Trumpets, Please!:
Rules of Notice

I do not see how Mr. Stauffer can reject the proposition that every word in a good poem counts and still continue to use the term "poem" in a meaningful sense.

Cleanth Brooks, *Well Wrought Urn*

The Hierarchy of Detail

In his essay "How Readers Make Meaning," Robert Crosman presents an interpretation of "A Rose for Emily" worked out by one of his students.¹ The analysis is unusual: while it accounts for many details in Faulkner's story that are usually passed over, it does not come to terms with the ending, for the student fails to mention, much less catch the implications of, the famous "long strand of iron-gray hair" on the pillow.² Nonetheless, argues Crosman, the interpretation is valid; it may fail to incorporate certain textual features, but that is true of any interpretation. While more traditional readings of the story all account for the last sentence, they skim over elements that his student vividly illuminates.

In one sense, I agree with Crosman: no interpretation can possibly account for all the details in a text. This position, however, runs against the current of a strong critical tradition based on two

1. Crosman, "How Readers Make Meaning." See also his "Do Readers Make Meaning?"—especially his claim for the validity of an interpretation of Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" "as a statement that we should drink milk regularly" (153).
of what Susan Horton aptly calls "interpretive fictions": that "the 'best' interpretation can avoid leaving out as much as it takes in" and "that everything in the text means or ought to be forced into meaning."\(^3\) These interpretive fictions have held a firm grip on contemporary criticism, especially from the New Critics onward. Wimsatt and Beardsley, for instance, claim that "poetry succeeds because all or most of what is said or implied is relevant; what is irrelevant has been excluded, like lumps from pudding and 'bugs' from machinery."\(^4\) Similarly, Barthes' exhaustive analysis of Balzac's "Sarrasine" assumes that "everything signifies something."\(^5\) Wayne Booth seems to agree in principle: in a discussion of apparently irrelevant features in *Tom Jones*, he notes that "if we really want to defend the book as art, we must somehow account for these 'extraneous' elements."\(^6\) And Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss' famous analysis of Baudelaire's "Les Chats" is in harmony with this critical chorus, for it too hinges on an implicit assumption that all features of a text are fair game for the critic.\(^7\)

There is, however, a countertradition as well, one that admits (sometimes grudgingly) that everything in a text is *not* really important. One variant of this countertradition assumes that texts are, in fact, abridgeable. To be sure, such condensations as those produced by the *Reader's Digest* have no academic standing. Still,

---

5. Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, 51. See also his claim that "a narrative is made up solely of functions: everything, in one way or another, is significant. . . . There are no wasted units" ("Introduction to the Structure of Narrative," 244–45). He does admit later on, however, that not everything is equally important [247–48], a position also hinted at later in *S/Z* [see, for instance, 112].
7. Roman Jakobson and Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Charles Baudelaire's 'Les Chats.'" In a very different tradition, see also Forster's claim that "the plot-maker expects us to remember, we expect him to leave no loose ends. Every action or word in a plot ought to count" [Aspects of the Novel, 61]. And in a different tradition yet, see Ronald Dworkin's "Law as Interpretation." Even Jane Tompkins—while self-consciously aware that her "contextual reading" of *Wieland* is a "product of modern critical assumptions"—justifies her interpretation as "more satisfactory . . . because it is able to account for portions of the text that have hitherto been seen as irrelevant, inadvertent, or simply 'bad'" [Sensational Designs, 43]. For attacks on Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss by Michael Riffaterre and Jonathan Culler, see above, Chapter 1, note 11.
the shortened *Clarissa* is more common in colleges and universities than is the complete novel; the Norton Anthologies, like the other collections that have served up the world of literature to college and high school students, tantalize with selections from longer works; many volumes in the widely used French series "Classiques Larousse" offer *extraits* rather than full texts. Such texts are not chopped up at random; behind their publication is the assumption that abridgement must be done according to certain rules, according to a systematic assessment of what is more important and what is less so.

This countertradition has its theoreticians as well. Gary Saul Morson, for instance, argues that "to identify the structure of a work is to construct a *hierarchy* of relevance that makes some of its details central and others peripheral." Tzvetan Todorov, similarly, argues against "a general refusal to privilege any part of the work whatever; we must not assume that there is only a monotonous reading which attributes an equal importance to every sentence of the text, to every part of the sentence."

This countertradition, I believe, is the one that accords more fully with the way people actually read and write. Of course, anything in a text *can* be made to "mean" by an ingenious reader—even accidents of pagination. It would not be hard to give meaning, for instance, to the fact that in the original French edition, the murder in Robbe-Grillet's *Voyeur* appears to take place on a blank page that would be 88 if it were numbered, for the number 8 has been a motif throughout the novel. But giving meaning is not the same as finding it or construing it; and to the degree that a novel is an attempt by a novelist to convey some more or less precise meaning, it is impossible for all of its features to bear weight. It is impossible because of limitations in both writers and readers.

8. Morson, *Boundaries of Genre*, 42. He goes on to claim that "the way readers go about this process of ordering . . . is not a constant. Different genres, for instance, imply different rules for ordering, and readers in different periods may estimate importance in different ways." In this regard, see Jane Tompkins' contention that Richard Adams was unable to notice a particular phrase in Hawthorne "because there is nothing in his interpretive assumptions that would make it noticeable" (*Sensational Designs*, 15).


There are many reasons why writers cannot write so that everything carries an intended meaning. As producers in an economic system, they sometimes have to fill space for nonartistic reasons (one thinks, in particular, of large, popular blockbusters, in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries), and their works are often altered by other hands. Furthermore, as flawed humans like the rest of us, they sometimes lose their grip on the specifics of their texts. Dostoyevsky, especially when under the pressure of a deadline, was notoriously sloppy; in *The Idiot*, he was even able to change the name of a character between the third and fourth chapters of part 3, where Lieutenant Molovtsov becomes Kurmyshov. And even so painstaking a writer as Raymond Chandler, in wrapping up the plot of *The Big Sleep*, forgot to give his readers the real story behind the mysterious death of the chauffeur, Owen Taylor. Indeed, in his later years, he could not recall it himself. “I remember,” he wrote to Hamish Hamilton, “several years ago when Howard Hawks was making *The Big Sleep*, the movie, he and Bogart got into an argument as to whether one of the characters was murdered or committed suicide. They sent me a wire asking me, and dammit I didn’t know either.”

The limitations on an author’s control over the details of a text, though, do not arise solely from economic pressures or from the human limits of memory. Such control is in fact *mathematically* impossible. As composer Ernst Kfenek points out, if you try to organize a piece of music totally, you end up paradoxically with the equivalent of chance. For as soon as a composer asserts full control over one aspect of the score (say, melody), he or she relin-

11. For a fuller discussion of textual corruption, see Hershel Parker, *Flawed Texts and Verbal Icons*.
12. Chandler, letter to Hamish Hamilton, March 21, 1949, in *Raymond Chandler Speaking*, ed. Dorothy Gardiner and Kathrine Sorley Walker [Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries, 1971]. 321. Stephen Knight views the situation differently: “Chandler may well have forgotten and the others may not have read the novel carefully enough, but the explanation is there. He committed suicide, the lump on his head was given him previously by Joe Brody” [Form and Ideology, 150]. He is right about the lump, at least to the extent that Brody says that he sapped Taylor. But Knight does not explain why he believes Brody or why he is sure it was suicide even if Brody is telling the truth. Indeed, given the limitations of the first-person point of view, it would be impossible for the novel to tell us definitively that it was suicide.
Rules of Notice

quishes control over another (for instance, harmony). What is true for music, where each note has a fairly restricted range of features (e.g., pitch, timbre, duration), is even truer for literature, where each word has a far greater range of potential relationships to the words around it (e.g., phonetic, syntactic, connotative, denotative), as well as to other works of literature and to the outside world. A writer who aims at the most precise semantic distinctions cannot simultaneously maintain full control over the text’s rhythms; once you have decided to write a play in palindromes, you severely limit your opportunities for subtle gradations of tone.

All art is a matter of choice, and the most fundamental choice an author faces is the choice of where to direct his or her attention. What is true of writers is true of readers as well. If one assumes that all features of a text are to receive close attention from an interpreter, then a text (even a lyric poem, certainly a novel) becomes an infinite and impenetrable web of relationships. In the end, such a view not only makes everything equally important, but also makes everything equally unimportant: only boredom can result. As Roland Barthes puts it, “Read slowly, read all of a novel by Zola, and the book will drop from your hands.” But Zola would never have expected us to read that way. Thus, while Barthes is right that “we do not read everything with the same intensity of reading; a rhythm is established,” he is wrong to see such reading as necessarily “casual, unconcerned with the integrity of the text.” That rhythm—if we catch the one the author intended—is very much a part of the integrity of the text.

In other words, since the attention of the author is not directed equally to all details in a text, then neither should the attention of the authorial audience be. The reader trying to recover authorial intention should, rather, try to duplicate the angle of the author’s attention. Thus, while, as Crosman claims, no interpretation can account for all the details of a text, it does not follow that all partial interpretations are equally valid, since not all details equally deserve explication. This notion fits our commonsense experi-

14. Barthes, Pleasure of the Text, 12, 10–11 (emphasis in the original).
Narrative Conventions

ence with texts: except perhaps when we are reading academically, we tend to read hierarchically, in the sense that we assume that, for any given text, certain features are more important than others. John D. MacDonald begins *Darker than Amber* as follows:

We were about to give up and call it a night when somebody dropped the girl off the bridge.

They came to a yelping stop overhead, out of sight, dumped her over the bridge rail and took off.

It was a hot Monday night in June. With mood. It was past midnight and just past the tide changes. A billion bugs were vectoring in on us as the wind began to die.

It seemed to be a very final way of busting up a romance.¹⁵

Then follow more than four pages of flashback to Travis McGee's fishing expedition and his attempt to help a friend recover from a failed marriage. Most readers who are likely to pick up this novel will recognize that these four pages are a detour from what is really important. Not that the detour has no function—it does serve to heighten our anticipation. But MacDonald's rhetorical device works only for the reader who views the events described as a deflection from what he or she really wants to know. No reader who pays as much attention to the fact that the fishermen had "lost seven"—rather than six or eight—"amid the pilings" [11] as to the description of McGee's attempt to free the victim from the cement block wired to her ankles will be able to experience the intended dramatic curve.

Basic Gestures of Noticeability

"I begin now to understand you all, except Miss Price," said Miss Crawford... "Pray, is she out, or is she not?..."

Edmund, to whom this was chiefly addressed, replied, "I believe I know what you mean—but I will not undertake to answer the question. My cousin is grown up... but the outs and not outs are beyond me."

Rules of Notice

"And yet in general, nothing can be more easily ascertained. The distinction is so broad. Manners as well as appearance are, generally speaking, so totally different. Till now, I could not have supposed it possible to be mistaken as to a girl's being out or not. A girl not out, has always the same sort of dress; a close bonnet, for instance, looks very demure, and never says a word."

A text, then, has a hierarchical organization of details: we do not attend to everything equally. To be sure, there are many forms of attention. Some features of a text are rich or evocative, others are strange, others surprising, others climactic. But whatever their specific character, their weight in our reading experience is variable. This chapter centers on two interrelated aspects of noticeability: concentration and scaffolding. First, rules of notice tell us where to concentrate our attention. Some details are, quite simply, more skimmable than others. You can get through War and Peace without paying very much attention to the clothing that the characters wear, and you will still have a reasonable experience of the text. But if you nod off during the discussions of Napoleon's progress, your response—in particular, your failure to share the growing tension—will be far from the one Tolstoy intended.

Second, the stressed features in a text serve as a basic structure on which to build an interpretation. As authorial audience, we read with the prior understanding that we are more expected to account for a detail that is stressed by a rule of notice than for a detail that is not. And both while we read and after we have finished, we shape our interpretations to conform to this basic understanding. Interpretations start, at least, with the most noticeable details.

Communication can exist only if author and receiver agree beforehand about what is worthy of notice. And like Miss Crawford's distinction between "out" and "not out," this agreement requires precise cultural articulation. One need not subscribe to Miss Crawford's social code to feel that, in literature, it is—as she says—"very inconvenient indeed" when an author fails to give the proper signals and allows those details which should be "not noticeable" to "give themselves the same airs and take the same

Narrative Conventions

liberties as if they were"—or vice versa. For there are two ways in which communication can fail on the question of notice: the irrelevant can appear to be prominent, or the crucial can pass by unnoticed.

Sometimes, of course, authors are quite explicit, even forceful, in the ways they direct us. They may simply tell us in so many words that something is important. James Cain's chatty narrators are especially given to telling us where to direct our attention: "After the coop was built," Leonard Borland tells us in Career in C Major, "Craig dug in at his farm up-state, and that left me alone. I want you to remember that, because if I made a fool of myself, I was wide open for that, with nothing to do and nobody to do it with." Or, later on, when describing the fiasco during Rigoletto: "I want you to get it straight now, what happened." But this is not simply a Cainian device. Almost all authors do the same thing to a greater or lesser extent. "Trumpets, please! Or still better, that tattoo which goes with a breathless acrobatic stunt. Incredible!" So Hermann, in Nabokov's Despair, announces his "discovery" that Felix is his double. "The adventure that befell us on the way," we are told by Anton Lavrent'evich, the narrator of The Possessed, "was also a surprising one"—just to make sure we approach it in the right frame of mind.

Only slightly more subtly, a detail can be emphasized through repetition. Thus, Naomi Schor's reading of Poe's "Mystery of Marie Rouget" starts out from the fact that the peculiar state of Marie's outer skirts is emphasized "by a combination of repetition and italicization. . . . For the reader, the hitch appears as a kind of marker, a signal, in a word: a detail jutting out above the plane surface of the text, providing the would-be interpreter or literary detective with a 'handle' on the text." Similarly, the authorial

Rules of Notice

audience of The Great Gatsby knows that Daisy’s green light, like the ash heap and the billboard advertising Dr. Eckleburg, is important because it is mentioned so frequently.21

Certain semantic gestures serve as markers of stress as well—the use, for instance, of words like “immediately” or “realized.” “He stood still as he suddenly remembered,” notes the narrator in Francis Steegmuller’s Blue Harpsichord. “Damn it—I’ve gone and left my thesis at Cynthia’s” —and the authorial audience knows that this event is worth attention because of “suddenly” and (since it stands out in this particular text) “damn.” Notice can also be directed through syntax. “It was after an August afternoon in a Times Square picture-house that Edna met Myrtle Throgmorton at the Schrafft’s on West Forty-Second Street,” writes Margaret Ayer Barnes in Edna His Wife; and because the sentence begins “It was” rather than simply “After an August afternoon,” this particular August afternoon is singled out as especially important.23 Similarly, an author may underscore importance by having a character perform the same actions he or she expects of the reader. After Inspector Roderick Alleyn reads through an entry in Arthur Rubrick’s diary (Died in the Wool), Ngaio Marsh tells us that “Alleyn read this passage through again”—a clear sign to the reader that it contains something worth close consideration.24 And in Charles W. Chesnutt’s “Po’ Sandy,” if we use Annie’s responses to Uncle Julius’ tale-within-a-tale as a model for our own reading, we will know what we should invest with our primary attention.

Metaphors and similes, too, can underline in fairly straightfor-

21. Thus, James E. Miller, Jr., is able to say, “By now the signal is unmistakable” when the word “ashen” appears in Nick’s attempt to imagine what Gatsby’s death must have been like (“Fitzgerald’s Gatsby: The World as Ash Heap,” in The Twenties: Fiction, Poetry, Drama, ed. Warren B. French [Deland, Fla.: Everett/Edwards, 1975], 190). See also F. H. Longman, who emphasizes roses and the color white in Gatsby because of “verbal recurrence” (“Style in The Great Gatsby,” Southern Review [University of Adelaide] 6 [1973]: 58).
ward ways. In *The Ambassadors*, Henry James describes one of Strether's discoveries as coming like "the click of a spring."  

John Barth announces the moment of Todd Andrews' revelation in *The Floating Opera* in a no less evident way: "For like that night in Baltimore when a dark alleyway turned me dazzled onto the bright flood of Monument Street, I now all at once found myself confronted with a new and unsuspected world."  

Typography can serve as a marker of stress as well. Todd's discovery itself, for instance, is printed partly in italics. Changes in typeface help guide the reader's attention in Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They* just as Manuel Puig's use of typography in *The Kiss of the Spider Woman* highlights shifts in the narrative that are crucial if we are to follow its drift. In Nabokov's *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert chides a detective story for presenting its clues in italics, but the criticism is ironic, since many of the clues in *Lolita* itself are in italics, too.  

Still, such explicit markers of stress can go only so far in telling the authorial audience where to direct its attention. Authors need other—more implicit and often more economical—devices as well. Specifically, there are conventional rules for determining the primary objects of attention. True, different rules of notice apply to larger or smaller groups of texts. Some—for instance, the rule that tells the reader to attend to the first letter of each line of a poem, or to note what each line spells out when read in reverse—apply only to fairly limited types (acrostics and palindromes respectively). Others—such as the rules that stress beginnings and endings (see "Privileged Positions" below)—are more widespread. But while the specific rules may vary with genre, cultural context, and author, the authorial audience is expected to share them, whatever they are, with the author before picking up a text.  

Let me stress, however, that while an author writes with the expectation that his or her readers have internalized certain rules, it does not follow that he or she is bound to follow those conventions rigidly. Quite often, rules will be twisted to special ends. One  

---

rules of notice

of the most striking is the kind of dislocation that occurs when you read a passage (or even a whole book) assuming one set of rules to be in effect, only to find that you have been tricked. In "A Double-Barreled Detective Story," for instance, Twain—assuming that his readers will apply the rule permitting us to skim nature descriptions in a nineteenth-century detective story—begins his fourth chapter with the following evocation:

It was a crisp and spicy morning in early October. The lilacs and laburnums, lit with the glory-fires of autumn, hung burning and flashing in the upper air, a fairy bridge provided by kind Nature for the wingless wild things that have their homes in the tree-tops and would visit together; the larch and the pomegranate flung their purple and yellow flames in brilliant broad splashes along the slanting sweep of the woodland; the sensuous fragrance of innumerable deciduous flowers rose upon the swooning atmosphere; far in the empty sky a solitary oesophagus slept upon motionless wing; everywhere brooded stillness, serenity, and the peace of God.27

This almost surrealistic description was intended as a trap for the unwary reader, but even Twain himself was surprised by the success with which it worked, for it turned out that except for the presence of the oesophagus, nothing in the passage jarred any of his readers. Indeed, in order to make the joke effective, Twain had to resort to a footnote that ordered his readers to examine the paragraph again carefully.

The surprise ending of Nabokov's "Vane Sisters" also plays on confusion about the appropriate rules of notice. As I noted above, the rule that tells you to look at the first letter of every line (or every word) applies only to a small class of texts—and it is easy to miss the signals that the final paragraph of "The Vane Sisters" belongs to that group. The reader who fails to read acrostically, however, will misread the ending of the book, which has a buried message that inverts the story's apparent meaning.

No matter how much a writer wishes to play with conventions, however, he or she can do so only if the readers share those conven-

Narrative Conventions

tions to begin with. Indeed, the more a writer wishes to undermine tradition, the more imperative it is that the tradition be understood to begin with. This may help explain why so-called serious avant-garde authors so frequently turn to formulaic popular fiction as a skeleton on which to hang their own works. In sum, whether a writer is twisting the rules or using them straightforwardly, he or she must work on the assumption that the reader has command over them to begin with, and regardless of the text, the reader reading without knowledge of the rules presupposed by the author is unlikely to uncover the intended meaning. The total number of rules of notice used in nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels is, of course, vast, and I cannot hope to discuss them exhaustively. I will, however, try to show something of their range by giving examples of three general types: rules of position, of intratextual disruption, and of extratextual deviation.

Privileged Positions

If you ask someone familiar with Pride and Prejudice to quote a line from the novel, the odds are that you will get the opening sentence. Similarly, most readers of The Great Gatsby have a stronger recollection of its final image than of most of the others in the text. This is not because those passages are inherently more brilliant or polished or interesting than their companions. Rather, out of all the aphorisms and images that these novels contain, these gain special attention because of their placement. For among the rules that apply quite broadly among nineteenth- and twentieth-century European and American prose narratives are rules that privilege certain positions: titles,28 beginnings and endings (not only of whole texts, but of subsections as well—volumes, chapters, episodes), epigraphs, and descriptive subtitles. As Mar-

28. See also John Fisher’s discussion of titles in “Entitling.” In some ways, Fisher’s arguments support mine: “The title tells us how to look at the work” (292), but he fails to deal with why this is so—that is, that we live in a community that has agreed to treat titles in certain ways, and that authors know this. See also Umberto Eco’s enunciation of a rule that “[irony or other figure excepted], the title of a chapter usually announces the content of it” (Role of the Reader, 20).
Rules of Notice

Ianna Torgovnick puts it, “It is difficult to recall all of a work after a completed reading, but climactic moments, dramatic scenes, and beginnings and endings remain in the memory and decisively shape our sense of a novel as a whole.” Placement in such a position does more than ensure that certain details will remain more firmly in our memory. Furthermore, such placement affects both concentration and scaffolding: our attention during the act of reading will, in part, be concentrated on what we have found in these positions, and our sense of the text’s meaning will be influenced by our assumption that the author expected us to end up with an interpretation that could account more fully for these details than for details elsewhere.

The concentrating quality of a detail in a privileged position can be demonstrated by looking at Anna Karenina. The novel has a large cast of characters—so large that we might hardly notice Anna’s arrival were the novel not named for her. But because of the title, we know from the beginning that we should look at the other characters in their relationship to her, rather than vice versa. Since they are the ground and she the figure, we pay more attention to her appearance and to the initial description of her character than we do to Dolly’s. Of course, one could well argue that the novel is structured so that even without the title, we would eventually concentrate on Anna rather than on Dolly. That is undoubtedly true, but it does not contradict the importance of the title; it merely suggests that the title does more to orient our reading at the beginning of the book than in the middle and the end. And even so, our reading experience would be quite different if the title were Levin. Similarly, we know we are expected to pay special attention to the dog that Gerasim rescues halfway through Turgenev’s

29. Torgovnick, Closure in the Novel, 3–4. See also Gerald Prince’s claim that “the beginning or the end of various sequences” are “strategically important points” (Narratology, 72), and Barbara Gerber Sanders’ justification of an analysis based primarily on the ends of chapters in The Great Gatsby: “Structurally, the beginnings and endings of chapters are strategic places for development of thematic images. . . . The reader’s mind is, or should be, more alert at these transitions” (“Structural Imagery in The Great Gatsby: Metaphor and Matrix,” Linguistics in Literature 1, no. 1 [1978]: 57–58). Films differ markedly from novels in this regard, perhaps because filmmakers must take late arrivals into account. People will start films in the middle, but they will rarely do the same with books.
"Mumu" because she is the title character. The effect is all the stronger because until this point, the title has been a source of puzzlement.

One way to highlight how titles concentrate the process of reading is to consider cases where novels have alternate titles, or where alternate titles were seriously considered. When a novel’s cover proclaims *Pride and Prejudice*, we are immediately alert to certain contrasts. While the book incorporates a number of other oppositions as well (young/old, male/female, mother/daughter, rich/poor, light/dark, city/country), no reading could ever control them all—and Austen’s choice of title makes it clear where she wanted us to put our attention first. The resulting experience is quite different from the one that would have been encouraged had the novel been published under the title that Austen used for her first version, *First Impressions*. With the early title, we would have been more alert to the elements common to Darcy and Elizabeth than to their differences (the fact that both exhibit pride and prejudice is beside the point; the published title encourages us to look initially for contrasts rather than for unity), and we would be more prepared on first reading to see Elizabeth’s reaction to Wickham as part of the same package as her reaction to Darcy. In addition, the title *Pride and Prejudice* prompts us to concentrate on character, whereas *First Impressions* encourages us to concentrate on plot—more specifically, on change. Pride and prejudice are static qualities that may or may not be transformed, but first impressions imply the existence of second (and different) impressions.

Whatever one feels about the trial of *Madame Bovary*, therefore, the prosecutor Pinard had reasonable critical justification for starting with the title in order to get at the novel’s central meaning.30 First sentences operate in a similar way. “All happy families resemble one another, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way”31—so begins *Anna Karenina*, and from the beginning, the authorial audience is encouraged to pay more attention to family life than, say, to politics, which in this novel is subsidiary to


Rules of Notice

individual action. The reader is further advised to see the novel in terms of a basic opposition between "happy" and "unhappy," and, more explicitly, to see happiness as a form of one's unity with others and unhappiness as a form of difference. No one could argue that the first sentence is essential to the book in the sense that if it were not there we would feel its lack. But without that sentence, the didactic message of the novel would be slightly muted, and it would thus engender a different reading experience for the authorial audience.

Titles not only guide our reading process by telling us where to concentrate; they also provide a core around which to organize an interpretation. As a general rule, we approach a book with the expectation that we should formulate an interpretation to which the title is in fact appropriate. This retrospective process of interpreting a completed book will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, but a few examples may be useful here. The title of James Cain's Postman Always Rings Twice does little to direct our attention as we are reading. There are no postmen in the novel, and while it is eventually obvious that the title is metaphoric, it is not immediately clear just what the import of the metaphor is. At the beginning of the novel, perhaps, after the first murder attempt fails, it might warn us to expect a second—as if the title were a twist on "Opportunity knocks but once." But by the end, we are encouraged to give a fatalistic reading of the text, because it is only in the context of such an interpretation that the title is appropriate. It is not only that Frank and Cora fail, but that they had to fail.

Ford Madox Ford's Some Do Not... provides a more elaborate example of how a title can serve as a skeleton on which to build an interpretation. As in all of the novels that make up Parade's End, the title has multiple meanings because the phrase is used in a number of different contexts. Its first appearance after the title comes in a privileged spot as well: a citation, at the end of a section, typographically set off:

"The gods to each ascribe a differing lot:
Some enter at the portal. Some do not."32

32. Ford, Some Do Not... , bound with No More Parades [New York: NAL/Signet, 1964], 28 [pt. 1, chap. 1]. Further page references are given in the text.

61
The phrase returns near the close of part I (chap. 7, also in a privileged position, half a page from the end), after General Campion has run into Tietjens and Valentine's horse. When Tietjens decides to stay with the animal, the fly driver says, "But I wouldn't leave my little wood 'ut nor miss my breakfast for no beast. . . . Some do and some . . . do not" (149; ellipses in original). Later, when a "dark man" offers to help keep Tietjens out of the war, Tietjens tells him that he really wants to join the army; the dark man says, "'Some do. Some do not'" (229; pt. 2, chap. 3). At the end of part 2, in chapter 5, after Valentine agrees to become Tietjens' mistress, the phrase becomes explicitly sexual: "'That's women!' he said with the apparently imbecile enigmaticality of the old and the hardened. 'Some do!' He spat into the grass, said: 'Ah!' then added: 'Some do not!'" (284). But a few pages later, he realizes, "'We're the sort that . . . do not!'" (287, pt. 2, chap. 6; ellipses in original).

The primary function of Ford's technique is not to create linguistic paradox by showing the multiple meanings latent in the title's language (although it does do that). Rather, the repetition of the title pressures the authorial audience to tie together the contexts in which the phrase appears and to interpret a number of apparently separate concerns (optimistic hope for the future, proper care for animals, willingness to fight in the war, and sexual honor) as in fact variations on a single theme. One might argue that the unity would be there without the title. Still, without the title to predispose the reader to notice its repetitions in the text, he or she would not be so likely to see them at all, much less to see them as contributing to a thematic unity. To put it another way: without the title, a reader who claimed to find this linguistic web uniting these disparate passages might reasonably be criticized for stretching things; with the title, a reader who refused to accept the connections could reasonably be accused of denseness. But this accusation carries weight only in a community where there is a prior agreement to privilege titles.

Last sentences, of course, cannot serve to focus a reading experience (at least, not an initial reading experience). But they do often serve to scaffold our retrospective interpretation of the book. The final image of Dashiell Hammett's *Glass Key* is Ned Beaumont...
staring at an empty doorway. Anywhere else in the novel, we might well slide over such a bland detail. By putting it at the end, though, Hammett is urging his reader to privilege that blankness and to tie it to all the other doors and entryways into mysterious psychological blanks that give the book much of its character.

Not all novels privilege opening and closing sentences; different genres stress different points to different degrees. Still, it is telling that novels that do not privilege the opening often make some linguistic gesture to signal their departure from the general rule. *The Postman Always Rings Twice* is a case in point. The opening paragraph tells us how our narrator, Frank, has been thrown off a hay truck. It gives us a general sense of his character, but we can tell that it is intended as introductory material (like the introduction of a sonata-form movement), rather than as the beginning of the exposition, because of the way that Cain begins the second paragraph: "That was when I hit this Twin Oaks Tavern."33 The syntactic device "that was when" serves to inform us that this is the important point of departure.

At first, the claim that titles, openings, and closings are privileged may seem a trivial one—and in a sense it is, since it is one of the simplest rules of interpretation. Yet it is curious how often it can serve to answer interpretive disputes by supporting one reading over another. The privileged nature of closing sentences surely answers Robert Crosman’s arguments, outlined at the beginning of this chapter; the privileged nature of beginnings supports a feminist-economic reading of *Pride and Prejudice*. Similarly, the opening sentence of *Little Women* ("‘Christmas won’t be Christmas without any presents,’ grumbled Jo, lying on the rug") encourages the authorial audience to see the novel in terms of the interaction between love, friendship, and family on the one hand, and economics on the other. And the fact that Norman Mailer begins his *American Dream* with a reference to John Kennedy supports an interpretation that sees the whole novel as lit by the Kennedy mystique—although the evidence for that claim would be feeblel

Narrative Conventions

if the explicit mention of Kennedy came only in the middle of the novel.34

So far, I have considered position in the most literal sense, as a feature of the text as a physical, printed artifact. But textual features have positions within plot structures too, and a novelist can direct attention by careful placement in this regard as well. Threats, warnings, and promises, for instance, are almost always noticeable because of their role in predicting the shape of a text. This will be clearer after Chapter 4, where I discuss configuration in more detail. Still, it is possible to give a few examples by relying on our commonsense notions of novelistic structure.

Few authors are so skillful at emphasis through placement as Dostoyevsky. His novels are full of small, superficially empty moments that the authorial audience charges with psychic energy because of their placement. One thinks of Raskolnikov and Razumikhin staring at one another in the dark corridor (Crime and Punishment) or of Kirillov's bizarre empty stare when Pyotr Stepanovich goes to see if he is really going to shoot himself (The Possessed). Both moments exemplify a general rule: details at climactic moments (at peripeties, discoveries, revelations, recognitions) receive special stress. This rule can in turn be broken down into more specific variants that are known to most experienced readers of nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, even if they are really formulated explicitly. A few examples: (1) When a character's moral choice serves as the linchpin for the development of the plot, then that character is to be read as an important character. On this basis, the reader of Ibsen's Doll's House can fairly assume that Krogstadt—whose decisions about whether to expose Nora's forgery determine much of the play's action—is intended to be a more important character than Mrs. Linde, who serves primarily as a sounding board for, and contrast to, Nora.

34. Of course, the Kennedy reference also conjures up an image of violent death. Since Mailer had written the first version of the opening before Kennedy's assassination, it was obviously not on his mind; still, one suspects that his decision to keep the reference (albeit with alterations) even in his postassassination revisions stemmed at least in part from the fact that the death imagery, too, fit in with the rest of the novel. For a detailed discussion of the editorial problems in this novel, see Parker, Flawed Texts and Verbal Icons, chap. 7.
Rules of Notice

(2) When an event changes a major character’s relationship to other characters, that event is to be read as charged. Thus, in Marge Piercy’s *High Cost of Living*, when the homosexual Bernard makes love to the protagonist, his lesbian friend Leslie, the act is a plot-stressed event since we know that, whatever happens, their relationship will be permanently altered. (3) When an event or a detail answers a question around which a narrative has been based, it is emphasized. Thus, the gray hair in “A Rose for Emily” is stressed not only by its physical position, but by its plot position as well, for it provides the final bit of information about what has happened to Homer Barron. (4) In addition, there are positions that are stressed only in certain genres: the meeting around the fireside at the end of a detective story, for instance, attracts our special attention.

Rules of Rupture

Politics in the midst of imaginative concerns is like a pistol shot in the middle of a concert.35

We tend to skim over the even and the unbroken; disruptions attract our notice. This explains why we notice the pyramid rising above the desert, and also why we notice certain details in literary works. Specifically, textual features stand out both when they disrupt the continuity of the works in which they occur and when they deviate from the extratextual norms against which they are read. Thus, for instance, silences interjected into a dialogue attract notice (“‘My name is Gagin, and this is my’—he hesitated for a moment—‘my sister’”),36 just as violations of conventional expectations do (most detective story solutions are quickly forgotten, but almost everyone who has read Agatha Christie’s *Murder of Roger Ackroyd* remembers its unconventional climax—a climax

that I will not spoil for those who have not read the novel]. Need­
less to say, however, the application of this general rule is prob­
lematic in particular cases.

Let me begin with intratextual disruptions—breaks in a given
text's continuity—since they are somewhat more straightforward.
Continuity, to be sure, itself depends on rules of configuration; as I
have pointed out, notice and configuration are interdependent.
Still, even at this point, a few examples can be given.

The blatantly irrelevant tends to be noticed. Any time a detail is
mentioned when there seems to be no apparent reason for it, the
surface of the text is ruptured; most of the time, such ruptures are
appropriately treated as signals to pay attention. This is especially
true when the irrelevance itself is explicitly mentioned: "Oh,
yes—there had been one more episode, if one wanted to record
every last detail: the visit to the milliner. But even Terence wasn’t
morbid about mere shopping encounters."37 But such explicitness
is hardly required. We pay attention when Gatsby and Tom
Buchanan switch cars, because it seems such a pointless turn in
the plot that we feel sure it will have consequences. Even nontradi­
tional novels often make use of this rule. One of the most oft-
quoted passages in Robbe-Grillet’s Erasers is his description of a
tomato—a description made memorable by the specificity of its
detail (excessive even in this densely detailed novel), and es­
specially by the apparent irrelevance of much of it: "Above, a
scarcely perceptible accident has occurred: a corner of the skin,
stripped back from the flesh for a fraction of an inch, is slightly
raised."38

The inappropriate, too, tends to be noticed. There are numerous
variations on this rule. For instance, inappropriate behavior by
characters is always noticeable. Myshkin’s verbal assault on Ca­
tholicism in Dostoyevsky’s Idiot, for instance, stands out at least
in part because a formal reception is an improper forum for such an
impassioned outburst. A more specific variant applies to detective
and spy novels: when a character displays a piece of knowledge

37. Steegmuller, Blue Harpsichord, 28 (pt. 1, chap. 3).
38. Alain Robbe-Grillet, The Erasers, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove,
1964), 153 (chap. 3, pt. 3).
that he or she has no apparent way of having obtained, the reader should watch that character. Indeed, mysteries are often solved because the criminal lets slip a piece of information that he or she could have only if he or she committed the crime. When Corky, in the Encyclopedia Brown story “The Case of the Knife in the Watermelon,” lets slip that he knows how long a knife blade is—even though the knife is buried up to its handle in a watermelon—the careful reader can be sure that he is the guilty party.

More often than not, the authorial audience is also to pay attention when a plot changes direction. This can occur in fairly literal ways, as when, in Robin Hood, Little John physically stops moving:

So he strode whistling along the leafy forest path that led to Fosse Way, turning neither to the right hand nor to the left, until at last he came to where the path branched, leading on the one hand onward to Fosse Way, and on the other, as well Little John knew, to the merry Blue Board Inn. Here Little John suddenly ceased whistling and stopped in the middle of the path.\textsuperscript{39}

A less literal kind of change in direction is found in Aglaya's marriage at the end of The Idiot. This attracts our notice at least partly because it disrupts the neat closure of the circle provided by the final meeting of Myshkin and Rogozhin (whose first meeting opened the novel), and by Myshkin's return to the "idiocy" that had plagued him before the novel began. Indeed, shifts in plot direction also include changes in a novel's perspective—the move from a waking state to a dream, for instance (for this reason, the dreams in Jane Eyre are given special attention by the authorial audience)—as well as shifts in narrative distance. Thus, when Gogol, toward the beginning of "Nevsky Prospect," suddenly moves from the generalized, distant description of the crowd to a more detailed, close-up description of Pirogov and Piskarev, the shift in perspective makes us pay special attention to these two characters.

We similarly notice shifts in style. Dramatic effects in opera are often created in this way. For instance, when the Empress in the

\textsuperscript{39}. Howard Pyle, The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood [New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1952], 89.
Narrative Conventions

Strauss-Hofmannstahl *Frau ohne Schatten* (*The Woman without a Shadow*) thinks that the curse has been fulfilled, she switches from singing to heightened speech in order to express her despair. And any experienced operagoer, hearing that passage—even without knowing the plot or a word of German—would recognize it as a crucial juncture just because of the stylistic jolt. So it is in literature. The phrase "They ran" stands out in Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust* because it is such a compact sentence following the long, stream-of-consciousness flow of the dreamlike fantasy of Miss Habershamb caught in the traffic. Rhymed couplets in Shakespeare's plays stand out for similar reasons.

Deviations from norms outside the text in question are just as noticeable as breaks in a text's continuity, but here we run into more severe interpretive problems, for a number of reasons.

What counts as a deviation will vary, for norms are radically context dependent. Indian musical tunings, which sound quite normal to someone raised in Delhi, seem strange and exotic when heard against the norms of American popular songs—at least, they did until they, too, became an American pop norm. The blandest American TV jingle would have the same shock value for an Indian unfamiliar with Western musical practice. In the same way, noticeability in fiction depends in part on what system of norms is invoked.

To make matters more complicated, there are two different kinds of norms involved in literary texts. On the one hand, there are what might loosely be called "real world" norms: norms that readers bring to works from their social experiences outside art, rather than from their experiences with literature per se. Thus, for instance, any violation of an actual cultural taboo will attract a reader's notice—although, of course, what constitutes a taboo will vary from culture to culture. The riveting power of Nora's departure in *A Doll's House* derives only partly from its privileged posi-

Rules of Notice

tion. It is noticeable also because, in the social context in which Ibsen expected the play to be produced, the action itself was shocking, even though it may seem less so now. In contrast, a contemporary American reader of Chekhov's "Lady with the Dog," living in a social context where divorce is common, may be more surprised than Chekhov intended by Anna and Gurov's failure to consider this option. True, many texts teach their actual readers about the cultural perspective from which they are written. The social meaning of Lydia's elopement with Wickham is discussed exhaustively in Pride and Prejudice. But that discussion itself makes sense only to readers who have at least some prior knowledge of the importance of marriage and propriety in that culture.

In order to understand a text as the author intended, therefore, it is necessary to know in advance which social norms it was expected to be read against. But it is just as important to know the literary norms that serve as a text's background. Suppose, for example, we pick up a mystery story and find the characters comparing literature and life:

"You confess that you read detective stories, Miss Grey. You must know that any one who has a perfect alibi is always open to grave suspicion."

"Do you think that real life is like that?" asked Katherine, smiling.

"Why not? Fiction is founded on fact."

"But is rather superior to it," suggested Katherine.42

Are we to pay particular attention to that exchange and treat the novel as an inquiry into the ontology and epistemology of fictional discourse? The question cannot be answered in terms of how people confronting violent crime really operate, or even in terms of

42. Agatha Christie, The Mystery of the Blue Train [New York: Pocket, 1940], 130 (chap. 21). See also Michael Innes, The Bloody Wood [New York: Berkley Medallion, 1966]: "What if we're slipping sedately into one of those well-bred English detective novels of the classical sort? Death at Charne House" [62]; and P. D. James, An Unsuitable Job for a Woman [New York: Warner, 1982]: "But it didn't surprise her . . . to hear that Sergeant Maskell . . . was tied up all morning. It was only in fiction that the people one wanted to interview were sitting ready at or in their office, with time, energy, and interest to spare. In real life, they were about their own business" [82, chap. 2].

69
how the authorial audience believes such people operate. Rather, the noticeability of this feature has to do with how such people behave in books. But what books? Different norms characterize different sets of narratives; what stands out as deviant, therefore, depends not only on social context but also on the intertextual grid against which the text is read. Generally speaking, formulaic elements—elements that regularly recur without significant variation in comparable texts—are not noticeable unless they are traditionally points of stress—that is, unless they are given specifically formulaic emphases. (Thus, as I have suggested, the fireside chat of the detective story is stressed because that is precisely its formulaic purpose—to point out an event worthy of special notice.) In a classical detective story, for instance, life-and-literature discussions are formulaic in this sense; like the formulaic descriptions of clothing in popular romances and of the storms that so often beset Southworth heroines, they are intended not to attract notice, but rather to fill space.

This is not to say that a sensitive cultural critic could not look at these formulas to unveil their implicit cultural values. Indeed, as I have suggested earlier, much of the most valuable political criticism comes from the decoding made possible by reading in a context that the author did not intend, a technique that often highlights precisely those elements of a text that the author and his or her intended readers took for granted—elements that can therefore reveal unexpected and unconscious aspects of the reigning ideology. Such reading against the grain, though, depends on authorial reading for its political force; it is valuable not because it points out certain features, but because it points out certain features that the author did not intend to be particularly noticeable.

What counts as a formula varies from genre to genre. The life-and-literature discussions in Pirandello’s plays are intended to be read against a different intertextual grid than those in Christie, and in this context they are no longer mere filler. It would be just as wrong to ignore them in a reading of his work as it would be to stress them in a reading of The Mystery of the Blue Train. Readers frequently stumble on this point, missing what is important or stressing the irrelevant because they are reading in the wrong context. But the fault does not always lie with the readers. Authors
Rules of Notice

can fail to assess properly the background their actual readers are likely to call into play.

For instance, writers (especially inexperienced writers) occasionally rely on what appears to be a deviation from a formula but what has in fact already been used so often that it has become a formula in its own right. The confusion of the border line between life and art that was an effective overturning of dramatic conventions in Pirandello becomes just another formulaic gesture in the work of student playwrights, just as the double and triple crossing that was so startling in the early novels of Le Carré and Deighton is by now no longer able to surprise us. We almost expect the true villain to be the head of a major spy operation on the good guys’ side.43

The appropriate background group for a given text usually includes the previous works by the same author: the science fiction elements in Doris Lessing’s later novels stand out more sharply against the stark realism of her earlier books, just as the return to realism in The Diaries of Jane Somers is especially noticeable in the context of that science fiction. The genre of the work in question, as we have seen, also alerts readers to the intended background, especially when the genre is announced by the title (Dinesen’s Seven Gothic Tales, for instance); as a general rule, it is appropriate to give priority to deviations from works in the same genre over deviations from works in other genres. Still, every work has its own unique intended background (if only because every author has read a different selection of books). And although the variations in background may be so subtle as to be insignificant, interpretive questions often come down, in the end, to questions about choice of background group—a choice that the work itself cannot explicitly outline, and that will therefore depend to some extent on the reader’s assumptions about the proper intertextual grid, assumptions made in part before even starting the book.

43. Thus, the impact of a book depends on when you read it with respect to other books. As Robert Champigny points out, “Suppose that a reader comes across The Maltese Falcon after reading several stories in which the murderer is a client who tries to seduce the detective. The fact that The Maltese Falcon exemplifies this pattern may disappoint him, not because he assumes that it is historically improbable but because, in his eyes, the development of the story makes the denouement too likely. He may thus consider Hammett to be an imitator of authors who wrote after him” (What Will Have Happened, 32).
Thus, for instance, the reader who comes to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Dred* with expectations drawn from experience with the works of Jane Austen is apt to be startled by the transformation of the heroine Nina. In the world of Austen, while characters change, the kind of flightiness exhibited by Nina in the opening chapters is unalterable; Nina’s metamorphosis into a wise, independent-minded, and courageous woman appropriate for the virtuous Clayton to marry seems as unimaginable as Lydia’s would be if she turned into an appropriate wife for Darcy. But such transformations were more common in the popular American women’s novels of the day than in Austen. Indeed, Nina Baym argues that one of the two basic variants of the “single tale” told in “the many novels by American women authors about women, written between 1820 and 1870,” starts with “a pampered heiress” who, after financial misfortune, “develops the capacity to survive and surmount her troubles.” Thus, what may seem surprising and unusual to us may in fact be merely formulaic. (Nina’s death halfway through the novel, in contrast, is remarkable through either lens.)

In the case of *Dred*, modern readers can make a fairly reliable guess about authorial intention by looking at the historical context in which the novel was written and published. Sometimes, however, the available evidence is more ambiguous, with the result that recovery of the authorial meaning becomes more chancy. For instance, as I have noted, the comparison between the so-called real world and the stylized world of detective novelists is a common gesture in detective stories. Thus, if a reader of Eric Ambler’s *Intercom Conspiracy* has experience with the genre, he or she might not pay particular attention when Valerie Carter tells novelist Charles Latimer:

“I think [your novels are] highly ingenious and much better written than most. Above all nobody in them is made to behave stupidly. . . . One of the things I can’t stand in that sort of book is the character who gets trapped in a dangerous situation and is forced to run appalling risks simply because he didn’t, for some feebly contrived reason, go to the police when the trouble started. The author is assuming that the reader is a moron, and that’s infuriating.

44. Baym, Woman’s Fiction, 11, 35.
Rules of Notice

"So, when my father began explaining why he couldn't go to the police and tell them what was going on, I became angry."  

But since the theme is repeated as the novel progresses, the reader may begin to wonder about its intended importance. Is this simply an elaboration of a formulaic gesture? Or does The Intercom Conspiracy really aim to question which vision is truer: that of the individual participant (with his or her actual experience, but with the concomitant limitations) or that of the novelist (with his or her greater scope but also greater distance). One can, of course, apply the standard rules of notice for detective stories. Or one can apply a basic rule of coherence (discussed in more detail in Chapter 5), and assume that it should be read to make the best novel possible. In the case of The Intercom Conspiracy, we have a fairly weak spy novel, although as a novel about fiction and history it is somewhat more interesting. However we choose to interpret it, though, we are engaging in guesswork. In order to read it as the author intended, we have to know, before picking it up, what other texts Ambler wanted us to have in mind as we read.

Even after we have decided on the proper norms for a work, it is not always easy in practice to know what constitutes a real deviation. As I noted above, a textual element is formulaic if it regularly recurs without significant variation in comparable texts. But ascertaining what constitutes "regular" recurrence and "significant" variation is an act of judgment: one reader's significant variation is another's cliché. At the end of Pride and Prejudice, Lady Catherine is almost, but not quite, reconciled to Darcy's mismatch: "She condescended to wait on them at Pemberley, in spite of that pollution which its woods had received, not merely from the presence of such a mistress, but the visits of her uncle and aunt from the city."  

Does the authorial audience view this as a formulaic reiteration of traditional comedy's love-conquers-all happy ending, with its reconciliation of warring factions through marriage of the younger generation? Or does the authorial audience pay special attention to the slight twist ("she condescended . . . in spite of that


73
Narrative Conventions

pollution”) and stress instead the novel’s failure to resolve problems as neatly as the traditional formula dictates? Obviously, different actual readers will read it differently. But those differences do not stem necessarily from Austen’s highly developed sense of paradox (there is no reason to assume that she did not intend one or the other of those readings unambiguously). Nor, more important, do they necessarily stem from a difference in the general rule being applied. Rather, they may well arise from a difference in the way that a generally agreed upon rule is being applied in one specific instance.47

To make matters more complex still, formulas are not as a rule given special attention, but specific references (parodies, quotations, allusions) are. Thus, the phrase “Look at Dick” is not noticeable in a children’s reader, but it becomes so when it is used in Toni Morrison’s *Bluest Eye*. It is not, however, always easy to tell a reference from a formula. Those who know Haydn’s Symphony No. 13 may find citational significance in the fact that Mozart later used the opening theme of the finale to launch the last movement of his own *Jupiter Symphony*. In fact, though, the theme itself is a commonplace of counterpoint exercises, and there is no authorial significance to its appearance in both works.

In general, the border line between reference and formula—like the border lines between deviations and norms more generally—can be pinpointed only in the context of a particular intertextual grid. Take, for instance, Raymond Chandler’s decision to name his series detective Marlowe. One can easily read this as a reference to Conrad’s Marlow and draw symbolic conclusions from the parallels thus revealed between, say, *The Big Sleep* (the novel where Marlowe first appeared) and *Heart of Darkness*. But was Chandler really intending his readers to do that? The text itself does not provide an answer; the reader’s interpretation, rather, will depend on his or her intertextual grid. If the reader groups *The Big Sleep* simply with traditional detective stories, then the connection between Philip Marlowe and Conrad’s Marlow will appear to be purely coincidental (the name, after all, is not uncommon), not an

47. For good examples of the ways in which the same general rules can be applied differently by different critics, see Culler, *Pursuit of Signs*, chap. 3.
Rules of Notice

instance of copying and hence no more noticeable than the occurrence of the same name in Bentley's Trent's Last Case, Ambler's Cause for Alarm, or Allingham's Mystery Mile. If, on the other hand, the reader groups it with the so-called serious British literary tradition, the name immediately becomes charged. Sometimes an author will make the reader's task easier by being fairly explicit about references to other texts—as when Peachum explains the arrival of the Royal Messenger to the audience in The Threepenny Opera in terms of dramatic tradition: Even though in reality "mounted messengers from the Queen come far too seldom," Mac-heath will not be hanged because "this is an opera, and we mean to do you proud."

Sometimes, we can tell by context. Generally speaking, the importation of an apparently inappropriate formula (as the use of primer style in Morrison) signals a reference. Sometimes, we have to know the author. Only a reader familiar with Pushkin's style and wit will be comfortably sure that the completely formulaic last story in Belkin Tales is intended as a parody.

But there remain instances when even experienced actual readers will be baffled. It is not easy to be sure whether the apparently formulaic marriage between Annella Wilder and Valerius Brightwell in Southworth's Allworth Abbey is intended as a simple closure or as an attack on the genre. (For a fuller discussion of this text, see Chapter 5.)

Knowing where to direct our attention, however, is only the first step in literary interpretation. We also need to know how to construct textual meanings out of the details we have found. This leads to the next set of rules: rules of signification.

49. For a good discussion of this point, see Morson, Boundaries of Genre, 110–13.