none of the values represents a major departure from or a major challenge to the values that most readers are likely to bring to the story. The values are deployed with considerable skill and sophistication. I believe that this recognition partially underlies the claims that "My Old Man" is less an homage to Anderson than a demonstration of Hemingway's superiority to him. The deployment of the values leads the authorial audience to carefully nuanced judgments of Butler and of Joe. In responding to Butler, we are responding to a man who senses what is right but cannot always act according to that sense. In responding to Joe at the end, we are responding to a boy who is understandably devastated, yet devastated in a way that his fuller understanding would have prevented. Consequently, we are asked to respond in complex ways, asked to draw upon our own experiences with complicity, with undue admiration of a revered figure, and with undue disillusionment. In short, I think Hemingway's deployment of the basic values involves us in a progression whose ethical quality is rich and satisfying. In that sense, "My Old Man" is a very fine achievement, one whose quality has not been fully appreciated.

The values and beliefs associated with the thematizing are likely, I think, to evoke more variation among flesh-and-blood readers. For some, they may be very problematic or even harmful: a person trying to recover from an experience that has left him or her feeling stripped of everything may be seriously set back by experiencing Joe's account of how he came to conclude that "once they get started they don't leave a guy nothing." On the other hand, someone who is further along in such a recovery may find something to build on in recognizing that Joe's conclusion is severely limited. Other readers will resist the general negativism of the thematizing. Nevertheless, to the extent that the resistance leads them to an honest reexamination of their alternative beliefs, their reading will be a positive experience. Those who already agree with Joe's conclusion will have their belief reinforced by reading the story, and they may either engage very powerfully and productively with the story or minimally and unfruitfully.

A second step here is to recognize that the values and beliefs implicit in the thematizing in "My Old Man" are part of Hemingway's
larger set of values and beliefs. Although that set has often been too easily summarized and made systematic, two of its important elements are that the world is a destructive place and that men should face that truth with toughness and dignity and strength. Flesh-and-blood readers again vary in their responses to these truths. Some readers build from them a code to live by. Some accept the belief about the world but refuse the stipulation about how best to respond. Others vehemently argue about the problems with Hemingway’s focus on men, asserting that his so-called truths are themselves undermined by his failure to represent women acting in accord with them. Still others refuse the initial characterization of the world. And in each case, Hemingway’s success in pulling readers into his authorial audience will have consequences for the depth of one’s engagement—positive or negative—with his values, just as the outcome of each reader’s engagement will have consequences for the way he or she reacts to Hemingway’s next invitation.

From Text to Theory

If “My Old Man” works something like the way I have claimed, then it provides three insights into our general understanding of the way narratives, when viewed rhetorically, work—and all three are related to Hemingway’s use of the naive narrator. The first insight depends on taking one step further my discussion of the deployment of the narrative’s values. The rich ethical quality of the transaction is intimately tied up with Hemingway’s handling of Joe’s narration: the ethical quality depends not just on our seeing the complexity of Butler’s and Joe’s situations but also on how we see it. Because the tensions in Joe’s narration so strongly activate our powers of inference, we become strongly engaged in the characters’ situations, mimetically and ethically. Since our inferences are directed by Hemingway, we rely very heavily on both his craft and his moral vision—and on his way of revealing the vision through his skill with the naive narration. Hemingway’s tale is far from the first to show us this potential in naive narration, but “My Old Man” should, I think, deepen our appreciation of the ways in which technique and vision function interdependently as we read.
Second, Hemingway’s management of the ending gives “My Old Man” a progression unlike any other that I know, even as it teaches us something about the categories of our analysis. Structuralists distinguish between story and discourse in order to be able to specify the different bases of a narrative’s construction, and structuralists such as Chatman go to great lengths to keep the two parts of narrative distinct. I follow the structuralist distinction because separating tensions from instabilities enables me to identify distinct sources of narrative movement. Unlike the structuralists, however, I do not regard the distinction as absolute, and “My Old Man” provides evidence that it is not: Joe’s unreliable narration indicates that the same element of a narrative can function simultaneously as discourse (the unreliability creates a tension) and as story (the unreliability simultaneously generates an instability—or at least the potential for an instability). In other words, Hemingway’s story suggests that, from a rhetorical perspective, the story–discourse distinction is better seen as a heuristic than as an absolute.

The third insight is more complicated. Even more than *A Farewell to Arms*, the story exposes the paradox of this kind of paralipsis, in which a naïve narrator apparently sheds his naïveté. Joe Butler narrates the tale of his disillusionment at some unspecified point after he has experienced that disillusionment. Logically, his new attitude toward his father should permeate his narration. But it does not. If Joe’s new attitude did permeate his narration, the ending would lose all its power. Yet we feel neither that Joe is being insincere nor that he is deliberately withholding his knowledge from us for his own artistic purposes (if he were, then he would not be a naïve character but a highly sophisticated narrator). In this respect, the story exposes the inescapably synthetic nature of apparently mimetic naïve narration, and it points to one difference between fictional and nonfictional homodiegetic narration. In nonfiction, the homodiegetic or autodiegetic narrator can employ paralipsis, but such employment will always reflect some self-consciousness. A real-life narrator cannot tell a story of self-enlightenment and simultaneously be unaware of that enlightenment until it occurs in the action. (The other alternative, of course, would be that the real-life narrator would have his knowledge inform his narration.)
In the case of “My Old Man,” however, Hemingway is able to have the paralipsis and Joe’s unselfconsciousness peacefully, albeit paradoxically, coexist: as with *A Farewell to Arms*, the story retains its mimetic power, even after the paradox is exposed.

There are two related reasons for this effect. First, mimesis is always a matter of conventions, and one convention of mimetic narrative is that narration from the time of the action enhances the mimetic effect. Such narration creates the impression that the action is unfolding before us rather than being told after the fact. Second, as in *A Farewell to Arms*, we experience the progression. We do not know that the narrator will lose his naïveté and so are not aware that the logic of mimesis rules out the kind of narration we are reading. It is not until our experience of the narrative is over that mimetic logic steps in and says that we can’t have experienced what we just experienced. But that mimetic logic must yield to the commonsense logic that points out we have already experienced it.

Just what happens at the end of “My Old Man”? And how good is the first story Hemingway published in the United States? In answering these questions by saying, in effect, “something complicated and subtle” and “very good indeed,” I have also tried to sketch one approach to answering similar questions about other narratives. For now, I want to stand by these answers, but just as Hemingway’s story has something to offer narrative theory, I am very much aware that other critics and theorists may lead me to revise them. Progression ought not be a concept limited to narrative dynamics.