Some twenty years ago, in a critical age more innocent than our own, David Lodge advanced the argument that everything in a novel could be explained by reference to an author’s choice of language, and that therefore character is only a convenient abstraction from verbal signs. Part of Lodge’s argument involved the following “watch, I’ll-show-you” demonstration:

If I wish to describe an actual person, Mr. Brown, I might be able to choose between calling him tall or big, dark or swarthy. . . . But I could never “choose” between calling him tall or short, dark or fair. If he is a character in a novel, however, I can choose to describe him as tall and fair, or short and dark, or short and fair, or tall and dark. I can also call him Mr. Green or Mr. Grey or by any other name. I could conceivably call him all these things for a special literary effect: Mr. Brown, or Green as he was sometimes called, was short, but tall with it. His fair-complexioned face was swarthy. As one of his friends remarked, “Grey is a difficult man to pin down.”

In an earlier book, I have argued at some length that Lodge’s example actually works against his case because it shows that character cannot be fully explained by reference to language alone. The passage describes a particular chameleon-like character, and though the character may still be in process (indeed he may always be in process), the representation of him in the first two sentences puts constraints on the language of the third. If that sentence is to remain a summary that also adds to the description, there are countless things the friend cannot say, including, for example, “Brown is an easy man to pin down.” My claim in short is that Lodge’s attempt to collapse character under language actually shows that character can put constraints on language.

Since in the earlier book my focus was on the role of language in
introduction

fiction, I pursued those implications of the claim most relevant to my
developing argument that language played a great variety of roles,
ranging from the crucial to the incidental, in the achievement of fic­
tional effects. Now I want to consider some other implications of
Lodge's passage and my reading of it. What else can we conclude
about character in imaginative literature besides the fact that it is or at
least can be a nonlinguistic (or translinguistic) element? In one re­
spect, of course, Lodge's commentary on his demonstration is very
much on target: this description does not refer to a real person. Fur­
thermore, Lodge's setup and execution of the description foreground
its artificiality: Brown-Green-Grey is neither real nor the image of a
real person but rather is a construct, designed as an amusing display
of authorial ingenuity which will also make Lodge's argumentative
point about the importance of language in fiction. Although our
awareness of, say, Hamlet, or Huck Finn, or Clarissa Dalloway, as
made-up is not foregrounded to the degree it is with Brown-Green-
Grey, we can recognize that such an awareness is part of our appre­
hension of them as characters. Part of being a fictional character, in
other words, is being artificial in this sense, and part of knowing a
character is knowing that he/she/(it?) is a construct. I will hereafter
call the "artificial" component of character the synthetic.

Lodge's example, I think, gets its punch from the interaction of this
synthetic component with something else, namely, Brown-Green-
Grey's possession of recognizable traits: his being short, tall, swarthy,
fair; his having surnames. In other words, the description creates its
effect by playing off—and with—the way characters are images of
possible people. Lodge gives Brown-Green-Grey traits that normally
help us identify a person, but by giving this character two or three
traits where one is usually present and by having the second and
third contradict the first, Lodge takes away as he gives: this person is
not really a person. To identify the concept implied in the phrase
"this person," I propose that we recognize a second component of
character, what I will hereafter call the mimetic.

If we were to abstract Lodge's example from its context, and ask
what is the point of describing such a character, we could no doubt
generate a variety of answers: it is a comment on the way the times
require us to perform multiple social roles; it is a response to all those
male poems about the inconstancy of women, suggesting that men
are fickle through and through; it is a paean to the complexity of even
the most ordinary individual. I am not interested here in choosing
any of these answers as superior to the others, and, indeed, I shall
later return to discuss why all in one important way miss the mark.
But I am interested in what this ordinary ability to generate such an-
The Rhetorical Interpretation of Narrative

answers suggests about literary character. The ability is no doubt con­
nected with what Jonathan Culler has identified as that part of literary
competence called "the rule of significance"—"read the poem as ex­
pressing a significant attitude concerning man and/or his relation to
the universe." (Thus, my later question will in effect be why we
would be incompetent to follow that rule here.) More pertinent to my
purposes here, the ability to generate such statements of significance
reveals another component that character may have. In each state­
ment, Brown-Green-Grey is taken as a representative figure, as stand­
ing for a class—the individual in modern society, men, the ordinary
human, respectively—and his representativeness then supports some
proposition or assertion allegedly made by Lodge through his text.
This exercise suggests, then, that character also has a thematic com­
ponent, while my claim that each of the three statements of signifi­
cance somehow misses the mark suggests that this component may
not always be developed.

In summary, this further consideration of Lodge's colorful creation
indicates that character too can be multichromatic, that it is a literary
element composed of three components, the mimetic, thematic, and
synthetic, and that the mimetic and thematic components may be
more or less developed, whereas the synthetic component, though
always present, may be more or less foregrounded. The logical next
questions are whether the synthetic, by virtue of its ineradicable pres­
ence, ought to be privileged in our theoretical account of character
and whether we can determine under what general conditions the
mimetic and thematic components get more or less developed. Again
it will be useful to work with a specific case in which the creation of a
character is the focal point of the text. So I move from Lodge's Brown-
Green-Grey to Browning's Duke of Ferrara, a more complex creation
than our flexible friend.

In an essay on issues facing contemporary American criticism,
Jonathan Culler offers in capsule form the structuralist view of char­
acter, one suggesting that critics should turn away from what I have
called the mimetic component of character and privilege the synthetic
component: "The most intense and satisfying reading experiences
may depend upon what we call involvement with characters, but suc­
cessful critical investigation of the structure and effects of a novel, as
a literary construct, may require thinking of characters as sets of
predicates grouped under proper names." Culler's discussion in
Structuralist Poetics of Todorov's and Barthes' work on character clari­
fies this view by shedding light on what he means by predicates.
Todorov, he says, "proposes to treat characters as proper names to
which certain qualities are attached during the course of the narrative. Characters are not heroes, villains, or helpers; they are simply subjects of a group of predicates which the reader adds up as he goes along. In S/Z Barthes treats Sarrasine as "the meeting place of turbulence, artistic ability, independence, violence, excess, femininity, etc." Note first that Culler's conception of character as a collection of predicates does not go beyond interpretation—the predicates (or qualities) sometimes must be inferred from seeing a proper name associated with speech, thought, or action, or indeed, with speech associated with another proper name. By simultaneously depending at least in part on interpretation and denying any importance to the mimetic component, Culler does bring the thematic component of character (and then by extension of narrative in general) into an almost equal prominence with the synthetic. One consequence of Culler's conception is that it can resolve many critical disputes about particular characters by declaring that such disputes are themselves the result of a common category mistake. Applying Culler's conception to, say, the notorious dispute about whether the governess in The Turn of the Screw is sane or insane, we could conclude that the dispute stems from the mistaken assumption that the character is a representation of a possible person. Jettisoning that assumption, we could then more properly understand the character as the meeting place of both sane bravery and insane paranoia.

Applying this view to Browning's poem yields the following results. Through the use of pretended speech acts, Browning has made "Ferrara" the meeting place of many predicates or qualities: imperiousness, power, unscrupulousness ("I gave commands; Then all smiles stopped together"); vanity ("She thanked . . . as if she ranked / My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name / With anybody's gift"); possessiveness ("None sets by / That curtain I have drawn for you but I"); appreciation of beauty ("I call that piece a wonder now; / There she stands / As if alive"). In addition, two rather incompatible qualities meet under "Ferrara": "mental instability," a quality inferred by concluding that the emissary from the Count is an inappropriate audience for the speech acts of the poem; and "boldness," a quality inferred by concluding that the emissary is an appropriate audience. Since the poem is Browning's creation of a character, this delineation of predicates gives us the major structural elements of the whole. The full structure results from the intersection of this larger set of predicates with a smaller set grouped under "my last duchess," a set whose most important members are friendliness, beauty, openness to pleasure. The poem reveals the character of the Duke by indicating how the set of qualities associated with his name dominates over the set associated with "my last duchess."
If we analyze the poem according to a conception of character that gives weight to the mimetic component, we get markedly different results. As Ralph Rader has pointed out in an analysis that assumes the importance of the mimetic component, Browning’s task is to create the illusion that we are not reading a poem but overhearing part of a conversation. More specifically, Browning seeks to make the Duke’s speech appear to be motivated entirely by the dramatic situation, even while it paints a complete portrait of him—complete, that is, within the limits of the implied dramatic situation. In sum, the Duke is a character whose mimetic component is overtly emphasized while his synthetic component, though present, remains covert. At this stage of the analysis, his thematic component does not figure prominently, but I will later discuss its place in the poem.

It may seem odd to argue that the synthetic remains covert when we are reading a poem written in rhymed couplets, but a short thought experiment suggested by Rader will help justify the point. Who is responsible for the rhymes, Browning or the Duke? The fact that we instinctively answer “Browning” indicates the kind of involvement with the Duke we have: we have only his voice but we do not hear him rhyming. The synthetic is there but it remains covert. To the more general question of whether a poem will always appear more synthetic than prose, I answer, not necessarily. Whenever we read a title page which tells us that the work is a novel, we know we are reading something as synthetic as any poem. But neither this knowledge nor our perception of line breaks, stanzas, and rhymes necessarily prevents our participating in the mimetic illusion. To participate in the illusion is to enter what Peter Rabinowitz has called the narrative audience; to remain covertly aware of the synthetic is to enter what Rabinowitz has called the authorial audience. In other words, the authorial audience has the double consciousness of the mimetic and the synthetic, while the narrative audience has a single consciousness of the Duke as real. I will be discussing the nature of—and the relation between—these audiences in more detail in later chapters; for now let me just note that the authorial audience is the ideal audience that an author implicitly posits in constructing her text, the one which will pick up on all the signals in the appropriate way. When I speak about “our” responses in the pages that follow, I am referring to the responses of this audience. The narrative audience is that group of readers for whom the lyric, dramatic, or narrative situation is not synthetic but real. For the mimetic illusion to work, we must enter the narrative audience. To enter it in Browning’s poem is to imagine oneself an invisible eavesdropper who hears and sees just this part of the interview between the Duke and the envoy.

Within the general conception of “My Last Duchess” sketched
above, we must choose between the view of the Duke as mentally unstable and the view of him as extremely bold. Is the Duke's confession of his crime against his last duchess an unwitting self-revelation or a purposeful warning? I follow Rader in concluding that it is a purposeful warning whose purpose will be accomplished only if it does not appear to be a warning. The Duke must not appear to be warning for the same reason that he never openly objected to the frequent smiling of the duchess: "E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose / Never to stoop." This hypothesis about the Duke's character is superior to one that says he is out-of-control for two main reasons, one general, the other specific. First, it gives a definite, positive motivation for this speech in this situation, whereas the alternative is a faute de mieux account (I can't see any reason why the Duke would say this to the envoy from the father of his next wife, so he must be crazy). Second, this conclusion more adequately explains the rather elaborate business the Duke goes through before the main revelation.

I said
"Fra Pandolf" by design for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst
How such a glance came there; so,
Are you to turn and ask thus.
(ll. 5–12; emphasis mine)

The inference is that the Duke is acting with premeditation here: he is determined to make the envoy "sit and look at her" so that he can tell his story and thereby give his warning-sans-stooping.

Furthermore, this hypothesis, with its emphasis on the relation between the overt mimetic and covert synthetic components of the Duke, allows for some important insights about Browning's control of the whole, a control which is perhaps most impressive in the conclusion:

Will't please you rise? We'll meet the
Company below then. I repeat,
The Count your master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretence
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir. Notice, Neptune, though
The Rhetorical Interpretation of Narrative

Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

It is here at the end that we learn for the first time that the Duke’s auditor has come on business relating to the Duke’s next marriage. This delayed disclosure is of course a direct consequence of the mimetic imperative: as the poem is constructed, any prior definition of the situation by the Duke would seem an obvious contrivance by Browning. As Browning follows the mimetic imperative, he also increases the effectiveness of the poem as a constructed object. The details illuminating the dramatic situation function not just as exposition but also as climactic strokes in the portrait of the character. The Duke’s horrible imperiousness has been revealed in his account of how he handled the Duchess. But the sheer audacity that accompanies that imperiousness and adds substantially to its horror is made known only when we realize the audience and the occasion for the Duke’s speech. In addition to making this exposition an effective device for the achievement of completeness in the poem, Browning makes it contribute substantially to the arresting quality of the portrait he is drawing. Because the full dimensions of the Duke’s character dawn upon us only gradually and only in retrospect, they dawn upon us more powerfully. Finally, these concluding realizations are brilliantly set off by the last two lines of the poem, in which the Duke symbolically encapsulates his purpose (“Neptune taming a sea-horse”), even while, as Rader also points out, he seems to insist that he has been talking only about art throughout the whole monologue.

Comparing the analysis based on Culler’s conception of character with the one based on a conception that gives weight to a mimetic component, we find some interesting results. Despite their considerable differences, both analyses offer worthwhile insights into the poem. Choosing between them is also a matter of choosing the kind of knowledge that one wants from a theory of character. Culler suggests that his conception will lead to a better understanding of the “structure and effect” of works. I think that the parallel analyses indicate that his claim is misleading. The structuralist analysis does not yield any substantial account of the effect of the poem and has little to say about the specific structure of the whole. Instead, it identifies the basic elements out of which the structure of both the text and the character are created; this identification of basic elements is both the weakness and the strength of the analysis. By identifying the basic elements, the structuralist can indicate something about the materials out of which the mimetic analyst will build his account, but such an indication comes at the price of failing to offer any well-developed interpretation of its own.
Introduction

The mimetic analysis, on the other hand, commits one to developing an account of the structure and effect of a work. Judged by that shared criterion, it does offer a superior way of theorizing about character. But the differences in the results of the analyses suggest that, Culler's reference to structure and effect aside, the methods are not always competitive and that each could be used for a different critical purpose. Where the structuralist analysis tends toward the inclusive (e.g., in its identification of semantically incompatible predicates), the mimetic tends toward the restrictive: it chooses among incompatible traits, it tries to build as precise a portrait of the character as possible. Where the structuralist remains suspicious of the emotional involvement that comes from viewing the character as a possible person, the mimetic analyst regards that involvement as crucial to the effect of the work. In short, where the structuralist seeks an objective view of the text, one which foregrounds the text as construct, the mimetic analyst takes a rhetorical view, one which foregrounds the text as communication between author and reader. Since I want my theory to account for the structure and effect of texts by accounting for such communication, I shall pursue the rhetorical (and mimetic) view here.

The consequences of choosing the rhetorical over the structuralist conception of character become even greater as we consider the role of the thematic component within the rhetorical conception of Browning's poem. Whereas the Duke has been defined for the structuralist as the meeting place of many thematic qualities, the rhetorical analysis to this point has neglected the thematic component of the Duke's character. Does the Duke have a role in the structure of the poem that leads to our abstracting thematic conclusions from it? The best answer, I think, is yes and no. On the one hand, it is fairly easy to construct thematic propositions that are implied or reinforced by Browning's creation of the Duke, propositions that would go right along with the structuralist conception of the character. A partial list would include: to execute one's spouse for her friendliness is horrible; to possess beauty by killing it is reprehensible; power corrupts; men (frequently) treat women as possessions that exist for the sole purpose of giving them pleasure. On the other hand, these propositions are not conclusions that the poem itself leads one toward in the way that, say, Golding's *Lord of the Flies* tries to lead the reader toward the conclusion that humans are inherently evil. Instead, these propositions are in effect taken for granted by Browning. The powerful effect of his portrait does not depend on his demonstrating the truth of these assertions; rather these are general propositions whose truth Browning presumes independently of our reading the poem and on which he relies to make his portrait more arresting.
We can usefully distinguish between the thematic elements of a character like the Duke and of one like Jack in Golding's novel by making a distinction between a character's *dimensions* and his or her *functions*. A dimension is any attribute a character may be said to possess when that character is considered in isolation from the work in which he or she appears. A function is a particular application of that attribute made by the text through its developing structure. In other words, dimensions are converted into functions by the *progression* of the work. Thus, every function depends upon a dimension but not every dimension will necessarily correspond to a function. The Duke has many thematic dimensions (attributes that may be considered for their potential to contribute to thematic assertions) but essentially no thematic function: the work progresses not to make assertions but to reveal his character. Golding's Jack has many thematic dimensions—his lust for power, his willingness to destroy nature for his own advantage, his greater concern with short-term advantage than long-term good, and so on—that all contribute to his main thematic function of demonstrating the strength of inherent evil in humans. The distinction between dimensions and functions allows us to see why applying the rule of significance to the case of Mr. Brown-Green-Grey would be an act of literary incompetence. Lodge's character, like Browning's, has thematic dimensions—he is male and chameleon-like, he resists fixities, and so on—but no thematic function: the text achieves closure before it develops the thematic potentiality of these dimensions.

The distinction between dimensions and functions also applies to the mimetic and synthetic components of character, though, as we shall see, it has a greater relevance to the mimetic. Furthermore, it allows me to resituate the importance of the mimetic component within the general rhetorical approach to character I have been defining. The distinction between dimensions and functions is based on the principle that the fundamental unit of character is neither the trait nor the idea, neither the role nor the word, but rather what I will call the *attribute*, something that participates at least in potential form in the mimetic, thematic, and synthetic spheres of meaning simultaneously. Thus, the rhetorical theorist need not stipulate in advance that the characters in a given work will be represented people, or themes with legs, or obvious artificial constructs. The theorist only commits himself to the position that a character may come to perform any of these functions or indeed all three of them to varying degrees within the same narrative.

An analogy with the way speakers use utterances may clarify the distinction between dimensions and functions. Most utterances contain
a potential for signification greater than the signification actualized, if only because most utterances do not take advantage of the signifying potential of the sounds used to make them. Nevertheless, a speaker may take advantage of this signifying potential by shaping his utterance in such a way that its sounds call attention to themselves. The teacher who bids good morning to his class in rhymed couplets conveys an attitude with those rhymes that is simply not present in a prosaic greeting. Or to take a more standard example, recall how Pope in “An Essay on Criticism” reinforces his dictum about sound echoing the sense by exemplifying his point in his own lines:

> Soft is the strain when Zephyr gently blows,  
> And the smooth stream in smoother numbers flows;  
> But when loud surges lash the sounding shore,  
> The hoarse, rough verse should like the torrent roar.  
> When Ajax strives some rock’s vast weight to throw,  
> The line too labors, and the words move slow.  

(II. 366–71)

Similarly, when an author creates a character, she creates a potential for that character to participate in the signification of the work through the development of the character in three spheres of meaning; that potential may or may not be realized depending upon the way the whole work is shaped.

At the same time, we need to remember that, as we read, characters do not come to us first as attributes which we recognize as dimensions which then become transformed into functions as we look on in wonder, but that they come to us already in the process of being shaped into functions, or (especially within the mimetic sphere) as already functioning. When we read, “Miss Brooke had that sort of beauty that seemed to be set in relief by poor dress,” or “Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, seemed to unite in her person the best blessings of existence,” we are immediately encountering characters who are already performing mimetic functions. The point, in other words, is that my rhetorical theory of character is claiming to offer analytical distinctions that allow us to understand the principles upon which works are constructed rather than claiming to offer a blow-by-blow description of what happens when we read.  

II

This sketch of a framework for a rhetorical approach to character also indicates the conditions that must be satisfied for that sketch to develop into an adequate working theory of character in narrative. (1) We need to explore further the nature of the three components, in-
cluding the relation between dimensions and functions. (2) We need to investigate the range of relations among the three different functions. (3) We need to investigate the nature and variety of narrative progression so that we can better understand the mechanisms by which dimensions get converted into functions. Fully satisfying these conditions will be the task of the later chapters, but here I can take some initial steps toward satisfying the first and third conditions.

Mimetic dimensions, as we have seen, are a character’s attributes considered as traits, e.g., the Duke’s maleness, his position of power, his imperiousness, his boldness, and so on. Mimetic functions result from the way these traits are used together in creating the illusion of a plausible person and, for works depicting actions, in making particular traits relevant to later actions, including of course the development of new traits. In works where the traits fail to coalesce into the portrait of a possible person, e.g., Swift’s creation of Gulliver, or some modern works intent on destroying the mimetic illusion, a character will have mimetic dimensions without a mimetic function. Moreover, within the creation of a possible person, a particular trait might serve only to identify that character, e.g., the detective who always eats junk food, and the trait might not (though it often will) have any consequences for his later actions—or for our understanding of them. In such a case, the character has a mimetic dimension that is incidental to his or her mimetic function: the plausibility of the portrait would remain without the trait and the rest of the work would be essentially unaffected by its absence.

Silently underlying this discussion of the mimetic component are some messy problems. First, all this talk about characters as plausible or possible persons presupposes that we know what a person is. But the nature of the human subject is of course a highly contested issue among contemporary thinkers. Although this study of character can have consequences for that debate, I shall not take it up directly here. Not only would such a discussion require lengthy excursions into biological, philosophical, psychological, sociological, and economic territories that would preclude the exploration I have just begun but, more important, such a discussion is not a necessary preliminary to the rhetorical study I am undertaking. For that to be justified, it is enough that authors write with some working notion of what a person is and with some belief that characters can (or indeed, cannot) represent persons and that as readers and critics we can discern these ideas in the work. At the same time, this principle means that for certain works we may need to invoke the findings of psychology, sociology, economics, biology, and/or philosophy because authors may be drawing on (or perhaps anticipating) these findings in their representations of the mimetic components of character. Thus, for
example, it seems to me necessary to know something about the psychoanalytic understanding of character to enter the authorial audience of *Light in August*: certain features of the representation of Joe Christmas as a possible person that are rendered comprehensible by that knowledge remain virtually inscrutable without it. On the other hand, we do not need such an understanding to enter the authorial audience of, say, *Tom Jones* or *Pride and Prejudice*: the characters in these works, though perhaps susceptible to psychoanalytical interpretation, are constructed and offered to us on different principles.

The second problem is related to the first: how to specify adequately the criteria by which to judge a given representation of a character as plausible or not. For the most part, such a representation is a matter of conventions and the conventions change over time as both ideas about persons and fictional techniques for representing persons change. Modern readers may have a hard time finding Pamela Andrews a possible person but Richardson's contemporary readers (*pace* Henry Fielding) did not. Thus, I think that for my purposes flexible, shifting criteria are superior to fixed ones. Since my goal is to understand the principles upon which a narrative is constructed, I shall seek to make my judgments according to what I know or can infer about the conventions under which a given author is operating. Furthermore, we ought to recognize from the outset that it is very easy to call any character's plausibility into question by abstracting the character's behavior from the situations which influence it. Is it really plausible that a man who has been king all his life would be able to learn anything about himself by giving up his kingship and then hanging around on a heath in a storm with a fool, a disguised friend, and someone pretending to be mad? Come off it, Mr. Playwright. Finally, in addition to judging plausibility in connection with the whole web of circumstances surrounding a character's actions, I will out of respect for the variety of human behavior and experience seek to err on the side of generosity rather than of parsimony in judging plausibility: the dividends that might accrue to our remaining open to the idea that such and such a person could exist and behave in such and such a way in such and such a situation are more rewarding than the satisfaction we might get by initially questioning the plausibility of such a creation.

Thematic dimensions, as we have seen, are attributes, taken individually or collectively, and viewed as vehicles to express ideas or as representative of a larger class than the individual character (in the case of satire the attributes will be representative of a person, group, or institution external to the work). Just as characters may be functioning mimetically from our first introduction to them, so too may they be functioning thematically, but just as the full mimetic function
The Rhetorical Interpretation of Narrative

is often not revealed in the initial stages of a narrative, so too may thematic functions emerge more gradually. In works that strive to give characters a strong overt mimetic function, thematic functions develop from thematic dimensions as a character's traits and actions also demonstrate, usually implicitly, some proposition or propositions about the class of people or the dramatized ideas. Usually, the narrative will then use these functions to influence the way we respond to the actions of the character, and sometimes the progression may make these functions crucial to the work's final effect, even if the work is not organized to convince us of a particular proposition. We shall see an example of such a narrative shortly, when I turn to discuss Lardner's "Haircut." In works where the artificiality or the synthetic nature of characters is more overt, thematic dimensions get developed into functions somewhat differently: the representative quality of the traits or ideas will usually be explicitly revealed in the action or the narrative discourse. Golding's initial description of Jack connects Jack's physical appearance with the conventional image of Satan. Thus, Jack's physical attributes immediately give him a thematic dimension that is of course later converted into a thematic function.

The distinction between the mimetic and thematic components of character is a distinction between characters as individuals and characters as representative entities. In attaching the notion of "plausible person" to the mimetic component, I do not mean to imply that my own working concept of a person precludes representativeness. It seems to me that our understanding of people in life also commonly has a thematic component: we see the traits that others possess as defining a type of person or a set of ideas and attitudes that are not peculiarly their own. We say, "He's a sixties flower-child," or "She's a radical feminist," and imply that the identities of these people can be summed up by a set of ideas or values associated with those descriptions. At the same time, we (i.e., those of us sharing a fairly widespread, though less than universal, belief about how to treat other people) commonly regard ourselves as more enlightened, more open, more tolerant, if we refrain from making any quick leaps from traits to themes. Indeed, we label those who leap from skin color or sex to assumptions about a person as racist or sexist. As I have already suggested in the discussion of "My Last Duchess," we must also resist the automatic ascription of traits to themes in literature. In both cases, then, the problem arises not from thematizing itself but from doing so prematurely or carelessly, i.e., without sufficient attention to the relation of the trait to the rest of the person or character and the situation and actions in which he or she is engaged.

On the other side of this similarity between people and literary
characters, there is, of course, a significant difference: however much we may wish that Ronald Reagan or Howard Cosell or the next door neighbor were just an artificial construct, each of them is undeniably organic, just as Elizabeth Bennet and Prince Hamlet of Denmark and Hester Prynne are undeniably synthetic. One consequence of the difference, I think, is that we are given a greater license for thematizing in literature; though we must remain wary of hasty jumps from trait to theme, we are likely to be invited to make more considered ones. Because literary characters are synthetic, their creators are likely to be doing something more than increasing the population, more than trying to bring another possible person into the world. They are likely to be increasing the population in order to show us something about the segment of the population to which the created member belongs.

As this point implies, the ineradicability of the synthetic component marks it off from the mimetic and thematic components: in the synthetic sphere dimensions are always also functions. Synthetic dimensions will always be synthetic functions because they will always have some role in the construction of the work; this role may be extraneous or disruptive, the character's other components may interfere with the success of the synthetic function, but the function cannot be eliminated. Furthermore, although every mimetic and thematic function implies a synthetic function, not every synthetic function implies a mimetic or thematic one. The unnamed emissary in "My Last Duchess" has a mimetic dimension by virtue of his status relative to both the Duke and the Count, but he has no functions other than the synthetic one of being the appropriate addressee for the Duke's veiled warning. (The Count, of course, is a character with mimetic and thematic dimensions but no corresponding functions.) Nevertheless, it does make sense to distinguish characters like the Duke of Ferrara whose synthetic status remains covert and those like Christian in Pilgrim's Progress whose synthetic status is foregrounded. Although this distinction is not strictly parallel to the distinction between dimensions and functions for the other two components, it does capture a similar phenomenon: the development of a potentiality in the character into an actuality. The means by which the synthetic component can be foregrounded are many and diverse, but one is especially noteworthy because it exploits the artificiality of the material out of which the character is made. An author can focus the reader's attention, through a narrator, another character's speech, or even an action, on the character's name or the descriptions of the character so that we regard the character as symbolic rather than natural. When I construct a narrative in which Smoothtalk meets Bumpkin on a bustling boulevard in Urbia, then I am inviting my readers, fit and few as they may be, to regard the characters as constructs designed for some thematic purpose.
III

Progression, as I use the term, refers to a narrative as a dynamic event, one that must move, in both its telling and its reception, through time. In examining progression, then, we are concerned with how authors generate, sustain, develop, and resolve readers' interests in narrative. I postulate that such movement is given shape and direction by the way in which an author introduces, complicates, and resolves (or fails to resolve) certain instabilities which are the developing focus of the authorial audience's interest in the narrative. Authors may take advantage of numerous variables in the narrative situation to generate the movement of a tale. In general, the story-discourse model of narrative helps to differentiate between two main kinds of instabilities: the first are those occurring within the story, instabilities between characters, created by situations, and complicated and resolved through actions. The second are those created by the discourse, instabilities—of value, belief, opinion, knowledge, expectation—between authors and/or narrators, on the one hand, and the authorial audience on the other. To recognize this difference in kind I reserve the term "instabilities" for unstable relations within story and introduce the term "tension" for those in discourse. Some narratives progress primarily through the introduction and complication of instabilities, whereas others progress primarily through tensions, and still others progress by means of both. In examining progression, we are also involved in considering narratives as developing wholes. In order to account for the effect of, say, a complication of one instability, we will need to consider the previous development of that instability and its relation to other instabilities or tensions as well as the way it is disclosed to the reader. To do a similar analysis for all such complications would lead one to an analysis of the whole narrative. The point, in other words, is not that all parts of a narrative are directly concerned with instabilities or tensions, but rather that all parts of a narrative may have consequences for the progression, even if those consequences lie solely in their effect on the reader's understanding of the instabilities, tensions, and resolution. Let me illustrate this conception of progression, and some of its consequences for the way in which I shall seek to develop my rhetorical theory of character by a look at a short narrative that progresses both by tension and instability. I choose Ring Lardner's "Haircut" in part because, as a narrative analogue to the dramatic monologue, it also fits in with the progression of examples in this chapter.

Just as the poet in a dramatic monologue seeks to create the illusion that his audience is not reading a poem but overhearing part of a conversation, so Lardner seeks to create the illusion that his audience
is not reading a story but overhearing a barber's rambling monologue to a new customer. Lardner builds the illusion in large part by emphasizing the haphazardness of the barber's speech—Whitey frequently shifts topics with no more transition than a "Well" or a "But I was going to tell you." Like the poet in the dramatic monologue, Lardner needs to sustain the illusion of unartistically delivered speech even as he arranges it for maximum effect. But there is a significant difference between Whitey's narrative and most dramatic monologues: while the speaker in a dramatic monologue may or may not talk directly about himself, the movement of the poem is typically a movement toward the disclosure of his character, whereas the movement of Whitey's narration is toward the disclosure of events involving other characters, particularly Jim Kendall, Julie Gregg, Paul Dickson, and Doc Stair. Significantly, however, the first major instability among these characters is not introduced until after the halfway point of Whitey's narration, when he says that "Jim was like the majority of men, and women too, I guess. He wanted what he couldn't get. He wanted Julie Gregg and he worked his head off trying to land her." Indeed, at this juncture, the narrative divides neatly into two parts; everything before this point serves to disclose information about the four chief actors and their environment, information that is necessary for the authorial audience's understanding of how and why they act as they do in the focused narrative of related events that follows this point. The apparently scattered information of the first half is brought into a coherent relationship as we draw upon it to infer the means and motives behind the central events of the story, Jim Kendall's humiliation of Julie Gregg and his subsequent death in what Whitey regards as an accident. This arrangement makes the second half of the story move with economy and power to its climax, but it raises some interesting questions about the first half: What does Lardner do there to propel the reader forward, and what happens to that principle of propulsion after the shift to a different principle just after the halfway point?

In the terms introduced above, the initial principle of movement in "Haircut" is the tension between Whitey and the authorial audience: Whitey's judgments of Jim Kendall as a "card" (p. 25), as "kind of rough but a good fella at heart" (p. 24), are at odds with our much harsher judgments, and we read on in part for the pleasure of communicating with Lardner behind Whitey's back, in part to take in what he tells us about his small town, and in part to see how the portrait of our unreliable narrator develops. In other words, in the absence of any clear direction to the potential instabilities introduced in this first half of the narrative, Whitey becomes much like the
Speaker in a dramatic monologue: he is as much the focus of our interest as anything he tells us.

Now what emerges from the tension and our interest in Whitey is a clear, if limited, mimetic portrait: he is a small-town barber who is garrulous, loves a laugh, is well-liked, and most significantly, for this is the source of the tension, is morally obtuse. He is unable to detect the cruelty of most of Jim Kendall’s practical jokes and unable to differentiate between such acts as Jim’s kidding Milt Sheppard about the size of his Adam’s apple, and Jim’s falsely promising his wife and children that he would take them to the circus. In addition, Whitey has attributes that mark out a thematic potentiality: he is shown to be a representative of his own small town and thus of a small-town mentality. Whitey’s occupation and personality make his shop the base of Kendall’s operations, and indeed, the first joke of Jim’s that Whitey tells about is directed at Whitey himself, and the barber is able to reply in kind. The occupation further identifies Whitey as a representative male—he is a man serving other men, talking and joking with them in a space where the women are excluded. In addition, Whitey seems to know and get on with everyone, and his nickname accentuates his status as one of the gang. Finally, Whitey’s very role in the narrative, passing on the gossip of the town to its new inhabitant, emphasizes his place as representative male.

The initial movement by tension has many consequences for the narrative after it shifts to its movement by instability. First, our understanding of Whitey’s obtuseness operates to create one of the dramatic ironies of the narrative: given what we know of Whitey, we have little trouble seeing that his report of Jim Kendall’s death as accidental misses the truth of that event by a country mile. We are quickly able to discern that Paul Dickson, urged on by Doc Stair’s angry remark that anyone who could pull anything like Kendall’s trick on Julie Gregg “ought not to be let live” (p. 32), had deliberately shot Kendall when they were out duck-hunting. We can discern further that Doc Stair as coroner took advantage of Paul’s reputation as “cuckoo” (p. 27) and “a half-wit” to declare the death accidental because that declaration would better serve the cause of justice than the truth would. The dramatic irony—and part of the effect of the story—arises, as Brooks and Warren say in Understanding Fiction, from the fact that the biter is bitten and from the fact that Whitey is blind to the complicated “trick” played on Jim by Paul Dickson and Doc Stair. But the effect produced by the ending is more than ironic satisfaction, and to describe the way that effect comes about I need to introduce one last distinction, that between completeness and closure.

Closure, as I use the term, refers to the way in which a narrative
Introduction

signals its end, whereas completeness refers to the degree of resolution accompanying the closure. Closure need not be tied to the resolution of instabilities and tensions but completeness always is. For example, in a narrative entitled "Diary of Disastrous December," which has 31 chapters, each of which is headed by the date and which follow each other in chronological order, the very inscription of 31 December at the head of the last chapter will be a strong signal of closure. Whether the narrative will have completeness will depend on how the instabilities and tensions are worked out in that (and of course previous) chapters. In a narrative in which a character sets out from home on a dangerous journey and returns at the end, the return itself will function as a sign of closure and the condition in which he returns will be a step toward completeness, indicating how the initial instability is resolved; the degree of completeness will depend upon whether and how the later instabilities have been resolved. In "Haircut," Lardner provides closure by signaling the end of the customer's turn in the chair. He provides completeness by using Whitey's final words, including the signal of closure, to provide final resolution to the instabilities by altering the authorial audience's understanding of the resolution that has already been narrated. This altered understanding is a result of Lardner using Whitey's final lines to convert the thematic dimension of Whitey's character into a thematic function. These lines create the second main consequence of the initial progression by tension as Lardner reemphasizes the tension between Whitey and the authorial audience and more subtly recalls his representative status:

Personally I wouldn't leave a person shoot a gun in the same boat I was in unless I was sure they knew somethin' about guns. Jim was a sucker to leave a new beginner have his gun, let alone a half-wit. It probably served Jim right, what he got. But still we miss him round here. He certainly was a card.

Comb it wet or dry? (P. 33)

This ending creates an effect more chilling than satisfying first because Whitey's judgment of Jim ("It probably served Jim right, what he got") is made for a reason that misses the mark as widely as his judgments about Jim's character. The chill gets deeper when we reflect that Whitey as representative spokesman can confidently report Kendall's death as accidental and blithely talk about missing the old card only because Doc Stair's declaration has been accepted by the townspeople. And they have accepted the judgment because, like Whitey, they believe that Paul Dickson is a half-wit, a belief based not on Paul's recent behavior but on his having been given that label years
ago. Whitey's final comments reveal that the whole sordid episode, begun with Kendall's pursuit and humiliation of Julie Gregg and ended by Paul Dickson's murder of Kendall, has transpired in front of the townspeople's eyes without their recognizing its sordidness. Because no one has been intellectually or morally sensitive enough to understand what happened in the case of Jim Kendall, it is not at all unlikely that a similar sequence of events could occur again. The insensitivity of the good-natured Whitey and by extension of the townspeople he represents is nicely underlined by the story's final sentence, or rather by the swift and matter-of-fact transition from the account of Kendall's death to the business at hand: "Comb it wet or dry?" Like Browning in "My Last Duchess," Lardner is able to make the final signal in the progression contribute to both its closure and completeness, that is, both indicate the narrative's end and reinforce its final effect. From this point, extrapolations to the significance of the story for Lardner's view of both the viciousness and stupidity of small town life are rather straightforward. The more general point I want to emphasize is that Lardner uses both the initial movement by tension and its consequences for the characterization of Whitey to transform the progression of the whole from the tale of a trickster tricked to a tale emphasizing the chilling implications of that event.

Indeed, Lardner's conversion of Whitey's thematic dimension into a thematic function affects the authorial audience's understanding of the resolution still further. Given that Lardner has encouraged us to establish a general pattern of inverting Whitey's judgments, we may initially conclude that our obtuse friend is right for the wrong reason when he says that Jim got what he deserved. Once we begin thinking about how Lardner is using Whitey to reveal ideas about the American small town, we will soon reflect enough to question whether Jim's punishment fits his crimes: despite Jim's cruelties, murder in cold blood seems an excessive punishment. Furthermore, Whitey's representative obtuseness allows Lardner to leave murky the relation between Doc Stair's decision to call the death accidental and his own role as the agent, however unwitting, behind Paul's action: Is Doc simply protecting himself? Has he become another version of Kendall by playing upon the stupidity of the townspeople in his declaration that the death was accidental? Or is he a fit instrument of justice, someone who regrets what he said to Paul but also acknowledges, with Lardner's approval, that justice is better served through his lie than through putting Paul—and perhaps himself—on trial? Lardner's technique does not allow us to answer these questions with any confidence, but this uncertainty adds to rather than detracts from the completeness of the story. The murkiness is appropriate because it
Introduction

contributes further to the unsettling, chilling experience of the narrative, especially the way its ending causes the authorial audience to reconsider its understanding of Whitey, Doc, Jim, Paul, Julie, and the town in which they live. Lardner's view of the viciousness and stupidity of the small town is not accompanied by any easy judgments about its simplicity or transparency.

This claim that the ambiguity about Doc's motives contributes to rather than detracts from the completeness of the story perhaps requires further explanation. With the conversion of Whitey's thematic dimension into a function, the progression gives new importance to the thematic sphere in the story as a whole. Thus, when the ambiguity about Doc contributes to our understanding of Lardner's view of small-town life it contributes to the completeness. If Doc Stair were the protagonist, if the progression centered on instabilities surrounding him and his motives, then this ambiguity would most likely be a sign of incompleteness: some major instability would not be resolved. In Lardner's story, however, the instabilities are resolved; it is the authorial audience's understanding of the resolution that is revised and completed in an appropriate way by our reflections on the residual ambiguity and Whitey's inability to resolve it.

IV

In addition to illustrating the interconnections between character and progression, this discussion of "Haircut" also suggests some guidelines for the next—and largest—step in this study. That step is to develop the theory of character from the framework sketched here through an examination of the range of relations among the mimetic, thematic, and synthetic components of character. Because progression and character are so closely interrelated, I can best encounter the variety of narratives necessary to explore that range by choosing a group of works whose characters collectively raise a multitude of questions about the interrelations of their components and whose progressions follow a variety of different principles. In analyzing these principles of progression as part of explaining the relations among the components of character, the study will adumbrate a theory of progression as well. Furthermore, since, as we have seen in the earlier discussion of Culler and Rader, questions about character and progression are inextricably tied to larger theoretical issues in the interpretation of narrative, my questions about specific characters and progressions need to be linked to more general theoretical questions about the interpretation of narrative.

More specifically, I shall proceed by making a loose division of the
main problem of character into two parts and then conclude with a demonstration of how the solutions to the problem can be built upon as we extend the reader's role in the rhetorical transaction of narrative beyond appreciation into resistance. The first part will take as its dominant focus the mimetic-thematic relation, the second will more fully incorporate the synthetic. The division between these parts must be loose because, as the framework sketched above indicates, though the synthetic component can sometimes remain in the background of the work and its analysis, it is nevertheless always present. Furthermore, when in Part II I want to focus on the synthetic-thematic and synthetic-mimetic relationship, the third component will necessarily exert its influence as well.

I have chosen to begin with the mimetic-thematic relationship because it immediately connects this study to a central theoretical issue in the interpretation of narrative, one that clearly involves those who call themselves theorists and those who abhor that label: the practice of thematizing the particulars of the text. Thematizing has been both attacked and celebrated in recent years, and I shall reconsider its pleasures and problems by considering the relation between the mimetic and thematic components of Winston Smith's character in \textit{1984} and of Elizabeth Bennet's in \textit{Pride and Prejudice} in connection with Richard Levin's powerful neo-Aristotellean attack on thematizing. I shall argue that Levin offers a useful corrective to facile thematizing, but that his attack goes too far. In addition, I shall try to demonstrate that the relations between the mimetic and thematic components of Winston Smith and Elizabeth Bennet represent two frequent but distinct developments of these components. The study will turn next to the relation between the mimetic and thematic functions of John Marcher in "The Beast in the Jungle," examining these functions in connection with the celebration of thematizing offered by Robert Scholes in \textit{Textual Power}. My analysis will focus especially on Scholes's twin claims that interpretation proper is thematizing and that the generalizing movement of thematizing ought to continue until one reaches the broadest cultural code one can find applicable to the text. I shall want to modify both claims as I try to show that the analysis of narrative progression complicates the notion that interpretation equals thematizing and that in James' narrative the mimetic functions of the characters do indicate that the generalizing movement of thematizing should stop before we reach the broadest code possible.

In Part II, I shall consider three narratives that foreground the synthetic component of character in different ways and to different degrees. These different kinds of foregrounding also induce further theoretical reflections about the concepts of progression and of audi-
ence that I have introduced here and will employ throughout. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the foregrounding of the synthetic occurs through Fowles's exploitation of the differences between the assumptions that the narrative and authorial audiences make about their reading. In *Great Expectations*, the foregrounding occurs through Dickens's wonderfully inventive way with outlandish characters such as Wemmick. In *If on a winter's night a traveler*, the foregrounding occurs through the text's extreme self-reflexiveness.

In discussing Fowles's novel, I shall try to complete the consideration of the mimetic-thematic relationship by accounting for the influence of the synthetic component of character upon it, while also investigating the relations among the audiences of narrative. In considering *Great Expectations*, I shall re-examine my concept of progression by comparing my ideas about textual dynamics with those of Peter Brooks in *Reading for the Plot*, who wants to "impose psychic functioning on textual functioning," and demonstrates the results of that imposition with his own reading of Dickens's novel. Brooks's theory will require me to develop further the ideas about the relation between text and audience that underlie my rhetorical theory, and that are the foundation of this study's claim to offer a more adequate account of what Brooks in his subtitle calls "design and intention in narrative." In examining *If on a winter's night a traveler*, I shall take up the question of audience once again, because Calvino's attempts alternately to blur and emphasize the differences among real readers, narrative readers, and authorial readers indicate that even these distinctions among audiences may not be sufficient to account for the complexity of communication in some narratives, especially his.

In Part III, I shall take up the problem of resisting characters (and authors), as I examine the relations among the components of Catherine Barkley in Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. I shall situate my discussion in the context of Judith Fetterley's feminist critique of Hemingway in *The Resisting Reader*, but it will draw upon virtually all of the principles that have been argued for and demonstrated in Parts I and II. That is, the discussion will reconsider both Fetterley's critique and any more positive view of Catherine by investigating all of Catherine's components and their role in the progression of the whole. Since the evaluation of Catherine must be connected with the evaluation of Frederic, and since that issue is connected with the evaluation of Hemingway's beliefs about the world, the discussion will ultimately address the problems inherent in that last kind of evaluation as well.

By the end of Part III, the range of relations among the components of character and the varieties of narrative progression will have been
amply demonstrated; in addition, different kinds of responses to those narrative representations will have been illustrated and argued for. Yet I would make no claim that my nine sample texts represent all the possible relations among the components of character or the full variety of progressive principles. In the concluding chapter, therefore, I will sketch how the analysis might be extended to three especially interesting cases without undertaking a full-bore analysis of any. First, I shall consider the relations among the components of character in a nonfiction narrative such as *The Armies of the Night*, focusing specifically on how Mailer's (re-)creation of himself, his own "mimetic" portrait, is a consequence of the synthetic functions that he wants his character to perform. Second, in a discussion that will pick up on the principles I see underlying Dickens's use of Wemmick, I shall examine the functions of some minor characters in the multiple-plot progression of *Middlemarch*. Third, I shall finish the analysis of character and progression by sketching an account of what happens in a work like *Mrs. Dalloway* where the progression is more lyric than narrative, where the movement is one of gradual revelation of a character yet is still something very different from a dramatic monologue.

Finally, the conclusion will draw together the findings of this book and reconsider both the theory's predictive power and its flexibility for considering new cases, new possibilities of narrative communication. The point to make here is that in taking up questions both theoretical (about thematizing, progression, audience, ideology, evaluation) and practical (about protagonists and secondary characters, Jane Austen and Italo Calvino, Hemingway and Henry James, realism and meta-fiction), this study does propose to survey a wide territory of narrative theory. It will not offer a full view of every square mile, but it does seek to provide glasses that will enable the reader to discern both the broad outlines of that territory and some close-up views of numerous especially significant sites.