The Black Cloud on the Horizon: Rules of Configuration

Antigone is young. She would much rather live than die. But there is no help for it. When your name is Antigone, there is only one part you can play.

Jean Anouilh, Antigone

Configuration vs. Coherence

Literary form—with its shadow twin, structure—has long been a vexed topic in critical discourse. At least part of the difficulty has stemmed from the frequent failure to distinguish carefully enough between the process of reading as it is taking place and the retrospective interpretation of that process once it has been completed. Thus, on the one hand, form refers sometimes to the reader's experience of an unfolding text during the act of reading. In Kenneth Burke's succinct phrase, "Form is the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite." On the other hand, the term can refer to the total shape of the work, as perceived by a reader who has completed it and reworked its elements into a total pattern. Form in this second sense is not a process, but something already achieved. As Cleanth Brooks puts it, "The structure meant is a structure of meanings, evaluations, and interpretations; and the principle of unity which informs it seems to be one of balancing and harmonizing connotations, attitudes, and meanings. . . . It is a positive unity, not a negative; it

Rules of Configuration

represents not a residue but an achieved harmony” (emphasis added). I call these two kinds of form configuration and coherence respectively, and different sets of rules govern each.

A reader applies previously learned rules of configuration while moving through the text. These rules are basically predictive—at least, on the level of discourse, although not necessarily on the level of story (that is, they permit us to make guesses about what will happen in the later parts of the text, whether the events described are chronologically before or after those we have already read about). They are therefore always probabilistic. To put it another way, in a given literary context, when certain elements appear, rules of configuration activate certain expectations. Once activated, however, these expectations can be exploited in a number of different ways. Authors can make use of them not only to create a sense of resolution (that is, by completing the patterns that the rules lead readers to expect, either with or without detours) but also to create surprise (by reversing them, for instance, by deflecting them, or by fulfilling them in some unanticipated way) or to irritate (by purposefully failing to fulfill them). It is important to stress this point: a rule of configuration can be just as important to the reading experience when the outcomes it predicts turn out not to take place as when they do. Eugene Narmour’s remark about music applies just as well to literature: “The structure of a work is a result of its implications, its realizations, and its non-realizations.”

Thus, Raymond Chandler’s Big Sleep was, at the time it was written, unusual among detective stories because the hero

2. Brooks, Well Wrought Urn, 195. See also Mark Schorer’s claim “that to speak of content as such is not to speak of art at all, but of experience; and that it is only when we speak of the achieved content, the form, the work of art as a work of art, that we speak as critics” (“Technique as Discovery,” in Essays in Modern Literary Criticism, ed. Ray B. West, Jr. [New York: Rinehart, 1952], 190).

3. Thus, the configuration/coherence distinction cuts across the story/plot distinction of E. M. Forster [Aspects of the Novel]. Story and plot, of course, are textual categories, rather than classes of reader activities. More important, story is a matter of chronology, whereas configuration is a matter of order of presentation. Furthermore, application of rules of configuration involves an understanding not only of story but of plot as well, since readers often use their knowledge of causation to predict what will happen next.


III
Narrative Conventions

fails to restore order. But it does not follow that the rule of configuration basic to the classical detective novel—the rule that leads us to expect justice to triumph in the end—is irrelevant to this text. Rather, as I shall argue in more detail in Chapter 6, the final pages have the shock value they do only because Chandler encourages us to invoke the rule and then intentionally undermines our expectations.

Readers apply rules of coherence, in contrast, to the work as a completed totality (even though, of course, the rules have to be learned before the reading begins). Although a reader may posit certain coherences while moving through the work, he or she always does so by positing from some assumption about how the book will end. To put it otherwise: as we are reading, rules of configuration allow us to answer the question, “How will this, in all probability, work out?” while rules of coherence allow us to answer the question, “If it works out in that way, how will I account for this particular element?” Once we have finished the text, rules of configuration allow us to answer the question, “How did this particular element make me think, at the time I encountered it, that the text would work out?” whereas rules of coherence allow us to answer the question, “Given how it worked out, how can I account for these particular elements?” Rules of coherence allow us to make sense of, among other things, a text’s failures to follow through on the configurations it seemed to promise—failures we cannot know about until the book is over. Thus while rules of configuration lead us to expect justice at the end of The Big Sleep, rules of coherence—which demand that the work fit together as a whole—allow us to interpret our frustration at the novel’s irresolution in terms of Chandler’s political message.

Let me stress that, according to my model, rules of configuration govern the activities by which readers determine probability. My perspective thus differs significantly from that of theorists who use apparently similar rules to describe texts. When Vladimir Propp claims, in discussing “Function VII” of the folktale, that “interdictions are always broken and, conversely, deceitful proposals are always accepted and fulfilled,” he is not really enunciating a rule of configuration in my sense. At best, rules like Propp’s reveal

Rules of Configuration

consistent patterns in texts that have already been read; at worst, they lead to the kind of prescriptions for writers that Wayne Booth so rightly attacked in The Rhetoric of Fiction. Rules of configuration, in contrast, do not tell writers what to do—at most, they tell writers the framework within which their readers are likely to respond. Writers may use this framework any way they wish, either by accepting it, stretching it, or even ignoring it. Rules of configuration are prescriptive only in the following way: they map out the expectations that are likely to be activated by a text, and they suggest that if too many of these activated expectations are ignored, readers may find the results dull or chaotic.

Basic Rules of Configuration

In our current critical climate, academic writing tends to privilege novels that are surprising, experimental, avant-garde (or at least formerly avant-garde). For a variety of reasons, books that do not to a large extent forge their own paths are rarely accorded much attention in a college or university setting. But given that the Southworths and Dixons, the Ferbers and Robbinses outnumber the Melvilles and Coovers—and given that they're more widely read, as well—it is reasonable to claim that on the whole, novels are more or less predictable. Yes, it is hard, after one or two pages, to say very much about how the plot of Robbe-Grillet's In the Labyrinth is going to work itself out. But more often than not, readers have a good sense of the general course of future events before they have gotten very far into a narrative.

How are we able to predict with reasonable assurance the trajectory of a novel that we have not yet completed? It is surprising how much we depend on explicit guidance from the author or narrator. We may associate the "But the black cloud was already seen on the horizon"6 technique of writing with literature of the second rank; but in fact, all authors—good and bad, popular and serious—lean on it heavily, in one form or another. It is not only modern "category" texts (Silhouette Romances, for instance) that announce the


113
Narrative Conventions

basic shape of their plots on their covers. Calling a play *The Tragedy of Hamlet* is not that much more subtle a way of warning us about how it is going to end. Nor, for that matter, is calling a novel *The Death of Ivan Ilych*.

Tolstoy, in fact, guides us even more firmly and prepares us for his ending not only through his title but also through his order of presentation: he begins with Ivan Ilych's funeral, and then narrates his life as a flashback. Similarly, Alice Walker begins *Meridian* with a chapter flagrantly called "The Last Return," which serves as a focal point toward which the other events of the novel—chronologically prior to it—are seen to be leading.

Epigraphs are useful devices for guiding readers' expectations, too. "Elle était fille; elle était amoureuse [She was a girl; she was in love]," the citation from Malfolatré that opens chapter 3 of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, clearly raises expectations about the events to come. Alternatively, an author may preview the course of a story by comparing it to another familiar plot. In calling his story "Lady Macbeth of the Mzensk District," Leskov not only influences our evaluation of the main character, as I noted above; he also raises expectations about what will happen. Like Austen (who has her characters act out "Lovers' Vows" in *Mansfield Park*), Leskov may be more heavy-handed than Robbe-Grillet, with his concealed references to *Oedipus* in *The Erasers*. The underlying literary techniques, however, are similar in essence.

Whether authors use prophetic titles, inverted chronologies, mythic patterns, or simply straightforward descriptions of what is to come ("I called Flossie first," says Marcus Gorman at the beginning of William Kennedy's *Legs*, "for we'd had a thing of sorts between us, and I'll get to that"), their warnings can vary in particularity. Sometimes, an author will merely give us a foreboding, a generalized hint about the sort of future that awaits the characters in a narrative, leaving the reader in suspense as to the precise form it will take. Southworth, for instance, writes in *The Hidden Hand*:

Rules of Configuration

Let them enjoy it! It was their last of comfort—that bright evening!
Over that household was already gathering a cloud heavy and dark
with calamity—calamity that must have overwhelmed the stability
of any faith which was not as theirs was—stayed upon God.9

“My last words,” notes Pechorin in Lermontov’s Hero of Our
Time, “had been entirely out of place: at the time, I did not realize
all their importance, but later had a chance to regret them.”10
Similarly, the Time Traveller of The Time Machine remarks, “‘I
was to discover the atrocious folly of this proceeding, but it came
to my mind as an ingenious move.’”11

But an author can be more concrete in prefiguring the course of a
narrative, as well. Dostoyevsky begins The Brothers Karamazov as
follows:

Alexey Fyodorovich Karamazov was the third son of Fyodor Pavlov-
ich Karamazov, a landowner well known in our district in his own
day [and still remembered among us] owing to his tragic and obscure
death, which happened exactly thirteen years ago, and which I shall
describe in its proper place.12

It is only a few paragraphs into the first chapter of So Big that
Ferber sketches out the conclusion of the novel we have barely
begun to read:

In fact, he never became as big as the wide-stretched arms of her love
and imagination would have had him. You would have thought she
would have been satisfied when, in later years, he was the Dirk De-
Jong whose name you saw [engraved] at the top of heavy cream linen
paper, so rich and thick and stiff as to have the effect of being starched
and ironed by some costly American business process; whose clothes
were made by Peter Peel, the English tailor, whose roadster ran on a

(chap. 27).
Nabokov [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday/Anchor, 1958], 75 (“Taman”).
11. H. G. Wells, The Time Machine, in Seven Science Fiction Novels of H. G.
Ralph E. Matlaw [New York: Norton, 1976], 2 [bk. 1, chap. 1].
Narrative Conventions

French chassis, whose cabinet held mellow Italian vermouth and Spanish sherry, whose wants were served by a Japanese houseman, whose life, in short, was that of the successful citizen of the Republic. But she wasn’t. Not only was she dissatisfied: she was at once remorseful and indignant, as though she, Selina DeJong, the vegetable pedler, had been partly to blame for this success of his, and partly cheated by it.  

But widespread as such explicit prefiguring is, it is but one strand in a large network of techniques by which the authorial audience is prepared, while reading, for the shape of things to come. Most of these techniques provide foreknowledge implicitly, requiring readers to decode information given to them by applying rules of configuration. There are many such rules, often highly genre specific; as a result, we may tend to think of configuration—especially as it regards the course of action in a novel—in terms of total plot packages: the classical detective story, the Harlequin romance, the Russian fairy tale. But in fact, we perceive form as we read because we recognize far smaller building blocks. For this reason, a novel that may seem quite fresh in its total structure (for instance, its overall pattern of stress and resolution) can still seem orderly, familiar, even inevitable.

Many rules of configuration are so much a part of our intuitive understanding of literature that they seem almost trivial when made explicit. Nonetheless, it is worth looking at a few of them to see the kind of blocks from which even sophisticated, large-scale literary structures are built. The task will be somewhat easier if we start at a high level of abstraction. Generally speaking, the events in nineteenth- and twentieth-century fictional narratives appear, at least the first time through, to be neither completely determined nor completely free. The text’s “horizon of expectations” (to borrow a term made popular by Hans Robert Jauss) is neither infinite nor zero.  

As Umberto Eco puts it, “Every text, however ‘open’ it is, is constituted, not as the place of all possibilities, but rather as the field of oriented possibilities.” From this middle ground...
Rules of Configuration

come two metarules of configuration of which many of the more specific rules turn out to be special cases. First, it is appropriate to expect that something will happen. Second, it is appropriate to expect that not anything can happen. Literary communication depends heavily on these rules and their interaction.

Recast as a statement about texts rather than readers, the first of these metarules—that something happens, that things change in a way that is not entirely the result of inertia—is, for some theorists, the fundamental characteristic of narrative. Gerald Prince, for instance, defines narrative as "the representation of at least two real or fictive events or situations in a time sequence, neither of which presupposes or entails the other."¹⁶ Mary Louise Pratt introduces the useful notion of tellability: "Assertions whose relevance is tellability must represent states of affairs that are held to be unusual, contrary to expectations, or otherwise problematic."¹⁷ Narratives, the first metarule tells us, can reasonably be expected to be tellable.

Thus, when we pick up a narrative text, we can assume that the final situation will not be identical to the initial situation—or, if it is (as happens not only in texts that start at the end, such as The Death of Ivan Ilych, but also, less literally, in circular narratives, such as "The Fisherman and His Wife," The Idiot, and Career in C Major), that it will reattain that initial situation through some movement of departure and return. If, for instance, a book begins, as Jane Austen's Emma does,

Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her

—the first metarule allows us to predict that we will, in fact, read about events that distress or vex her.

The first metarule (something will happen) opens up the possibilities of the text; the second (that something will happen ac-

¹⁶. Prince, Narratology, 4. See also Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, who tell us that if "nothing happens," "then we simply do not have fiction (Understanding Fiction, 10).
Narrative Conventions

cording to some configuration) limits the range of those possibilities. We can experience a text as meaningful literature only if we assume, even before we pick it up, that it will be patterned in some more or less recognizable way: that it can be seen as an example of or a variation of some preexisting genre category or plot type (even if it ultimately undermines it), that some rules of configuration will apply to it (even if the expectations aroused by those rules are ultimately frustrated), that relations among textual elements that look like configurations can tentatively be treated as such.¹⁸

To put it another way: events have a predictive value in fiction that they do not have in life. We can experience the ebb and flow of a text—in its resolutions and surprises, its climaxes and anticlimaxes—only if we assume while reading that the author has control over its shape, and that the future is in some recognizable way prefigured in the present. For instance, if a seemingly trivial fact is given notice in a text, if that fact does not have any apparent value for signification (for instance, as character revelation), and if there is a configuration in which that fact would have predictive value, then we should presume that that configuration holds, feeling the joy of confirmation when it does, the joy of frustration when it does not. If I mention to my wife in real life that our daughter is especially trusting and unsuspicious of strangers, my remark has no particular predictive value, except to the superstitious—indeed, superstition can perhaps be defined as the application of literary rules of configuration to reality. But the expression of the same sentiment sets up a different pattern of expectations in a novel. In Dixon’s Leopard’s Spots, Tom’s first daughter has been killed when blacks tried to abduct her; he later expresses his fears about his second:

“Lord, there’s so many triflin’ niggers loatin’ round the county now stealin’ and doin’ all sorts of devilment, I’m scared to death about that child. She don’t seem any more afraid of ‘em than she is of a cat.”

“I don’t believe anybody would hurt Flora, Tom,—she’s such a little angel,” said Gaston kissing the tears from the child’s face.¹⁹

¹⁸. One of the reasons that it is easier to read texts that have been published than those which have not is that the knowledge that the text has passed through editors helps assure us that this rule has been adhered to. For a good discussion of the importance of publication, see Pratt, Toward a Speech Act Theory, 116–25.

¹⁹. Dixon, Leopard’s Spots, 366 [bk. 3, chap. 4].
Rules of Configuration

No experienced reader should be surprised when Flora in turn is abducted, raped, and murdered—especially given the racist premises of the novel. The only surprise is that Dixon dilutes the potential pleasure of the pattern he has set up by fulfilling his reader's expectations within two pages, instead of building up suspense. These two basic rules underlie many of the more specific rules of configuration, to which I will now turn.

Rules of Undermining

It is scarcely possible for a human being to be happier than was Lord Leaton at this time. In the prime of his manly life, blessed with a fair wife in the maturity of her matronly beauty, and a lovely daughter, just budding into womanhood, endowed with an ancient title, an immense fortune, and a wide popularity, Lord Leaton was the most contented man in England.20

The first of the two metarules of configuration means, among other things, that readers can expect situations of inertia to be upset. Thus, for instance, when a work begins with a claim of a permanent and static state of affairs (as Emma begins with Emma's security) or a claim of an inevitable future (as the film War Games opens with the military's insistence that its computer cannot fail), we can expect the stability to be undermined. The precise application depends, however, on a number of variables. [1] The probability that a state of affairs will change depends, in part, on the reliability of the person claiming it to be permanent. It makes a difference, for instance, whether a character or an omniscient narrator makes the claim, as well as whether the fallibility of that character is itself an issue (as it is in War Games). Thus, when the omniscient narrator of Bleak House tells us that the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce is “perennially hopeless,”21 we are not intended to invoke the rule of undermining.

20. Emma D. E. N. Southworth, Allworth Abbey; or, Eudora [New York: Hurst, 1876], 27 [chap. 1].
Narrative Conventions

(2) The content of a claim affects our judgment about the likelihood of its reversal. Claims of perfect crimes and foolproof get-rich-quick schemes are particularly unreliable. Thus, when Thomas Bass opens *The Eudaemonic Pie* with the confident belief that the computer in his shoe will turn him into a winner at Las Vegas, the authorial audience expects that something will go wrong, especially when his boast is given double notice (it appears at the end of the first chapter, and is printed in italics as well).

Like a basketball player watching a free throw sail up and into the basket, I lean back on my heels and wait. I turn to the cocktail waitress and order a Tequila Sunrise. I watch the Filipino puff his cigar. I smile at the pit boss. I'm not even looking as the croupier calls out the number 13 and places his pyramid on top of my bet. *Why would anyone play roulette,* I think to myself, *without wearing a computer in his shoe?*22

Indeed, almost any assured statement of intention at the beginning of a narrative raises *some* doubt in the authorial audience as to whether it will in fact be carried out.

Terence Kelly, a rising young professor of Latin at the university, was inaugurating a new way of life for himself on this particular Wednesday in November, 1946 which happened to be his twenty-fifth birthday. It was known to himself as "the new program," and was a program of detachment. "Hands off! Hands off other people! Let them alone!" So it might be expressed, in brief.23

This is likely to be a novel about a man who finds himself entangled.

(3) Specific application of the rule depends on whether the initial situation or the predicted future is positive or negative. The way in which this factor influences the reading process, however, depends heavily on the novel's period and intended audience. For instance,

22. Bass, *The Eudaemonic Pie* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), 14. Although this book is not a novel, it does rely heavily on novelistic techniques for its effects—so much so that many of the early critics had difficulty believing it was true.

120
nineteenth- and twentieth-century European and American canonical fiction, especially after the rise in popularity of naturalistic techniques, has a strong streak of pessimism. In these texts, negative situations, such as economic deprivation, can be expected to be more stable than positive ones. Thus, it is reasonable for a reader to assume that the poverty of the Joads in Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* has a good chance of continuing—in contrast to even the moderate middle-class comfort of Charles and Emma Bovary. American popular literature of the era, however, is aimed at different readers, and uses different generic patterns; on the whole, it is not so uniformly pessimistic. Thus, when we pick up Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick* and find a chipper young street urchin polishing shoes, the authorial audience—which is radically different from Flaubert's—will expect his lot in life to improve.

Under the general rule of undermining lie a number of more specific rules. For instance, the rule of the lure of the unfamiliar governs our expectations by suggesting that novels are more likely to move from the familiar to the unfamiliar (although perhaps back again at the end) than vice versa. Eric Ambler's *State of Siege*, for instance, begins as the hero, Steve Fraser, who has been working as an engineer on a dam project in Sunda, is about to return to London. It would be highly unusual for a novel, particularly an adventure story, to begin with a trip from the exotic back to the well known. And while, as it reads, the authorial audience has to entertain the remote possibility that *State of Siege* will develop into a how-London-has-changed-while-I've-been-away novel, it is more prepared for what actually does happen—Fraser's departure is delayed, and his adventures take place against an Asian background. Even novels that seem to begin with returns rather than departures often actually move into the unfamiliar: although *The Idiot* begins with Myshkin's arrival back in Russia, from Myshkin's point of view it is still a trip from his familiar and protected Swiss habitat to a strange and threatening one.

Similarly, we have the rule of chutzpah: When a character states with assurance that which he or she has no good reason to believe to be the case, we can expect that he or she will turn out to be wrong, especially if the claim is important for the outcome of the plot. When Oedipus claims to possess greater wisdom than the
Narrative Conventions

oracle, it is reasonable to expect that he will be shown up. When, in Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig*, Mary Bellmont’s illness arouses “no serious apprehensions” in her parents, the authorial audience can reasonably expect the illness to grow severe.24 When Mrs. Norris, in Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, says to Sir Thomas, during a discussion of whether to bring Fanny into the house,

“You are thinking of your sons—but do not you know that of all things upon earth that is the least likely to happen, brought up, as they would be, always together like brothers and sisters? It is morally impossible. I never knew an instance of it”25

—the authorial audience is being asked to predict that the “morally impossible” marriage will in fact come to pass. Similarly:

He lay again on the bed, his mind whirling with images born of a multitude of impulses. He could run away; he could remain; he could even go down and confess what he had done. The mere thought that these avenues of action were open to him made him feel free, that his life was his, that he held his future in his hands. But they would never think that he had done it, not a meek black boy like him.26

So thinks Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright’s *Native Son* as he contemplates the murder of Mary Dalton and his attempt to extort ten thousand dollars from her parents. And his very sense of freedom is intended to make the authorial audience feel all the more surely that he is hopelessly trapped—more hopelessly trapped than his predecessor, Big Boy (in “Big Boy Leaves Home,” from *Uncle Tom’s Children*), who feels less confident about his possibilities of escape from a similar situation. And even without any knowledge of the actual course of European history, a reader could reasonably expect Macmaster to be proven false when, in *Some Do Not* . . . , he says (“loftily”): “’You’re extraordinarily old-fashioned at times,

Rules of Configuration

Chrissie. You ought to know as well as I do that a war is impossible—at any rate with this country in it.’”27

Like most rules, the rule of chutzpah has generic and historical exceptions. Heroes of classical detective novels—especially heroes based on the Holmes/Poirot model—are allowed an unpunished arrogance denied to most other characters. So are heroes of myth and certain Party representatives in strict Socialist Realist texts. Indeed, the particular types of characters that a culture exempts from this rule is probably one of the more revealing markers of its ideology.

Of course, Some Do Not . . . was written for readers who did know something about the course of European history, which brings us to another rule often invoked by novels set in particular time periods—the rule of imminent cataclysm. If a story begins at a specified moment right before a generally known upheaval [the French Revolution, World War II], we are probably being asked to read with the expectation that that upheaval will influence the course of the novel. Even without the hints that appeared on the paperback cover, the reader of The White Hotel could reasonably assume that the Holocaust would influence the working out of the plot. Any post-Holocaust book about European Jewish life in the late 1920s is probably intended to be read in the context of what we know historically took place—and the more stable and secure the political and economic position of those Jews appears to be, the more likely it is that we are expected to apply the rule of imminent cataclysm. Similarly, the authorial audience’s expectations as it reads post-1929 American novels dealing with the lives of the well-to-do before the stock market crash should in most cases be guided by knowledge that the market will collapse.

Of course, authors are free to ignore this rule—although they make the reader’s task easier if they signal that they are doing so. Stendhal’s “Editor’s Note” about the date of the composition of The Red and the Black (“This work was ready for publication when the crucial events of July occurred”)28 does more than dis-

sociate him from the events of 1830. It also serves to warn readers that they should not apply the rule of imminent cataclysm in their reading of the text that follows. But the very fact that Stendhal felt the need to mark his text in this way is an indication of how strongly this rule pulls on readers.

The rule of imminent cataclysm, of course, applies only to works written after the cataclysm in question. Dirk DeJong's decision to become a bond salesman in *So Big*—published in 1924—is intended to set up entirely different expectations from Junior's decision to follow the same path in Margaret Ayer Barnes' *Edna His Wife* from a decade later. But this is one of those areas where actual readers may find it hard to recapture the experiences of the authorial audience. It is easy to say that the rule of imminent cataclysm does not apply in *So Big*—it is another thing for real readers to cleanse their minds of their knowledge of American history as they read, and to avoid predicting the shape of the text based on their knowledge of events about which the author knew nothing. Obviously, the problem is most severe with historically distant texts, but since the world is always changing, even recent texts may pose problems. Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm* was published in 1982, but within a year and a half, its references to Grenada took on substantially different connotations for most actual readers.

Even in novels without such historical grounding, there is a parallel rule: If the course of action seems smooth, then anything that looks like a potential obstacle has a likelihood of turning into one. Much of our sense of anxiety as we read *Native Son* comes from Bigger Thomas' inability to burn Mary Dalton's bones after he has killed her. We see this as a possible obstacle to his success, and hence we expect it to trip him up. Similarly, the following passage in Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* not only tells us explicitly when the comfortable adultery of Thérèse and Laurent will end, but also warns us implicitly of what will push them into violent action: "This life of alternating excitement and calm went on for eight months. The lovers lived in perfect bliss. Thérèse was no longer bored, and had nothing left to wish for; Laurent, sated, coddled, heavier than ever, had only one fear, that this delectable existence might come to an end." And if even potential obstacles are ab-
Rules of Configuration

sent, then readers should probably expect one to emerge. The more central the action in question is to the plot, the more likely the obstacle will be. In Bodily Harm, Lora asks Rennie to pick up a box at the airport for her in St. Antoine—a small Caribbean island just made independent of England and on the edge of an explosive election. She assures her that the package does not contain drugs, and to Rennie it looks like a simple job with "no complications." But the authorial audience realizes that it would not be worth mentioning were it not likely to prove more complex than it seems, and it consequently awaits the outcome of the trip to the airport with trepidation—trepidation crucial to the intended reading experience.

Let me stress once again that a rule of configuration can be important in a text both when the expectation it activates is fulfilled and when it is not. The humor of the following passage by James Cain works only if we know the rule and are surprised when it does not apply:

But pretty soon Captain Madeira, he come to me and says I was to go on duty. And what I was to do was to go with another guy, name of Shepler, to find the PC of the 157th Brigade, what was supposed to be one thousand yards west of where we was, and then report back . . . .

So me and Shepler started out. And as the Brigade PC was supposed to be one thousand yards west, and where we was was in a trench, and the trench run east and west, it looked like all we had to do was to follow the trench right into where the sun was setting and it wouldn't be no hard job to find what we was looking for.

And it weren't.31

Rules of Balance: Focus

Just as rules of undermining furnish the openness demanded by the first metarule of configuration, so the second metarule requires

rules of order to limit the field of possibility. Among these are rules of balance. Whether or not the author is striving for formal elegance as an end in itself, most standard novels in our tradition are balanced in one way or another. Our knowledge of the various ways in which that balance can be manifested helps us predict the work's shape as we read, and thus share in its intended emotional curve.

Balance can occur along several axes. Some of these relate to what might be called the general focus of the work—its content in the broadest sense. The focus of a work is usually announced in some conventional way, and by knowing rules of focus, the reader can determine the probable boundaries of the novelistic universe that he or she will inhabit. Among the more important axes of focus is central consciousness: most traditional novels maintain some consistency with regard to point of view. For instance, if a novel opens from a particular point of view, readers can reasonably expect that it will be dominated by that point of view or will at least close with it, unless there is a signal to the contrary, such as a frame-tale structure (as in Turgenev's *First Love*), a constant flickering of point of view (as in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, James Hilton's *Ill Wind*, or Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*), or an explicit warning from the narrator or author that the focus will shift.

Like all rules of configuration, rules of focus are not prescriptions for producing well-made texts, but authors can use the knowledge that readers will apply them in order to shape readers' experience. Thus, if readers expect the initial point of view to return at the end of the text (as in a musical ABA structure), authors can fulfill that expectation to create a sense of closure. Robbe-Grillet's *In the Labyrinth*, for instance, begins with the word "I"; even though overt references to the first-person narrator disappear—the first person emerges only once more before the end, at the beginning of the last chapter—the authorial audience feels a sense of fulfillment when the novel ends with the word "me." But that sense of fulfillment comes about only because the expectations of return is activated in the first place. Granted, Robbe-Grillet, with his geometrical obsessions and his love of formal ingenuity, is an extreme case. But far less precise writers—even fairly sloppy writers like Dostoyevsky—rely on their reader's application of rules of focus to support closure. Anton Lavrent'evich, the narrator of Dos-
Rules of Configuration

toyevsky's Possessed, offers a limited perspective on events at the beginning of the novel. But while he remains the nominal narrator throughout the text, his persona and limitations fade away for long passages in the middle, where we receive a great deal of information to which he could have no possible access. But when it comes time to wrap up the novel, Dostoyevsky not only resolves his major plot strands and sums up his major themes, but he also returns explicitly to Anton Lavrent'evich's perspective in the last chapter, where "sources" are once again cited for the details of his narration. Similarly, John O'Hara heightens the sense of closure in Appointment in Samarra by beginning with the thoughts of Luther Fliegler—who turns out to be a minor character—and then returning to him for the closing paragraphs. Once again, authors may well choose to reverse the expectations they set up. Thus, the shift of narrator toward the end of Goethe's Sorrows of Young Werther is intended to wrench us emotionally, but it can work only for the reader who expects consistency in point of view strongly enough to feel the dislocation.

It is remarkable, in fact, how strongly the assumption of this kind of consistency operates. I remember my sense of irritation while reading E. Phillips Oppenheim's once-classic spy thriller, The Great Impersonation. The novel begins from the point of view of Sir Everard Dominey, who is apparently killed in Africa at the end of the second chapter by his German look-alike, Baron von Ragastein. The novel goes on to center on his killer, who returns to England and takes Dominey's place in order to act as a spy. This shift in perspective gives the novel an odd, off kilter flavor, but the reader who follows his or her instincts, expecting some return of Dominey at the end, will paradoxically find that the novel's effect is dissipated when the expectation is fulfilled. For at the end of the book, we find that Dominey had in fact killed von Ragastein, and that he has been impersonating the German impersonating him in order to infiltrate the German spy network. Oppenheim had (unconsciously, one presumes) followed this rule of balance even

though in so doing he risked destroying his intended effect, for the reader who expects balance loses the intended shock.

What applies to the perspective from which a novel is narrated applies as well to its central character or characters. Susan Suleiman has made a strong claim that "it is only after having read the whole novel that one can fully distinguish major characters from secondary or minor ones." There is some slippage introduced by the word "fully" here—but we need to remember that in fact, most traditional novels rely on the reader's use of conventional rules to recognize the protagonists almost as soon as they enter the text. Such recognition is particularly easy, of course, in those works (especially common in the nineteenth century) that announce their central characters in their titles (Jane Eyre, David Copperfield, Anna Karenina, Indiana). But even in our supposedly more sophisticated literary world today, non—avant garde novelists rely on fairly simple shared conventions to cast a spotlight on their protagonists. Showing up in a position privileged by a rule of notice is one way of attracting attention. In fact, merely being the first-mentioned character in a novel is enough to arouse some expectation—weak, perhaps, but significant—of centrality. Bigger Thomas is mentioned by name twice before any other character is named in Native Son; he is also the first character we see. Note also the beginning of Marge Piercy's High Cost of Living:

Leslie was balanced on the hard cushion of an antique chair designed for someone with a three-cornered behind. In front of her, too close, Hennessy straddled a chair backwards and loomed over her, telling loud anecdotes intended as far as she could guess as advertisements. "The minute Ted left the room, she walked over to me and stood there, just looking me up and down. Provocative. I could see she wasn't wearing a bra."

One can reasonably infer from her presence in the novel's first word that Leslie is more likely to be the center of the novel than Hennessy, Ted, or the anonymous "she." The presumption that Leslie is the (or a) main character is supported in several ways: the
Rules of Configuration

narrator assumes our greater familiarity with her (she is called by her first name, the only other present character by his last), the paragraph describes her space (which is being invaded by Hennessy) from her point of view (it is her interpretation of Hennessy’s motives that we are given), and Hennessy is so unattractive that an author is unlikely to demand that we keep him company for 288 pages. Similarly, when a novel begins

I first met her, this girl you’ll find soon enough, when she fished me out of the Sacramento River on an occasion when I was showing more originality than sense

— we can reasonably assume that “this girl” will be central to the novel and that the narrator will continue to show more originality than sense.35

Thus, while novels may have several main characters, they rarely center on one of them for a long period of time at the beginning and then switch, without preparation, to another—unless the change in focus is intended as an aesthetically significant jolt. Of course, sometimes such shifts are prepared for. For more than half of So Big, Selina DeJong is the primary character. But both the title and the opening two pages (privileged both) have made it clear that Dirk DeJong is a central subject as well. Thus, when his story eventually takes over from his mother’s, we do not feel disoriented. Alice Walker uses a title in much the same way to prepare us for Grange Copeland’s centrality in the second half of The Third Life of Grange Copeland, even though he has been all but absent from the novel until then. Similarly, Wuthering Heights begins with the Cathy II/Hareton generation, this leads the authorial audience to expect that the story it is later told will not stop with Heathcliff and Cathy I, but will continue on to the “present.”

When such warnings are not given, disruptions of focus more often than not are used to startle us. In the final scene of Turgenev’s Rudin, for instance, the protagonist is suddenly seen from a distance as a minor actor on the French barricades in 1848—a shift that underscores Turgenev’s criticism of Rudin’s presumptuous

35. Cain, Past All Dishonor (New York: Knopf, 1946), 1 (chap. 1).
Narrative Conventions

self-importance. But Turgenev's critique only works because we assume the rule of balance to be operative. Without the reader's expectation that Rudin will remain central, his final demotion produces no shock—and without the shock, there is nothing for the reader to interpret as a critique.

Dostoyevsky's *Gambler* violates the rule in a radically different way. While it is quite common for a novel to begin in medias res with regard to its story, this one seems to begin right in the middle of its *narration*. The opening paragraph (as would be appropriate in a real journal) gives us few hints about who is who, or who is important:

At last I have come back from my fortnight's absence. Our friends have already been two days in Roulettenberg. I imagined they were expecting me with the greatest eagerness; I was mistaken, however. The General had an extremely independent air, he talked to me condescendingly and sent me away to his sister. I even fancied that the General was a little ashamed to look at me. Marya Filippovna was tremendously busy and scarcely spoke to me; she took the money, however, counted it and listened to my whole report. They were expecting Mezentsov, the little Frenchman, and some Englishman; as usual, as soon as there was money there was a dinner party, in the Moscow style. Polina Alexandrovna, seeing me, asked why I had been away so long, and without waiting for an answer went off somewhere. Of course, she did that on purpose. We must have an explanation, though. Things have accumulated.36

The authorial audience can perhaps conclude that Polina will be important, but the rest of the cast is a jumble. In fact, some of those mentioned are crucial, others very minor. The effect is disorienting, and unmoors us from the comfort of our world so that we can take in the madness of Alexei's. But Dostoyevsky can create his intended effect only because his authorial audience approaches the novel with expectations about how focus is announced—expectations that he can then fail to fulfill.

Balance works with regard to subject matter as well. Just as we

Rules of Configuration

usually have ways of knowing, fairly soon, who will be the main characters, so we have ways to tell what a novel is likely to be about. Once again, titles are occasionally clear signals (War and Peace; Gladkov's Soviet factory novel, Cement), but more usually, the text itself counts on shared conventions to inform us about what its primary subject(s) will be. In a sonata-form movement, an experienced listener can usually tell an introduction from the first subject (although occasionally he or she may be fooled—as in the long introduction to the Tchaikovsky First Piano Concerto); similarly, an experienced reader knows how to tell when a significant subject has arrived in a novel—and expects that once it has arrived, it will remain important. To return to The High Cost of Living: the opening points to Leslie as a main character, but it also suggests that sex is likely to be a major topic in the subsequent text. It is not simply that sex is given a privileged position. The authorial audience, reading the opening of James' “Daisy Miller” (“At the little town of Vevey, in Switzerland, there is a particularly comfortable hotel; there are indeed many hotels, since the entertainment of tourists is the business of the place”),37 is not surprised when the novel does not go on to treat the trials and tribulations of the Swiss tourist industry. Nor does the authorial audience of The Sound and the Fury prepare itself, after the first page, to settle into a novel about golf. But sex is an interesting, even titillating, subject, as tourism and golf are not—and when a titillating subject is trumpeted at the beginning of a text, it is reasonable to assume that it will be developed. What counts as interesting, of course, is in part socially determined, and therefore varies with historical and cultural context. On this point, as on so many others, actual audiences may therefore not start out where their authors expect them to. Many actual readers of James Cain's Career in C Major, approaching it with expectations developed through reading The Postman Always Rings Twice, are probably surprised when opera does turn out to be the main subject rather than a mere prelude to bloodier matters. One reason why strict Socialist Realist texts seem virtually unreadable to many contemporary American read-

ers, in fact, may well be that their central concerns simply do not seem vital.

Rules of Balance: Action

Rules of balance regarding focus restrict the world that a novel will inhabit; rules of balance regarding action inform us about the events that will take place in the book to come. One of the most elementary rules is that it is reasonable to assume that repetitions will be continued until they are in some way blocked. Even very young readers get a sense of delight—of anticipation fulfilled—when the wolf phrases his request the same way ("Little pig, little pig, let me come in") for the third time. On a less literal level, the authorial audience expects the narrator's father in Sherwood Anderson's "Egg" to fail as an "entertainer" in part because he has failed at everything else he has tried to do.

Similarly, readers can usually start with the presumption that diverse strands of action will in some way be linked. In Farewell, My Lovely, Philip Marlowe has accidentally gotten entangled in the search for ex-convict Moose Malloy, who is wanted for murder. Suddenly, he is phoned by a stranger named Lindsay Marriott and offered some unspecified work. The authorial audience knows immediately that these two plot lines will eventually merge; the surprise of the book is not in the fact of the interconnection, but rather in its specific nature. Similarly, as Carol Billman points out, even the young readers of Nancy Drew books know that "when two suspenseful plot lines are introduced in the first chapter . . . [they] will eventually intersect."38 This kind of structure, while especially transparent in detective stories, is found more generally as well. Fredric Jameson may be overstating the case, but he is making a shrewd observation when he argues that "the detective story plot merely follows the basic tendency of all literary plots or intrigue in general, which is marked by the resolution of multiplicity back into some primal unity."39 Once again, of course, the

Rules of Configuration

rule can be as important in texts that do not fulfill expectations as in those that do. Chester Himes disorients us in *Blind Man with a Pistol* because we keep waiting for the parallel plots to merge; but the effect only works on a reader who knows the rule and builds false expectations on it.

Some rules of action, though, are much more complex than the rules of repetition and parallel. As one example, let me turn to the variations on what I call the other-shoe rule: when one shoe drops, you should expect the other. To put it in musical terms: just as an experienced listener, hearing the opening phrase of the Mozart G Minor Symphony (K. 550), immediately develops expectations about how the second phrase is likely to sound, so when we read novels, we learn to predict what sorts of things are likely to follow from what is first presented. Readers have learned to expect literary events to come in patterns of antecedent and consequent. Obviously, the other-shoe rule often involves notions of cause and effect, and in this way, it is related to the causal rules of signification discussed in Chapter 3. But whereas rules of signification allow us to determine the meaning of an event by moving from the effect to the cause, the other-shoe rule allows us to move in the other direction, to predict the consequences of an event by moving from cause to effect.

One version of the other-shoe rule is that it is generally appropriate to assume that events will produce results—that noticeable events that will not have consequences have probably been left out, unless they are included for their signification value, are inherently amusing, or are intentional red herrings. Like all rules of configuration, this one allows readers to develop a sense of anticipation, one that authors can foster and resolve, or frustrate. Pushkin is able to create a sense of anxiety in *Eugene Onegin* because his authorial audience expects that Eugene’s decision to flirt with Lensky’s fiancée, Olga, will have serious consequences—we are intended, in other words, to experience Lensky’s death in the ensuing duel not as a surprise but as the fulfillment of an evil premonition. Alternatively, this rule can be invoked and not fulfilled in order to surprise. Only if Austen’s readers apply this rule can her failure to provide the promised complications have the intended comic effect:
Narrative Conventions

Elfrida had an intimate freind [sic] to whom, being on a visit to an Aunt, she wrote the following Letter.

TO MISS DRUMMOND

DEAR CHARLOTTE

I should be obliged to you, if you would buy me, during your stay with Mrs Williamson, a new & fashionable Bonnet, to suit the complexion of your

E. FALKNOR

Charlotte, whose character was a willingness to oblige every one, when she returned into the Country, brought her Freind the wished-for Bonnet, & so ended this little adventure, much to the satisfaction of all parties.  

Relationships follow antecedent/consequent patterns, too. As a general rule, we expect that strong attractions and dissonances between major characters in novels will have consequences; the more notice that such attractions and dissonances are given, the stronger our expectations will be. We should be especially alert to relational tensions introduced at the very beginning of a book. From the opening pages of The Idiot, we can confidently expect that the sharp contrast between Myshkin and Rogozhin—with its paradoxical overtones of attraction and repulsion—will continue to generate action in the novel, and we achieve a sense of completion when they finally join together in their homoerotic vigil over Nastasya's bed toward the end of the novel. Likewise, at the beginning of The Virginian, when the hero forces Trampas to back down after Trampas calls him a "son-of-a______" (the event eliciting the now-classic line, "When you call me that, smile"), we expect the antagonism between them to be resolved in the end, for "a public back-down is an unfinished thing." Similarly, the opening paragraph of The High Cost of Living discussed above suggests that the conflict between Leslie and Hennessy [or at least between what they represent in this scene] will bear some of the


41. It is significant, though, that the novel does not end with this reconciliation, but rather with the epilogue, including Aglaya's marriage. The effect of that jarring post-resolution will be discussed in Chapter 5.

weight of the novel that follows. And no experienced reader of *Pride and Prejudice* has difficulty seeing, quite early in the text, that the working out of the relation between Elizabeth and Darcy will be central to the action.

It is not only what people do in novels that sets up the antecedent/consequent pattern; it is also what they say. As I suggested above, for instance, it is generally appropriate to assume that warnings and promises will be followed up. When Leonard, in Cain's *Career in C Major*, is preparing for his career as an opera singer, his teacher/partner/lover Cecil warns him about "the bird." When Leonard asks her what that is, she replies "'Something you'll never forget, if you ever hear it.'" Under the circumstances, Cain expects us to read the rest of the book haunted by the fear that Leonard will in fact come to hear the bird. The reader who does not apply the proper rule here—who does not recognize the way that the warning is intended to color our experience of the text—will be unable to share the mounting suspense that lies at the heart of the novel's effect.

Obviously, not all promises made in a text carry equal weight. Those made by minor characters, for instance, are less forceful than those made by major characters; those that promise events that will be significant for the plot—as we suspect it will turn out at the time the promise is made—are more forceful than those which promise something tangential. In the Cain example above, the warning is marked in several ways: It is stated by one of the two central characters, and it is repeated—with a clarification of its potential consequences. When Leonard asks, "'Suppose they give *me* the bird!'" Cecil replies, "'Then I'll have to get somebody else.'" Since the romantic relationship between Cecil and Leonard is crucial to the plot, the warning is thus doubly underscored by the repetition. In contrast, the promise made by Mary and Liz in *The High Cost of Living*, when Leslie comes over for dinner, has less impact:

> Every plate was different, from rummage sales, and "Everything comes from the land, everything!" except the cheap red wine in gal-

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Narrative Conventions

Ion jugs. "But we don't see why we can't make our own wine eventually. We have grapes started." 44

Mary and Liz are minor characters, to whom we have just been introduced; the question of the success or failure of their farm seems irrelevant to the concerns of the story, at least as it has developed so far. The authorial audience does not therefore take their remark to be a strong signal about how to approach the rest of the book.

Maxims often function in the same way that warnings and promises do. Those that are given prominence in a novel—especially when they come toward the beginning—create the expectation that they will be followed up. Some maxims, of course, are explicitly predictive in that they pose a specific link between the present and the future by telling what sorts of events follow from situations like the present one. "A man of tact, intelligence, and superior education moving in the midst of a mass of ignorant people, oftentimes has a sway more absolute than that of monarchs." 45

But even maxims that do not explicitly promise consequences of present situations can often be appropriately treated as predictive if they are neither justifications for actions that have just taken place nor guides to signification. Take the following:

"It is a law of nature that we overlook, that intellectual versatility is the compensation for change, danger, and trouble. . . . Nature never appeals to intelligence until habit and instinct are useless. There is no intelligence where there is no change and no need of change. Only those animals partake of intelligence that have to meet a huge variety of needs and dangers." 46

Or,

"Let me tell you this, as you don't seem to know it. The two go-getting things in this white man's civilization are force and cunning.

44. Piercy, High Cost, 120.
Rules of Configuration

When you have force or power you make people do things. When you haven’t you use cunning."

On the surface, they appear to be simply expressions of general truths rather than promises. But because of the conventional way in which such maxims are used in novels, it is appropriate to treat them as promises—that is, as promises that the truths they proclaim will be exemplified as the novel progresses.

This is how the authorial audience treats the wisdom passed on to Selina in the first chapter of *So Big,* by her father, right before he dies (what more privileged position?): “‘There are only two kinds of people in the world that really count,’” he tells her. “‘One kind’s wheat and the other kind’s emeralds.'” Obviously, the reader is intended to experience a sense of resolution when the maxim turns out to sum up the text at its recapitulation near the book’s end. But that experience is not built into the text itself; it is available only to the reader who applies previously learned rules of configuration at the maxim’s first appearance, and thus activates the expectations that the novel finally fulfills.

Tasks and questions operate in a similar way. It is generally reasonable to expect important questions to be answered and major tasks to be confronted, although (at least in nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels) failure to fulfill the task is more common than failure to answer questions. Assumptions that these rules operate is one of the necessary conditions to responding as intended, in particular to detective fiction. In one of the Encyclopedia Brown stories, for instance, we are told that a warning note has been typed on a piece of paper with “The quick brown fox” typed on the other side. In the real world, one can infer virtually nothing from this fact. But since this is a story in which a definite solution is promised, we are entitled to assume that something can be inferred. Thus, we look at the clue not to ask, “What does this tell us?” but rather, “Since this is guaranteed to tell us something definite, what could that something definite be?” It is

48. Ferber, *So Big,* 7 (chap. 1).
only in this very limited conventional context that the reader can conclude that the writer of the note had recently bought a new typewriter or repaired an old one.49

Antecedents and consequents can work in reverse, as well. If a strange event is narrated, it is normally a signal for the narrative audience to look forward to an explanation of its causes. This is different from rules of signification regarding cause; in those cases, we assume the causal connections that are not given. In these configurative cases, in contrast, we do not have the necessary information to determine causes on our own; we thus wait for the text to tell us the causes. A familiar form is the let-me-tell-you-why configurations found, for instance, in Pushkin’s “Shot” (from the Belkin Tales) and Kuprin’s “Idiot.” In the latter, the narrator is surprised by Zimina’s compassion toward an idiot stranger: “To tell the truth, I shouldn’t have expected from him such sincere compassion towards a stranger’s misfortune.” This leads to a story: “‘If you’ll allow me,’” says Zimina, “‘I’ll tell you why the sight of an idiot moves me to such compassion.’”50

Applying the other-shoe rule and its variants is not without its difficulties, however—for what constitutes a dropped shoe depends on history and culture. In the nineteenth century, colds were not the minor inconvenience that they usually are today; getting soaked in the rain therefore had more serious consequences. The contemporary reader who is not attuned to that historical difference is apt to be more surprised by the lengthy illnesses of Jane Bennet and Mr. Lockwood than Austen and Bronte intended. Similarly, sexual relations between unmarried people implied a set of consequences in the nineteenth century (one thinks of Lydia and Wickham) that they no longer do. It may be poignant when Philip Marlowe and Linda Loring part simply as friends after their night together in Chandler’s Long Goodbye, but it is neither shocking nor scandalous, and the authorial audience does not expect them to be punished in some way for their actions.51 Once again, learn-


51. They do get married after Playback, but I doubt that that outcome was foreseen by Chandler when he wrote The Long Goodbye, and it certainly has no impact on the way the authorial audience reads the novel.
Rules of Configuration

ing to read authorially involves learning historical and cultural norms.

Correct application of the other-shoe rule depends on our understanding of genre as well. Virtually any event or statement can imply some consequences; authorial reading involves the ability to sort out those for which the consequences are likely to be vital in the text. To a large extent, this comes about through rules of notice: the important antecedents will usually be marked. But we also need to know what sorts of things are appropriate in what sorts of works: antecedents are often noticed because they have the potential to lead to consequences that the genre requires.

Indeed, the whole notion of cause and effect in literature is radically genre bound. What is relevant to our ability to foresee textual turns is less our knowledge of what certain conditions lead to in reality than our knowledge of what they lead to in the kind of novel in which they are appearing. Antagonism is probably not, in fact, the most fertile breeding ground for true love, but it is the only breeding ground in at least one variant of the popular romance. Take, similarly, our ability to foresee the climax of John D. MacDonald’s Girl in the Plain Brown Wrapper. Maureen Pearson Pike has apparently tried to commit suicide three times in three different ways (pills, slit wrists, hanging). It does not matter whether such a series of attempts is really psychologically possible. What matters is that Travis McGee has informed us, with scientific authority, that suicides rarely try to kill themselves even in two different ways, and in this genre, as I have noted, such absolute statements by the narrator are to be treated as true. This, in turn, leads us to believe that someone is really trying to murder her—not because, in reality, that is the usual cause of fishy suicides, but because in this genre, anything that looks murder related should be treated as such. Furthermore, we suspect her husband, a man who has accumulated considerable wealth through somewhat questionable real estate deals. Again, this is not because of anything in reality, but because of a rule of ethical enchainment that applies to Travis McGee novels: People who engage in shady financial transactions are to be treated as capable of murder. (This is one of those cases where signification and configuration merge: our sense of the character’s ethics is really a matter of our expectations of what sorts of actions he or she is likely to perform.) When it is
hinted that maybe a jump will be next, we take it seriously; when we find out that there is to be an opening at her husband's new office on the top of "‘that big new building at the corner of Grove Boulevard and Lake Street? Twelve stories? Lots of windows?'"—then the authorial audience treats it as a signal from the author to approach that event with trepidation. In fact, if we know the genre well enough, we can even guess that McGee’s race to the opening will not be fast enough to save her—the novel needs a mangled body more than it needs a heroic rescue.

In “Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics,” Stanley Fish argues that the reader’s experience (what “happens to, and with the participation of, the reader”) is “the meaning” of a text. To a large extent he is right, and although he does not use my terminology, his analyses show how this meaning is radically dependent on the reader making predictions about the text using rules of configuration. The reader he posits, to be sure, has such a limited repertoire of rules of configuration that he or she has a fairly limited set of responses. As I noted earlier, the effect of anticipation is for Fish—at least, in this essay—almost always the shock of surprise. With a stronger understanding of configuration, of course, a reader may have a fuller set of textual responses—but in any case, the moment-to-moment curve of the text is “meaningful” as an aesthetic experience only in the context of some rules of configuration, and it can only be the curve that the author intended in the context of those rules expected of the authorial audience.

Still, this is not the only kind of meaning that texts have. After we have finished them, we tend to think about them retroactively, reshaping them in the process. This activity opens up a different kind of literary form and calls upon the last set of rules—rules of coherence.