The Biggest Black Eyes I Ever Saw: Rules of Signification

Our public is still so young and naive that it fails to understand a fable unless it finds a lesson at its end. It misses a humorous point and does not feel irony. . .[It] resembles a provincial who, upon overhearing the conversation of two diplomats belonging to two warring Courts, is convinced that each envoy is betraying his government in the interests of a most tender and mutual friendship.

*Mikhail Lermontov, A Hero of Our Time*

Signification Defined

Once we know, through rules of notice, what to attend to, we still have to face the problem of how to attend to it. Take the opening sentence of the third section of Faulkner's *Sound and the Fury*: "Once a bitch always a bitch, what I say." It is clearly noticeable. Not only does it begin a new section; in addition, coming after the elaborate grammatical and philosophical complexities of Quentin's internal monologue, it hits us like a blast of cold air with its immediacy. Yet what does it mean?

Out of context, Jason's remark may be somewhat obscure—but difficult as the novel is, the reader who has gotten this far in it will probably be able to make a variety of judgments about what the sentence means. He or she will know, for instance, that its referent is a woman, and not a dog; that the immediate source of the words...

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(that is, the dramatized speaker) is Jason (not Faulkner), who does not intend them to be ironic; that the act of making the statement reflects badly on Jason (at least, within the ideological norms according to which Faulkner expected his reader to judge); that the statement is false; and that, despite the authorial audience’s disdain for the speaker, it sees certain factors in his life as causal contributions to his hatred of Quentin.

In a critical climate in which the very word literal has come under attack, where every act of shaping—be it in the form of a novel or a philosophical discourse or a newspaper editorial—is claimed to be a fiction, it is hard to know precisely what to call the process of making these determinations without appearing to be naive. Nonetheless, the process does take place: in reading (decoding, unpacking, interpreting) Faulkner’s sentence, the reader moves from what appears to be said to what is really said, or at least from one level (which, if not literal, is more immediate or more close at hand) to another (which is more distant, more mediated). I call this activity signification.

Authors can be quite explicit about the acts of signification that they intend readers to perform. It is not only in allegories and children’s books (one thinks of Tom Swift) that characters’ names serve as signposts of character: Dostoyevsky’s Lev (from “lion”) Nikolaevich Myshkin (from “mouse”) trumpets his ambivalent character. (His name and patronymic may also refer, more subtly, to Tolstoy.) Alice Walker goes a step further and, in the opening of Meridian, gives us a detailed analysis of the implications of her heroine’s name, providing a dictionary-style offering with twelve different meanings. Nor is it only in fables and fairy tales that we find ourselves confronted with explicit statements about what it all means. In Anna Karenina, just as Levin’s brother Nikolai dies,

2. For a strong attack on the notion of literal meaning, see Stanley Fish, “Normal Circumstances, Literal Language, Direct Speech Acts, the Ordinary, the Everyday, the Obvious, What Goes without Saying, and Other Special Cases,” in Is There a Text? 168–92. For critical perspectives on the general expansion of the term fiction, see Barbara Foley, Telling the Truth, esp. chap. 1, and Gerald Graff, Literature against Itself, chap. 6.


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the doctors discover that Kitty is pregnant. Lest we fail to recognize the cosmic implications of this coincidence, Tolstoy tells us directly—in a privileged position, at the end of a chapter: “Scarce­ly had the unexplained mystery of death been enacted before his eyes when another mystery just as inexplicable presented itself, calling to love and life.”

More often than not, though, authors rely on a set of unspoken agreements to get their readers to apply the correct rules of signification to texts. Rules of signification are vast in number, and teachers probably have more trouble teaching their students to understand them than teaching them other kinds of rules. It is perhaps for this reason that so much literary criticism is devoted to rules of signification. Most of it, however, has been focused on the fairly narrow area of figurative language, which critical schools as diverse as New Criticism and post-structuralism have seen as the essence of literary study. Cleanth Brooks, for instance, has argued that “the essence of poetry is metaphor,” a statement that—except for its privileging of metaphor over other figures—accords quite comfortably with J. Hillis Miller’s insistence that the “center of our discipline . . . is expertise in handling figurative language,” and that the “teaching of reading” is therefore inevitably “the teaching of the interpretation of tropes.”

Given this imbalance, there seems little point in trying to add yet more to what has already been said, for instance, about the ways in which readers know how and when to read textual features metaphorically. Instead, in this chapter I turn my attention to some other rules of signification that have not already been so well mined—specifically, to sketch out a few of them in four further categories suggested by my analysis of the Faulkner phrase above: rules of source, rules of morality, rules of truth and realism, and rules of causation.

5. Cleanth Brooks, Well Wrought Utter, 248; J. Hillis Miller, “Function of Rhetorical Study,” 13. Geoffrey Hartman would seem to agree: “Could we not say that there must be [in critical thinking] a willingness to receive figurative language?” (Criticism in the Wilderness, 27). Mary Louise Pratt has made a compelling case against the notion that the use of figurative language distinguishes literary from nonliterary discourse (Toward a Speech Act Theory, esp. chap. 1).
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Rules of Source

Even the most rudimentary guides aimed at showing how to read literature include, fairly soon, the warning against confusion of author, narrator, and character. A study sheet devised by Hamilton College’s English Department for students beginning their first literature survey, for instance, informs them that the question, Who is speaking? is one of the first that a reader must ask.6 Because this distinction is stressed so often, it is only the most naive reader who makes gross errors on this score—who confuses Jason with Faulkner, for instance. Indeed, as Wayne Booth argued long ago in The Rhetoric of Fiction (the classic study of author/narrator relations), modern readers, if anything, tend to err in the opposite direction by ironizing everything, refusing to hear the implied author’s voice even when he or she is speaking directly.7 But in moments of stress—the furors surrounding the publications of Madame Bovary and Lolita, for instance—such niceties are often forgotten.8 And the hazy area where fiction and autobiography melt into one another (as in Remembrance of Things Past or Tropic of Cancer) often finds even professional critics merging author and narrator.

To be sure, there is often good reason for this kind of uncertainty; some passages in Madame Bovary, for instance, are so clouded that it is impossible to be sure precisely whose words are represented in the text.9 Still, what is surprising is not that we often find it hard to determine source (after all, difficulty is to be expected when we have one person taking on the voice of another). Rather, what is surprising is how easily experienced readers often figure out who is speaking even when the voice changes midstream. Indeed, even those authors, like Flaubert, who aim to muddle our thinking on this score can do so only because they assume we have certain procedures at hand that can be confused. Booth, in

8. For an interesting discussion of Madame Bovary in this context, see Hans Robert Jauss, Toward an Aesthetic of Reception, 42–44. See also Dominick LaCapra, Madame Bovary on Trial.
9. See LaCapra, Madame Bovary on Trial, esp. chap. 6.
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A Rhetoric of Irony, has pointed to a number of devices that signal the presence of an ironic voice, including the proclamation of "known error," factual conflicts within a work, stylistic clashes, and conflicts "between the beliefs expressed and the beliefs we hold and suspect the author of holding" (italics in original). While the procedures are somewhat subtler when irony is not present, similar signals operate in these cases as well. Take, for instance, the following passage from "Down by the Riverside," the second story in Richard Wright's Uncle Tom's Children:

He walked to the window and the half rotten planks sagged under his feet. He had never realized they were that shaky. He pulled back a tattered curtain, wishing the dull ache would leave his head. Ah been feverish all day. Feels like Ah got the flu.

Obviously, the speaker changes between the third and fourth sentences, from the narrator to the aptly named protagonist, Mann. The shift is extremely well marked in the text—overdetermined, in fact—because it is signaled in at least three ways.

Most obvious, there is a shift in person, from third to first. In traditional, realistic nineteenth-century novels, this is not an especially common device, except when the character's words—either thought or spoken—are placed in quotation marks. But it is found more frequently in contemporary novels, many of which use it in fairly complex ways. Nadine Gordimer's Burger's Daughter shifts between Rosa's first-person narration [addressed to different narratees as the book progresses] and various third-person viewpoints, in order to provide different perspectives on Rosa's life. Margaret Drabble's Waterfall also flickers between the first and third person—but here the different grammatical categories reflect not so much different people as different sides of the same speak-

10. Booth, Rhetoric of Irony, 57, 61, 67, 73. See also Pratt's discussion of violations of the Cooperative Principle, Toward a Speech Act Theory, esp. chap. 5. Wolfgang Iser gives a more extreme version of this notion in his discussion of pop art when he argues that "whenever art uses exaggerated effects of affirmation . . . their function is . . . to negate what they are apparently affirming" [Act of Reading, 11].

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...er. Much the same technique (with the added complication of a second narrator) is used in John Fowles' *Daniel Martin*.

In addition to the shift in person, there is a shift in linguistic style to Black English. According to a basic rule of signification, such changes are usually to be interpreted as a sign that the narrator is no longer speaking in his or her own voice. As Booth argues, this is a standard technique in ironic works, but it is used in nonironic discourse as well. Shifts in linguistic style are especially important in distinguishing the source of particular phrases in texts that use free indirect discourse (what the French call *style indirect libre*), since they can work with extreme efficiency, even within a single sentence. Sometimes, the signification of stylistic shifts is reinforced by typography. As Dominick LaCapra points out, "The type of cliché from which Flaubert as narrator and as writer tried to take maximal distance was that of ordinary bourgeois stupidity. When this sort of cliché is employed in 'objective' narration in *Madame Bovary*, it is often [but not invariably] italicized." Similarly, when the narrator, Vandyke Jennings, in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* notes, "Terry, in his secret heart, had visions of a sort of sublimated summer resort—just Girls and Girls and Girls," the capitalization serves as a clue that the word "Girls" is Terry's, not Jennings'. This rule, for all its apparent sophistication, is learned quite early. Sue Alexander's *Marc the Magnificent* may be aimed at first graders, but they are expected to know that the passages in parentheses and italics represent a different level of Marc's consciousness. The rule is harder to apply, but no different in principle, when employed without typographical support. In *Some Do Not . . .*, a reference to "Glorvina, who was the mother of two of Sylvia's absolutely most intimate friends" clues us in to a shift in source through the phrase "absolutely most intimate friends," with its inappropriate exaggeration.

13. LaCapra, *Madame Bovary on Trial*, 111.
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Wright makes his shift even clearer by accompanying the shift in person and style with a shift in tense, from past to present. It is not, of course, the case that a shift to the present necessarily indicates a shift from narrator to character. Sometimes it indicates a swing the opposite way, sometimes no shift at all. Indeed, Seymour Chatman even argues that it always signals a move to the narrator: “If we read in a narrative otherwise in the preterite a sentence like ‘War is hell,’ the generalization is thought to hold for the narrator, as well as [or even rather than] for the characters. But ‘War was hell’ must mean that a character thinks so.” But as Chatman himself realizes, in his discussion of the opening of Pride and Prejudice, there are numerous other factors at hand—including the question of the possible irony of the sentence. The most we can say here is that tense shifts may be used in numerous ways, but that their presence alerts the reader to a possible change in source.

The Wright passage, of course, does not begin to exhaust the conventional techniques for dealing with source. Among the further factors that help us determine whose words we are hearing are perspective and knowledge. When a text suddenly changes its vantage point from a general perspective to the limited perspective of one of the characters—that is, when we are seeing what one of the characters sees—we can often assume that the words we are reading represent what the character is saying or thinking. Thus, Nabokov opens Laughter in the Dark with an overview of the story, ending with the narrator’s claim, “and although there is plenty of space on a gravestone to contain, bound in moss, the

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abridged version of a man's life, detail is always welcome.” When he abruptly changes gears (“It so happened that one night Albinus had a beautiful idea”), we have reason to suspect that the word “beautiful” is Albinus’, not the narrator’s—a suspicion confirmed by the ironic undercutting in the following sentence (“True, it was not quite his own”). Alternatively, when our vision of a scene is too large for a character to have, we can often assume that the accompanying words are those of the narrator or implied author. Note, for instance, the next-to-last paragraph of Crime and Punishment:

She too had been greatly agitated that day, and at night she was taken ill again. But she was so happy—and so unexpectedly happy—that she was almost frightened of her happiness. Seven years, only seven years! At the beginning of their happiness at some moments they were both ready to look on those seven years as though they were seven days. He did not know that the new life would not be given him for nothing, that he would have to pay dearly for it, that it would cost him great striving, great suffering.

In the phrase “Seven years, only seven years!”—which is implicitly in the present tense—we are clearly intended to hear Sonia’s voice. The final words, however (“would cost him great striving, great suffering”), because they come from a vision of events that is beyond that available to the characters, must be assumed to represent the voice of the narrator.

Similarly, general statements that are too wise for the characters can generally be assumed to come from the narrator, at least when the narrator is a reliable representative of authorial norms. “His frock-coat seemed to have been made for someone else, and he had a beard like a tradesman’s,” we read of Dymov in Chekhov’s story “The Grasshopper.” “Of course, if he had been a writer or an artist everyone would have said that his beard made him look like Zola.” None of the characters in the story has that kind of self-under-

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standing—so we can only assume that it is the narrator speaking. Alternatively, statements that obviously cut against what Booth calls the “known facts” can usually be assumed in reliable narration to represent the thoughts of the characters. A little later in the same Chekhov story, we read:

They had a wonderful life after their marriage. Olga Ivanovna covered the walls of her drawing-room with sketches, framed and unframed, by herself and her friends, and surrounded the grand piano and the furniture with an artistic jumble of Chinese parasols, easels, many-colored drapes, daggers, small busts, photographs. . . . In the dining-room she hung cheap colored prints, bast shoes, and scythes on the wall, and grouped a scythe and a rake in the corner, thus achieving a dining-room à la russe. She draped the ceiling and walls of the bedroom with dark cloth, to make it look like a cave.19

Once we have read the description of Olga’s paltry attempts at creating a chic environment, we can be fairly confident that the designation “wonderful” cannot be the narrator’s.

Good Guys and Bad Guys: Rules of Snap Moral Judgment

“I didn’t finish the book,” said Maggie. “As soon as I came to the blond-haired young lady reading in the park, I shut it up, and determined to read no further. I foresaw that that light-complexioned girl would win away all the love from Corinne and make her miserable. I’m determined to read no more books where the blond-haired women carry away all the happiness. I should begin to have a prejudice against them. If you could give me some story, now, where the dark woman triumphs, it would restore the balance.”20

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Whether Wayne Booth is correct when he claims that "the emotions and judgments of the implied author are . . . the very stuff out of which great fiction is made,"\(^{21}\) there can be little doubt that the process of moral evaluation plays a central role in the reading of narrative fiction, and that for many readers, the greatest literature is that which forces them to probe the most difficult ethical questions with the greatest sensitivity (A Hero of Our Time, The Ambassadors, Anna Karenina, Remembrance of Things Past). Still, there are any number of reasons why an author might wish us to make quick judgments about his or her characters. Some narratives—for instance, adventure stories like the James Bond novels—depend for their effect on our experiencing the triumph over evil rather than on our understanding its nature. In such cases, efficient techniques are necessary so that the reader can know quickly who stands where. Furthermore, morality in fiction is closely tied to configuration; that is, ethical character—as we are reminded by the history of both the words *ethical* (from *ethos*) and *character* (meaning both moral quality and personage)—is often defined in terms of the kinds of actions we expect a character to perform in the future. Authors often need quick ways to set those expectations up. And even in novels where the primary end is ethical exploration, authors may need devices to allow readers to judge characters quickly—either because the characters are too minor for full development, or because the author needs an initial scaffolding that can then be developed (or undercut ironically) as the novel progresses. Dostoyevsky's subtle probing of light and dark imagery in The Idiot has the impact it does only because we start to evaluate fair-haired Myshkin and dark-haired Rogozhin as soon as we see them. Similarly, Gogol's play with the traditional patterns of light and dark in his treatment of the prostitute and the pure wife in "Nevsky Prospect," like Dashiell Hammett's reversal of the motif of the jolly fat man in The Maltese Falcon, can produce its intended effect only on readers who are prepared to make certain judgments to begin with.

Authors will often tell us quite directly what we should think of their characters. Mr. John Dashwood, we learn at the beginning of

\(^{21}\) Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 86.
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_Sense and Sensibility,_ "was not an ill-disposed young man, unless to be rather cold hearted, and rather selfish, is to be ill-disposed."\(^{22}\)

In addition, though, authors make use of a number of rules that they assume we have learned, and that allow us to make the appropriate judgments ourselves. Many of these rules are closely related to the New Critical doctrine of consistency of character. Although I would not agree with Brooks and Warren when they insist that the "thoughts and actions" of characters "must ultimately be coherent,"\(^{23}\) it is certainly the case that when we read nineteenth- and twentieth-century narratives, we tend, on the whole, to assume a kind of consistency of character that hardly holds in life. This consistency, in fact, goes well beyond the meshing of thoughts and actions. There are many axes along which characters are generally assumed to be consistent, although most rules of snap moral judgment fall into one of two general classes: metaphorical rules of appearance and metonymic rules of enchainment.

The most basic rule of appearance is that we are to judge characters by their exterior, until the text gives us sufficient reason to judge them in some other way. Physical appearance, in other words, can be assumed to stand metaphorically for inner quality. The ability to make this metaphorical leap is a part of what Jonathan Culler calls "symbolic recuperation," which, in contrast to "empirical recuperation... operates where causal connections are absent... We would presumably be unwilling to assume a causal connection between a perfect or a blemished complexion and a perfect or blemished moral character, but the symbolic code permits such associations and enables us to take the former as the sign of the latter."\(^{24}\) But while it is not a direct analogue of the way

23. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, _Understanding Fiction_, 173. See also Gary Saul Morson's claim that one of the rules of a novel is that "the statements, actions, and beliefs of any principal character (or the narrator) are to be understood as a reflection of his or her personality, and of the biographical events and social milieu that have shaped it." In this regard, he argues, novels differ from utopias (_Boundaries of Genre_, 77).
24. Culler, _Structuralist Poetics_, 225.
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Readers reason when dealing with their social realities, this symbolic code is neither constant nor purely literary. Specific applications will vary by text, and these variations are often echoes (and sometimes reinforcements) of the cultural norms within which the text is operating. Thus, for instance, the particular visual cues intended to inspire distrust in one text will not necessarily have the same meaning in another. The Late George Apley's father moved out of his old Boston neighborhood because seeing "a man in his shirt sleeves" on the steps was enough to tell him "that the days of the South End were numbered." But the relevance of that physical feature is not the same in 1986 as it was either a century earlier, when the event took place, or a half-century earlier, when the novel was written. Similarly, nineteenth-century authors who expected their readers to make character judgments based on hair color did not expect their readers to decode the image of the blond woman in the same ways that writers of mid-twentieth-century hardboiled American fiction did. Still, the basic rule—that character is more or less revealed in appearance—holds steadily. Even a novelist like Southworth who argues philosophically and politically that character and appearance do not reflect each other ("At some former period in the history of the human race characters and countenances may have been in harmony, but not now") is apt to find herself falling back on traditional literary markers of moral worth.

Norham Montrose was, in form and features, the very counterpart of Malcolm, having the same tall, broad-shouldered, deep-chested, strong limbed athletic form, the same noble Roman features, and the same commanding presence. But in complexion and in temperament they were as opposite as day and night; for whereas Malcolm was fair as a Saxon, with clear, blue eyes, and light auburn hair, Norham was dark as a Spaniard, with jet-black eyes and raven-black hair and whiskers.

27. Emma D. E. N. Southworth, Allworth Abbey; or, Eudora [New York: Hurst, 1876], 139 (chap. 10).
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Given the literary conventions according to which this text was expected to be read, in fact, both the phrase "in complexion and in temperament," and, even more, the next sentence of the text ("And where Malcolm was gracious, liberal and confiding, Nor­
ham was haughty, reserved and suspicious") are redundant.

Eyes are among the more reliable visual guides to character in fiction. As the narrator of Owen Wister's Virginian puts it, "Out of the eyes of every stranger looks either a friend or an enemy, wait­
ing to be known." 28 It is no accident that Wells gives the hero of The Time Machine gray eyes, for he wants us to know, from the beginning, that he is keen, intelligent, controlled. When we are
told that Olga, the protagonist of Chekhov's "Darling," has "gentle, soft eyes," or that Alyona Ivanovna, the pawnbroker in Crime
and Punishment, has "sharp, malignant eyes," or that Cecil Car­
ver, in Career in C Major, "had the biggest black eyes I ever saw" (in contrast to the Social Register types, who are "all so cultured that even their eyeballs were lavender")—we know a great deal
more about the characters than simply what they look like.29

As a general rule, it is appropriate to treat the way characters sound much as we treat the way they look. Sometimes we are
asked to judge by the quality of a voice per se [note Ippolit's
squeaky voice in The Idiot or Daisy Buchanan's "low, thrilling
voice," with its "fluctuating, feverish warmth," in The Great
Gatsby].30 Sometimes it is the way that language is used that
serves as a guide to character. Ring Lardner assumes we will judge
this narrator as soon as he begins to speak:

Mother says that when I start talking I never know when to stop. But
I tell her the only time I get a chance is when she ain't around, so I
have to make the most of it. I guess the fact is neither one of us would
be welcome in a Quaker meeting, but as I tell Mother, what did God
give us tongues for if He didn't want we should use them? Only she

29. Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, "The Darling," in Lady with Lapdog and Other
Stories, trans. David Magarshack [Baltimore: Penguin, 1964], 253; Dostoyevsky,
Crime and Punishment, 4 [pt. 1, chap. 1]; James M. Cain, Career in C Major, in
Three of a Kind (Philadelphia: Blakiston, 1944), 17, 4 [chap. 3, 1].
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says He didn’t give them to us to say the same thing over and over again, like I do, and repeat myself.\textsuperscript{31}

Once again, the specific conclusions to be drawn vary according to the context in which the book was intended to be read. Black English has different implications in Dixon’s \textit{Leopard’s Spots} and in Wright’s \textit{Uncle Tom’s Children}; in the Hardy Boys books, rough language is usually a sign of rough character, whereas in Chandler, refined English is intended to arouse suspicion.

We are also, as I suggested above, asked to judge characters by their names. This is not only the case with clearly allegorical names (Dostoyevsky’s Golyadkin, from “naked”), or only in displays of linguistic virtuosity (the famous guest list in \textit{The Great Gatsby}). Names also often imply, more subtly, a class or ethnic aura that, in a particular context, will carry a particular moral valence.\textsuperscript{32} In Louise Meriwether’s “Daddy Was a Number Runner,” for instance, it is significant that the black narrator’s mother gets a job as a cleaning woman in the Bronx with someone named Mrs. Schwartz, although the same name would have an entirely different resonance in a text about Jewish life.

In addition to metaphorical rules of appearance, which make it appropriate to assume that physical or verbal characteristics stand for moral qualities, we have metonymical rules of enchainment, which make it appropriate to assume that the presence of one moral quality is linked to the presence of another that lies more or less contiguous to it.

We are not only asked, for instance, to judge characters according to certain rules, but also to judge them according to how well they apply the rules. Thus, in mapping out the moral terrain of Southworth’s \textit{Allworth Abbey}, the reader is expected to judge peo-


\textsuperscript{32} See Ruth Prigozy’s argument that Fitzgerald was “intrigued with the possibilities of names as social indicators, symbolic reflectors of class status and even moral outlook” (“Gatsby’s Guest List and Fitzgerald’s Technique of Naming,” \textit{Fitzgerald/Hemingway Annual 1972}, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli and C. E. Frazer Clark, Jr. [Washington: Microcards, 1972], 99).
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people not only on their appearances but also on their ability to judge by appearance.

The stranger listened with the deepest interest. At the conclusion of the narrative, he said:

"The circumstances, indeed, seem to point out this young Eudora Leaton as the criminal; but from the glimpse I caught of her lovely face, she is just the last person in the world I should suspect of crime."33

Southworth's purpose in providing the stranger's assessment is not to guide our judgment of Eudora; we already know that she is beautiful and that she has been unjustly charged with murder. Rather, its function is to allow us to judge the stranger, who by his correct analysis shows himself worthy of our trust.

In another kind of chaining, many narratives also ask us, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, to assume a kind of innocence by association: we trust the friends of our friends and the enemies of our enemies. We can well appreciate Daniel Martin's method of appraisal.

I took a little to judging friends, and not only the ones I shared my bed with, by Phoebe's reaction . . . how much she would chat with them, how discreet or voluble she would be, how much put on her old maidservant self or show her real one. It was all rather absurd, perhaps; but people got a bad mark if they didn't get on with Phoebe and learn to walk the delicate tightrope between giving her a hand in the kitchen and taking possession of it. [Ellipsis in original]34

As with all narrative rules, authors frequently create their effects by tricking readers. The authorial audience of The Maltese Falcon at first trusts Brigid because she receives an unqualified endorsement from Effie Perrine's "woman's intuition":

"What do you think of Wonderly?"
"I'm all for her," the girl replied without hesitation.

33. Southworth, Allworth Abbey, 190 (chap. 14).
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“She’s got too many names,” Spade mused, “Wonderly, Leblanc, and she says the right one’s O’Shaughnessy.”

“I don’t care if she’s got all the names in the phone-book. That girl is all right and you know it.”

In the end, of course, the authorial audience discovers that it has been fooled, an effect that helps drive home the antifeminism of the text by showing that even “good” women like Effie are not to be trusted. But Hammett can use this rhetorical technique only because he can assume that his readers will apply the rule in the first place.

Similarly, we are often expected to assume that one moral failing naturally accompanies another. In Owen Wister’s Virginian, for instance, we are expected to treat Balaam’s failure to care properly for animals as a sign of a broader moral failing, just as in Charles W. Chesnutt’s “Mars Jeems’s Nightmare” (from The Conjure Woman), we are expected to think ill of McLean’s overall character when we see him beating his horse “furiously with a buggy whip.”

In Gatsby, we are surely not meant to be surprised when a man who has fixed the World Series—and who is Jewish and talks with an accent to boot—refuses to attend his friend’s funeral. One could do a revealing cultural study by examining what flaws in particular are chosen—by what writers in what social contexts—as the material on which readers are asked to apply this rule. It is, I think, a sign of a particular kind of moral vision that Chekhov, for instance, so rarely invokes it.

One specific variant of the linking of moral feelings is the rule that Space Invaders are to be distrusted. Thus, in the beginning of The Idiot, the authorial audience is apprehensive of Lebedev in part because he imposes himself on Myshkin and Rogozhin. This rule applies not only to physical space, but to emotional and literary space as well. Andrew Garve, in The Far Sands, relies on this rule to create suspense. The novel concerns a man who comes to wonder whether his wife is planning to kill him for his money (as

he thinks her identical twin did to her rich husband). It is therefore appropriate that Garve begins the novel, not after their marriage, but with him as a single man meeting her. The novel, in other words, is structured so that she enters the home space of his novel; she is thus especially subject to suspicion.

Novelists may also expect readers to use allusions as a basis for chaining their judgments. Of course, readers are often asked to transfer judgments when characters are explicitly or implicitly compared to characters in a previous, familiar text—we should, for instance, have already made a judgment about the heroine of Leskov’s “Lady Macbeth of the Mzensk District” before we have even gotten through the title. More interesting for my purposes, though, readers are often expected to link ethical quality and aesthetic taste. In many texts, we are asked to assume—until there is evidence to the contrary—that people with the correct aesthetic views are also morally correct, while those with aesthetic failings have moral failings as well. We should not be surprised when Marianne, in Sense and Sensibility, turns out to have—at least by the standards of the authorial audience—moral flaws that mirror her foolish views on art; and Willoughby is suspect as soon as he echoes Marianne’s aesthetic creed. Similarly, our judgments of the characters in Remembrance of Things Past depend to a large extent on their responses to music—especially, of course, on their responses to Vinteuil. And in James Cain’s Serenade, we know that down-and-out Howard Sharp can trust the feisty Captain Connors to help him escape from Mexico, because Connors admires Beecham’s conducting of the Beethoven Seventh and—even more—because Connors is susceptible to Sharp’s demonstration that Mozart might be a greater composer than Beethoven.37 But it is not only in the works of such novelists as Austen, Proust, and Cain—whose very themes, in part, are the interconnection of art and morality—that readers are expected to respond in this way. In Farewell, My Lovely, Marlowe keeps referring to Galbraith, a Bay City cop, as “Hemingway”—because he “‘keeps saying the same thing over and over until you begin to believe it must be good.’”38

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Galbraith's inability to understand the wisecrack is a point against him.

Needless to say, this convention depends not only on the reader's prior understanding of the rule itself and the prior knowledge of the works in question, but also on the reader's sharing of the author's judgments about those works. Without some knowledge of Chekhov's expectations about his readers' views on literature, it is hard to know, in "The Teacher of Literature," precisely how to take Shebalin's criticism of Nikitin for his lack of familiarity with Lessing, or how to interpret Nikitin's consequent despair. Jane Gray's dismissal of Jane Austen in Drabble's Waterfall raises similar interpretive questions.

Truth and the Narrative Audience:
The Rule of Realism

When I said above that Jason's statement (in The Sound the Fury) was "false," what exactly did I mean? Questions about the status of literary truth are as old as literary criticism, but they have become both more intricate and more compelling as literature has grown progressively more self-conscious and labyrinthine in its dealings with reality. One might perhaps read the Iliad or even Dickens' Hard Times without raising such issues. But such authors as Doris Lessing (especially in The Golden Notebook), Nabokov, and Borges seem continually to remind their readers of the complex nature of literary truth. How, for instance, are we to deal with a passage like the following from William Demby's novel The Catacombs?

When I began this novel, I secretly decided that, though I would exercise a strict selection of the facts to write down, be they "fictional" facts or "true" facts taken from newspapers or directly observed events from my own life, once I had written something down I would neither edit nor censor it (myself).39

What does this sentence mean? When an apparently fictional narrator (who, to confuse matters, has the same name as his author

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and is also writing a novel entitled *The Catacombs* distinguishes between "fictional" and "true" facts, what is the status of the word "true"? It clearly does not mean the same as "fictional," for he opposes the two terms. Yet it cannot mean "true" in the sense that historians would use, for he calls what he is writing a novel, and even if he quotes accurately from newspapers, the events of a narrator's life are not historically true.

This is but a small version of other more famous literary questions. What precisely do we mean when we ask whether the governess in Henry James' *Turn of the Screw* is really a trustworthy witness? Or when we ask whether Dostoyevsky's Golyadkin (*The Double*) really has a double? Or what really happened last year at Marienbad?

To answer these questions, we must remember that all works of representational art—including novels—are imitations in the sense that they appear to be something that they are not. A piece of canvas, for example, appears to be the mayor or the Madonna; a tale about a nonexistent clerk and his overcoat appears to be a true account. As a result, the aesthetic experience of such works exists on two levels at once. We cannot treat the work either as what it is or as what it appears to be; we must be aware simultaneously of both aspects. A reader is hardly responding to the Sherlock Holmes stories as the author intended if he or she treats him as a historical being, makes pilgrimages to his home on Baker Street, and uses weather reports to determine when certain stories "actually" took place. Neither, however, is the reader who refuses to fear for Holmes' safety as he battles Moriarty, on the grounds that he is simply a fiction.

In the proper reading of a novel, events that are portrayed must be treated as both true and untrue at the same time. One way of dealing with this duality is to add a third term to the distinction between actual and authorial audience. As I have noted, every author designs his or her work rhetorically for a specific hypothetical audience. But since a novel is generally an imitation of some nonfictional form (usually history, including biography and

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autobiography), the narrator of the novel (implicit or explicit) is generally an imitation of an author.\footnote{For a development of the notion of literature as “fictive discourse”—that is, as an imitation of utterances rather than of actions—see Barbara Herrnstein Smith, \textit{On the Margins of Discourse}.} He or she writes for an \textit{imitation} audience (which I call the \textit{narrative audience}) that also possesses particular knowledge. The narrator of \textit{War and Peace} appears to be a historian. As such, he is writing for an audience that not only knows (as does the authorial audience) that Moscow was burned in 1812, but that also believes that Natasha, Pierre, and Andrei “really” existed, and that the events in their lives “really” took place. In order to read \textit{War and Peace}, we must therefore do more than join Tolstoy’s authorial audience; we must at the same time pretend to be a member of the imaginary narrative audience for which the narrator is writing. Whether they think about it or not, this is what all successful readers do when approaching the text.

The nature of the narrative audience can perhaps be clarified by distinguishing it from some other apparently similar concepts. For instance, the narrative audience is quite different from the narratee, the person to whom the narrator is addressing himself or herself.\footnote{See, for instance, Gerald Prince, \textit{Introduction to the Study of the Narratee.}} The narratee is perceived by the reader as “out there,” a separate person who often serves as a mediator between narrator and reader. The “narrative audience,” in contrast, is a role which the text forces the reader to take on. The pretense involved in joining the narrative audience is also different from what Frank Kermode calls “experimental assent.”\footnote{Kermode, \textit{The Sense of an Ending}, 38–40.} “Experimental assent” is an activity on the part of the actual audience through which it relates the novel to reality, accepting the novel if it turns out to be “operationally effective,” rejecting it otherwise. The pretense I am describing is closer to Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief,” except that I would argue not that disbelief is suspended but rather that it is both suspended and not suspended at the same time.\footnote{I am not concerned here with the actual psychological processes by which a specific reader performs this act. This subject, however, is treated in Norman Holland’s \textit{Dynamics of Literary Response}. Holland starts out with the same observation that I do: we both believe and do not believe a literary text. But since he is}
One way to determine the characteristics of the narrative audience is to ask, "What sort of reader would I have to pretend to be—what would I have to know and believe—if I wanted to take this work of fiction as real?" Normally, pretending to be a member of the narrative audience is a fairly simple task, especially when we are reading traditional realistic fiction: we temporarily take on certain minimal beliefs in addition to those we already hold. Thus, for a while we believe that a woman named Isabel Archer really existed, and thought and acted in a certain way; or, on a broader scale, that Yoknapatawpha County and its inhabitants really exist. Sometimes, however, we must go even further and pretend to abandon our real beliefs and accept in their stead "facts" and beliefs that even more fundamentally contradict our perceptions of reality. In *1984*, the narrative audience possesses "knowledge" of a series of "facts" about what was, at the time the book was written, "future" world history. In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the narrative audience accepts what the authorial audience knows to be false scientific doctrine. If we do not pretend to be members of the narrative audience, or if we misapprehend the beliefs of that audience, we are apt to make invalid, even perverse, interpretations. For instance, the narrative audience of *Cinderella* accepts the existence of fairy godmothers (although the authorial audience does not share this belief). A reader who refuses to pretend to share that belief will see Cinderella as a psychotic young woman subject to hallucinations.

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concerned with the psychological actions of readers (particularly with their unconscious fantasies) rather than with the conscious audience roles implied by a text, his resulting categories [intellecting reader/introjecting reader] differ markedly from mine. For another formulation of a similar dichotomy, see Pratt, *Toward a Speech Act Theory*, 174. See also Robin Feuer Miller's discussion of *The Idiot*, where she distinguishes between "the narrator's reader [who reads for pleasure, in a chronological and unreflective fashion]" and "the implied reader [who reads more carefully, attempting to discover the implied author's message]" [*Dostoevsky and The Idiot*, 127]. These simultaneous roles are distinguished more by attitudes and values than by issues of truth; thus, her "narrator's reader" is closer to what I have elsewhere called the "ideal narrative audience" [the audience that the narrator wishes he or she were writing for] than to the narrative audience [see my "Truth in Fiction: Toward a Reexamination of Audiences," *Critical Inquiry* 4 [Autumn 1977]: 134–36], and is therefore of use primarily in analyzing ironic texts.
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Although there are as many narrative audiences as there are novels, they tend to fall into groups, the members of which are quite similar. A reader does not really have to shift gears to move from War and Peace to Gone with the Wind, different as those novels are. Sometimes, however, a novelist is able to create a startling tone or mood by demanding a narrative audience that is unexpected or unfamiliar. Kafka's Metamorphosis is a good example. What is striking about this novella is not simply its fantastic premise, which is no more fantastic than the basic premises of Alice in Wonderland. Nor can the peculiar quality of Kafka's tale be explained purely in terms of the characters' odd reactions to Gregor's transformation. What strikes me as most curious about the book is the unusual nature of the narrative audience. In Alice we are asked to pretend that White Rabbits wear watches, that Cheshire Cats fade away, and that Caterpillars smoke hookahs. This is readily done by joining a narrative audience of a sort that is familiar from our experience with fairy tales. In Metamorphosis, however, we are only asked to accept the single fantastic fact that Gregor has been transformed into a gigantic beetle; in all other respects the narrative audience is a normal, level-headed bourgeois audience. Furthermore, we are asked to accept this without surprise; contrast the matter-of-fact opening of Metamorphosis with the equivalent passages in Alice or in Gogol's "Nose," where the narrative audiences are openly warned that the events portrayed will be strange and unusual. This curiously contradictory role—half mundane, half fantastic—contributes greatly to the novella's disquieting tone.

Although many critics have dealt with the implied audiences of texts, they have tended, on the whole, to ignore the distinction between authorial and narrative audiences—as Walker Gibson and Walter Ong do when they write, respectively, of "mock readers" and "fictionalized" audiences. Granted, both the authorial and

45. Walker Gibson, "Authors, Speakers, Readers, and Mock Readers"; Walter J. Ong, "The Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction." In fact, almost all critics who discuss the reader are discussing a hybrid form that crosses the lines I have set up. For example, Wolfgang Iser's discussions of the reader's discoveries [Implied Reader] are really studies of the narrative and authorial audiences combined. Only toward the end of his book does he suggest a duality in the reader. In Stanley Fish's
the narrative audiences are fictions (neither exists in the flesh), but they are fictions in radically different senses. When speaking of the authorial audience, we might more accurately use the term hypothetical rather than the term fictional. As I have suggested, most authors, in determining their authorial audience, try—within the limitations imposed by their aesthetic aims—to approximate the actual audience as closely as possible. For to the extent that an authorial audience is invented, footnotes or other explanations will be required before the text can work. Thus, while some authors (such as Joyce) are forced, because of the esoteric nature of their intentions, to idealize and write for an audience they know does not exist (or does not exist in significant numbers), few authors intentionally strive for such a situation. As T. S. Eliot puts it, "When a poet deliberately restricts his public by his choice of style of writing or of subject-matter, this is a special situation demanding explanation and extenuation, but I doubt whether this ever happens. . . . From one point of view, the poet aspires to the condition of the music-hall comedian. Being incapable of altering his wares to suit a prevailing taste, if there be any, he naturally desires a state of society in which they may become popular."

The distance between authorial and actual audiences, in sum, may be inevitable—but it is generally undesirable, and authors usually try to keep the gap narrow. The narrative audience, on the other hand, is truly a fiction; the author not only knows that the narrative audience is different from the actual and authorial audiences, but rejoices in this fact and expects his or her actual audience to rejoice as well. For it is this difference that makes fiction

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_Self-Consuming Artifacts,_ the reader seems to be a complex combination: at least two actual audiences (the current, informed audience, with Fish as representative; the historical audience at the time the work was written), the authorial audience, and—when he is writing about fiction—the narrative audience. A primary difference between Fish's model (in that early book) and mine is that his is horizontal (he is concerned with the progress of a unified reader through time) while mine is vertical (I am concerned with distinguishing the different levels on which a reader operates simultaneously). Prince's distinction between real readers, virtual readers, ideal readers, and narratees (even though it does not, as I have pointed out, deal precisely with differing roles played by the reader) leads to more subtle analyses ("Introduction," 9).

46. Eliot, _Use of Poetry_, 22.
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fiction and makes the double-leveled aesthetic experience possible.

From the authorial/narrative distinction emerges at least one fundamental reading convention: the rule of realism. Realism, of course, is a slippery concept. Although there are many ways to define it, recurring difficulties crop up whenever it is seen in terms of the relationship between the novel and some external, empirically verifiable world. For that empirical reality is, to a large extent, a changing social construct; thus, with any such definition, the corpus of so-called realistic works varies according to changes in readers' perceptions—it changes with each shift in scientific paradigms, with each shift in cultural norms. There is, to my mind, little value in a definition of realism that at best encourages us to dismiss older works as foolish and quaint—and at worst encourages us to twist them until they confirm our current prejudices, so that Hamlet is reduced to a verification of Freud, Poe to a confirmation of Lacan. Nor am I enthusiastic about a definition whereby Jules Verne, for instance, becomes more and more realistic as time goes on.

There is, however, another approach to the problem. If we look instead at the relationship between the narrative and authorial audiences, we find that there is something constant in most of the fiction that has commonly been considered realistic. In The Portrait of a Lady, for instance, the narrative and authorial audiences are quite close; the narrative audience is asked to accept very little beyond the beliefs of the authorial audience and virtually nothing that seriously contradicts those beliefs. Thus, while the narrative audience believes that Isabel exists, this hardly conflicts with the authorial audience's prior experiences; it is not improbable that such a person should exist and act as she does. Contrast this situation with that in novels generally thought to be antirealistic or fantastic. In Nathanael West's Dream Life of Balso Snell, for instance, the narrative audience takes on a good deal more—beliefs that, like the belief that one could stumble on the Trojan Horse, do contradict the experiences of the authorial audience.47

47. John W. Loofbourow's attempt to solve this problem is similar to mine, but is not entirely successful because he fails to distinguish between implied audi-
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Of course, defining realism in terms of the distance between the two audiences does not provide a quantitative measure; literary distances may exist along several axes at once (scientific, historical, ethical, and so on), and they do not submit easily to the tape measure. This approach, however, does have the advantage of treating the realism of a given text as something that remains constant despite historical change. Furthermore, this definition reaffirms that realism is not a box into which some works fall and others do not, but rather a tendency, and it suggests that all novels are more or less, but at least somewhat, realistic in the sense of reflecting the beliefs of their authorial audience. Indeed, there is a general rule of realism to which virtually all nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels, at least those in the Western tradition, subscribe: the authorial audience knows it is reading a work of art, while the narrative audience believes what it is reading is real; but we can assume that in other respects the narrative audience shares the beliefs, prejudices, desires, fears, and expectations of the authorial audience, except where there is some evidence to the contrary, either in the text or in literary conventions. This principle can be broken down into two parts. First, there are areas of overlap between the two audiences, beliefs about reality that are common to both the authorial and the narrative levels; second, there is a more or less systematic way in which the areas of disagreement are mapped out. Let us look at these two claims in turn.

(i) No matter how fantastic a novel’s premises, no matter how unrealistic the setting, the authorial audience and the narrative audience must share some beliefs about reality in order for the situations and actions to have the consequences they do and for the plot to get from point A to point B. That’s because every fic-

ences. He locates realism in “any work in which the artist’s assumptions about ‘reality’ are the same as those of his audience” (“Literary Realism Redefined,” 434). But since he lumps together the authorial and narrative audiences, his definition falls apart. Surely the author and the authorial audience of Alice in Wonderland have the same preconceptions about reality, only the narrative audience has a different view of the world. And since, as Loofbourow notes, Dickens does undermine many of the preconceptions of his readers, we end up with the curious anomaly of realism that includes Carroll but excludes Dickens. For further development, see his “Realism in the Anglo-American Novel.”
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tional world, like every real world, requires a history, sociology, biology, mathematics, aesthetics, and ethics. The action of Gon-
charov's Oblomov, for instance, requires the institution of serfdom; the scenes of mental torture in 1984 can work their terror only because even in that world, two plus two really does equal four. And while in theory the writer of fiction can remake the world as he or she pleases, in practice no writer can create an entire world from scratch. Such a novel would be infinite, incomprehensible, or both. Thus, novelists always require their readers to make inferences about characters and actions; those inferences are possible only if there are at least some points at which the novel's inner world—the world of the narrative audience—is congruent with the world of the authorial audience. Take, for instance, Robbe-Grillet's Erasers. It is an extremely unrealistic novel. It takes place in an imaginary city, where imaginary terrorists are threatening an imaginary government; more significant, the normal laws of cause and effect have been suspended: doubles appear unexpectedly, time stops. Yet when some women make suggestive comments about what goes on in the clinic of the gynecologist, Juard, readers catch the meaning. They can make the proper inferences, though, only because, fantastic as this world is, it is also assumed to coincide partially with that of the authorial audience—specifically, in the way in which abortions are handled.

48 Robert Scholes, working from a different critical perspective, comes to much the same conclusion: see "Towards a Semiotics of Literature." See also Chatman, Story and Discourse, esp. 27–31, 138; and Champigny's claim that in fiction, "the introduction of fantastic elements has to be restricted; otherwise, narrative coherence would crumble, and the story would turn into a poem" [What Will Have Happened, 23]. For a discussion of the same point from the perspective of the "schema" theory of cognitive psychology, see Mary Crawford and Roger Chaffin, "Cognitive Research," esp. 4–11. As they argue, inferences are crucial because "no text can explicitly state all the information required by the reader" [10]—and inferences are possible because the reader comes to texts with "schema" which provide "default values" where the text has a gap [5]. For a demonstration of the infinite regress that results when there are no unspoken assumptions and when, consequently, everything has to be stated explicitly, see Lewis Carroll, "What the Tortoise Said to Achilles," in The Complete Works of Lewis Carroll [New York: Random House/Vintage, 1976], 1225–30.
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marked in some systematic way that is understood by author and reader alike. In other words, it is appropriate to assume that any novel is realistic (as defined above) unless there is evidence to the contrary. To use a comparison from music, realism is like the basic tempo from which nonrealism departs as a rubato; all fiction is at heart realistic except insofar as it signals us to respond in some other fashion. The opening of Marcel Aymé's "Le Passe-muraille," for instance, clearly tells us that, in this story, the narrative audience believes that it is possible to walk through walls. But since there is no signal that the narrative audience of S. S. Van Dine's *Canary Murder Case* believes in such a possibility, the narrative audience of that novel will not entertain this idea as a feasible explanation of how the famous Broadway beauty Margaret Odell was strangled in a locked room.

The specific signals used to chart out the overlap of authorial and narrative audience range quite broadly. As a general rule, the more potentially verifiable (by the authorial audience) the narrative audience's facts seem to be, the greater the overlap we should assume. Thus, in stories that take place in nonspecific or nonexistent times and places ("long, long ago in a distant kingdom"), we are justified, other things being equal, in assuming a high degree of nonrealism. For example, the counterfactual footnotes filling in the background of the "Second Revolt" at the beginning of Jack London's *Iron Heel* (in contrast, say, to Dickens' discussion of the legal system in *Bleak House*) provide no real links between the worlds of the authorial and narrative audiences; they must therefore be interpreted as a more sophisticated formulation of "Once upon a time." As such, they are a signal that what follows will contain counterfactual descriptions that the narrative audience should accept as true. In contrast, the more realistic details in the opening of John Marquand's *Wickford Point* set the reader up for a different kind of relationship between the authorial and the narrative audiences, a relationship typical of 1930s American naturalism. The author's disclaimer that his characters and incidents are fictitious does not in itself prove that what follows will be a narrative that could easily be confused with fact. But when the disclaimer is followed by the quotes from reviews of Allen Southby's book, by the details of his scholarly background,
by the careful description of his letterhead, the characteristics of
the narrative audience become increasingly clear. Given the first
chapter, we are not expected to believe that Southby could turn
into a dung beetle in the second.

In even more extreme cases, authors introduce into their texts
not only realistic details, but even historically true details. Take
the description of the storm in James Cain's *Mildred Pierce*. Here,
the author not only describes an event, but gives us the specific
location (Los Angeles) and the specific date (New Year's Eve, 1933).
As a general rule, when a newsworthy event is described with
enough specificity that the reader could, in fact, look it up in a
newspaper, the reader is—in the absence of signals to the con­
trary—justified in assuming that the event more or less coincides
with historical fact and that the rest of the text—again, in the
absence of counterindications—is highly realistic. 49

Some signals are genre bound. In John MacDonald's Travis
McGee novels, for instance, the narrative audience is expected to
take as true any generalizations made by the first-person narrator.
Because, in this series, McGee stands as the author's representa­
tive, this can be seen as a specific variant of a general rule of
detective stories, enunciated by Robert Champigny: "Since it can­
not be attributed to a mistaken or lying character, a free comment
[an authorial or unattributed comment that does not come from
the point of view of one of the characters] should provide the reader
with a valid axiom." 50

Still, as the critical history of *The Turn of the Screw* has amply
demonstrated, the signals of the degree of realism in a text are
among the more difficult to interpret. Even in fairly straightforward
detective stories, it is not always clear just what constitutes a
"mistaken" character. In Josephine Tey's *Man in the Queue*, for
instance, we are told by a police surgeon that because of the crush
of a crowd, the mysterious victim could have been held erect for
ten minutes after being stabbed, and in fact would probably not
"even be aware that he had been struck." 51

49. For a more detailed discussion of the use of verifiable facts in fictional texts,
see Barbara Foley, *Telling the Truth*.
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such a claim would seem preposterous, but in this context the narrative audience is apparently expected to accept it, for otherwise the mystery is insoluble. Fair enough; but at the end of the novel, we find the narrative audience was not to believe the same police surgeon when he assured us that the murder could not have been done by a woman—although there is no apparent way of distinguishing the validity of the two claims.

The problems get more complex still when we consider art that has, as its subject, the problem of perception—for instance, borderline fantastic novels with possibly mad narrators—where the signals can be so confused that actual readers simply cannot agree on how to take them. Thus, for instance, interpretations of Dostoevsky’s Double differ depending on how readers respond to the signals and what beliefs they consequently assume the narrative audience to hold. Depending on the strategies chosen, The Double can be read either as a realistic novel about madness or as a fantastic piece about doubles.

Post Hoc and Propter Hoc: Rules of Cause

The history of the novel—especially the realistic novel—has been tied closely to notions of causality and motivation. As Seymour Chatman puts it, “It has been argued, since Aristotle, that events in narratives are radically correlative, enchaining, entailing. Their sequence, runs the traditional argument, is not simply linear but causative.”

The general expectation that narratives are causative informs reading processes in two separate and opposite ways. First, as we will discuss in more detail in Chapter 4, readers use their understanding of causation to move from cause to effect, in order to determine the future course of a novel they are reading. Knowledge, for instance, of the possible effects on health of severe drenching (at least in the early nineteenth century) helps the reader predict what will happen when Jane Bennet gets caught in a heavy rain on her way to visit the Bingleys in Pride and Prejudice.

Second, readers move in the reverse way, from effect to cause, in order to determine why things are the way they are, or why charac-

52. Chatman, Story and Discourse, 45.
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ters act as they do. When we are introduced to the protagonist Pozdnyshev at the beginning of Tolstoy's Kreutzer Sonata, we are told that his hair is prematurely gray—and we are thus prepared to assume that he has suffered some severe anguish. (This example reminds us of the ways reading conventions—in this case, signification and configuration—interact. Once we realize that Pozdnyshev has suffered, we expect the novel to proceed to tell us about it.) The ease with which readers are able to make such determinations is one factor influencing the degree to which they find the book readable or comprehensible. Readers make these judgments in a variety of ways, but three very general techniques are important here.

(1) The authorial audience uses the realism rule to make a bridge between its visions of the external world and the novel at hand—that is, it generally assumes that the kinds of causal connections assumed to hold in the world around it will apply to the novel it is reading. In "A Rose for Emily," for instance, Faulkner assumes his readers' knowledge of how human aging affects hair color; it is on this basis that he expects his readers to infer from the presence of the "iron-gray" hair on the pillow not only that Emily killed Homer Barron years ago, but also that she has continued to sleep with his corpse into her old age.

(2) Sometimes an author cannot rely on the reader's conception of reality as a firm basis for cause-and-effect inferences. This may be, perhaps, because the author wishes to assert, in his or her fiction, a kind of causal relationship that does not, in fact, occur in reality. Or it may be because the author's notion of reality differs from that which he or she expects to find in the reader—this is especially common in historical periods when shared conceptions of reality are breaking down, or in books where writers are dealing with historical periods (past or present) the details of which they expect may be unfamiliar to their readers (present or future). In such cases, authors may wish to guide their readers through the use of maxims and other kinds of general statements. Chatman puts it well:

Both factual and rhetorical generalizations serve the same basic functions, for instance, the ornamental, and particularly the verisimilar. . . . Generalizations and other comments often arise because of
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the need for plausibility, since in troubled historical periods the codes are not strong enough to establish a seeming reality. Hence the greater prevalence of nonce-created, author-specific verisimilitude. . . . If a parish priest's desires are not satisfied by a large inheritance but require a canonship, it is because "Everyone, even a priest, must have his hobbyhorse" (Le Curé de Tours). But if he is satisfied, another generalization can accommodate that: "A sot does not have enough spunk in him to be ambitious."\(^{53}\)

Thus, when Stendhal wants us to understand Julien Sorel's sudden suspicions about Madame de Renal's sincerity, he notes, "Such is, alas! the unhappy consequence of too much civilization! At twenty a young man's heart, if he has any breeding, is a thousand leagues removed from that casualness without which love is often no more than the most tedious of duties."\(^{54}\) When H. G. Wells wants to ensure our understanding of why the Time Traveller's friends do not believe his initial claims, he notes, "But the Time Traveller had more than a touch of whim among his elements, and we distrusted him. Things that would have made the fame of a less clever man seemed tricks in his hands. It is a mistake to do things too easily."\(^{55}\) When Chester Himes wants to be sure that his white audience understands why a black junkman might side with a person he had never seen before against the police, he uses the maxim, "It was the code of Harlem for one brother to help another lie to white cops."\(^{56}\) The mainspring of the plot of Southworth's Allworth Abbey is maxim-ally justified by the claim, in a privileged position, "Flight! In that one short syllable lies the only safety from a forbidden passion, and where flight is impossible, passion becomes destiny."\(^{57}\)

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 244–45. See also Gerald Graff's claim that "contrary to a popular view, modern literature tends to be more rather than less didactic than earlier literature, in part because the beliefs which earlier writers could assume they could presuppose as cultural givens in their readers now have to be made explicit" ("Literature as Assertions," 96). For an important discussion of maxims, see also Nancy K. Miller, "Emphasis Added."


\(^{55}\) Wells, The Time Machine, in Seven Science Fiction Novels of H. G. Wells [New York: Dover, n.d.], 31 [chap. 3].

\(^{56}\) Himes, A Rage in Harlem [London: Allison and Busby, 1985], 82 [chap. 14].

\(^{57}\) Southworth, Allworth Abbey, 46 [chap. 3].
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Such generalizations are not always in the form of maxims about human psychology. Sometimes they may provide reminders—or authorial claims—about the differences between historical periods. Chandler’s Philip Marlowe notes, “Underneath a sheet of blue tissue paper in one corner I found something I didn’t like. A seemingly brand new peach-colored silk slip trimmed with lace.” And lest readers in the future be unable to follow the inferential chain because, having forgotten what life was like during the war years, they do not know why Marlowe does not like what he finds, Chandler adds an explanation: “Silk slips were not being left behind that year, not by any woman in her senses.”58

Generalizations and maxims intended to clarify causal relations, however, need to be differentiated from several other types of maxims. Some are merely descriptive or—to use Chatman’s word—“ornamental.” “She was dressed in a leopard-skin coat with a matching hat. Real skin, of course. She was not the sort of lady who worried too much about leopards.”59 Some, given to us by a character or unreliable narrator rather than by a reliable narrator or implied author, serve not to create verisimilitude by describing the world, but rather to underscore the speaker’s character by his or her distance from reality. When, in Herland, Terry insists that “‘women like to be run after,’” we are supposed to take it as a sign of his limitations, not of Gilman’s world view.60 Others serve as a way of expressing the author’s or character’s correct view of the world—they are, really, ends in themselves rather than means. “But sometimes Rennie liked to write pieces about trends that didn’t really exist, to see if she could make them exist by writing about them. . . . Successes of this kind gave her an odd pleasure, half gleeful, half sour: people would do anything not to be thought outmoded.”61 Still others serve as predictors and help us determine the narrative’s configuration. These will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

Beyond the realism rule and the use of maxims and generalizations, authors also depend on their readers’ assimilation of what I call the rule of temporal causation. Like the realism rule,

60. Gilman, Herland, 17 (chap. 2).
Narrative Conventions

this is a rule of literature, one that need not have its analogues in real experience. In its most basic form, the rule of temporal causation assures us that in nineteenth- and twentieth-century narrative, it is appropriate to assume that temporally connected events are causally connected unless there is a signal to the contrary, and that the information necessary to determine the causal chain is available either in the authorial audience’s prior knowledge or in the text itself. As Gerald Prince puts it, “Given two events A and B, and unless the text explicitly indicates otherwise, a causal connection will be taken to exist between them if B temporally follows A and is perceived as possibly resulting from it.”

From this perspective, E. M. Forster’s famous distinction between story (“a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence”) and plot (“a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality”) needs to be reformulated. As he puts it, stressing the objective qualities of the text, “The king died, and then the queen died’ is a story. ‘The king died and then the queen died of grief’ is a plot.”

From the reader’s perspective, though, one can put it differently: if a work is known beforehand to be a novel, then we are invited to interpret “The king died and then the queen died” as “The king died and then the queen died of grief.” Thus, Dostoyevsky writes, “The prince, however, heard them call him an idiot and he gave a start, but not because he had been called an idiot. He forgot ‘the idiot’ at once. He caught sight in the crowd, not far from where he was sitting, of a face.”

According to this rule, the reader is entitled to assume that he gave a start because he saw the face.

This does not mean, of course, that a novelist cannot write a novel that resists traditional notions of causality, but special precautions must be taken to ensure that readers, generally used to

62. Prince, Narratology, 39. A more specific version of this rule, later quoted by Prince, is proposed by Roland Barthes: “There is a strong presumption that the mainspring of the narrative activity is to be traced to that very confusion between consecutiveness and consequence, what-comes-after being read in a narrative as what-is-caused-by. Narrative would then be a systematic application of the logical fallacy denounced by scholasticism under the formula post hoc, ergo propter hoc” (“Introduction,” 248).
63. Forster, Aspects of the Novel, 60.
texts that operate according to the rule of temporal causation, will not fill in causal links where none are intended. Robbe-Grillet may very well be consciously trying to resist the nineteenth-century realist notions of causality in his novels, but as the analyses of Bruce Morrissette make clear, it is possible to make sense of them through the application of traditional rules for determining causal connections.65

Of course, even in the minimal narrative suggested by Forster, application of this rule is nowhere near so simple as I suggested. “The king died and then the queen died”—of grief? of remorse? of contagion? of relief? And the problems get more complex still when we deal with more extensive narratives. It is one thing to say that we can assume that the motives for Raskolnikov’s murder of the pawnbroker lie somewhere in what we are told about the events leading up to it; it is quite another—as the conflicting readings of Crime and Punishment make abundantly clear—to pick out the appropriate details for assigning the cause. Learning to read—realistic texts in particular—is to a large extent learning to apply this rule as sensitively as authors require.