

# Chapter 1

## Principles of Rhetorical Reading

As I shift my primary concerns from history and literary history to rhetorical form, I shift to a focus on reading itself. Whether a novel becomes part of the literary canon depends on many factors beyond its esthetic quality (historical significance, the politics of the book trade, the politics of the academy, and so on), but any novel that we value enough to re-read typically offers us a rich and rewarding reading experience: we find something worthwhile not just in the conclusions we can draw after we finish reading but also in our journey from the title page to the last sentence. Rhetorical reading is my term for the critical approach that attends both to the journey and to the destination, and its method is to analyze both the what and the how of the reading experience (see below for the approach's conception of audience). By putting at the center of the critical enterprise what is often an intense but inchoate experience, the approach seeks two interrelated goals: (1) to specify as precisely as possible the rewards offered by the experience and (2) to identify and analyze how authors, texts, and audiences collaborate (or in some cases, fail to collaborate) to produce those rewards. In the language of the Introduction, which reminds us that this collaboration is always historically situated, this second goal is to understand how an author utilizes and adapts the available horizon of resources for particular purposes, and how audiences respond to those uses in order to realize the potential rewards of reconstructing those purposes. The goals are interrelated because understanding the how gives us a more fine-grained sense of the what and because understanding the what gives us a fuller sense of what is at stake in the author's choices about resources. More generally,

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rhetorical reading of narrative (fictional or nonfictional; in written prose or some other medium) is grounded in the following definition: somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened. Rhetorical reading is also grounded in seven related principles that guide its practice.<sup>1</sup>

Just a word about that rhetorical definition before I turn to those principles. I do not regard it as the Platonic ideal of definitions of narratives (indeed, I believe that there is no such ideal) but rather one that both captures something common to most of the communicative acts we call narratives, and indicates my interest in the rhetoric of those acts. It is for that reason that the definition emphasizes tellers, audiences, and purposes. In moving from narrative to novel, I adjust the definition as follows: “a novel is an extended fictional narrative in which somebody tells somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened.” Furthermore, I emphasize that in the novel just about every element of this definition is doubled—with the author’s narrative act subsuming and ultimately governing the narrator’s narrative act. To put this point in practical terms, Fitzgerald’s telling to his audience in 1925 for the purposes associated with his particular narrative tragedy is different from Nick Carraway’s telling to his unspecified audience within the storyworld for the purpose of explaining why Gatsby stood out from everyone else Nick met during his time in the East. Much of Fitzgerald’s art entails his ability to exploit the doubled telling situation for communications to his audience that go beyond those Nick communicates to his, and much of the pleasure of reading the novel derives from attending to those communications and their purposes. On to principles.

1. **Narrative is not just a structure of events but is itself an event, a multi-dimensional purposive communication from a teller to an audience.** The focus on narrative as *purposive* means that I am interested in the ways in which an author shapes her choices from the horizon of resources in the service of larger ends. Talking about narrative as *multi-leveled communication* is another way of saying that I am interested in both the endpoint of reading and the experiential journey. Thus, even as I will pay attention to a novel’s relation to its historical context and the thematic points it makes about that context, I will also attend to its affective, ethical, and esthetic effects—and to their interactions. More generally, this principle underlies my conception of rhetorical form as the particular fashioning of the elements, techniques, and structure of a narrative in the service of a set of readerly engagements that lead to particular thematic, affective, and ethical effects on the audience.

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2. **With its focus on purposive communication, rhetorical reading distinguishes between the raw material of a novel and its treatment.** “Raw material” refers to the events, characters, setting, and other building blocks of the narrative—as well as the real people, places, and historical or autobiographical events upon which those building blocks may be based. “Treatment” refers to the author’s particular shaping of that raw material by means of her choices from the horizon of resources (and any innovations she introduces into that horizon) so that the novel accomplishes one set of purposes rather than another. This principle implies that the same material has the potential to be shaped in multiple ways, and this realization in turn encourages us to ask both how an author’s particular shaping works and to consider how it does or does not contribute to her larger purposes. In *A Farewell to Arms*, for example, Hemingway stages a debate between Frederic Henry and Passini, an Italian ambulance driver, about whether “defeat is worse than war.” Hemingway could have shaped the debate so that Henry, who argues for the affirmative position, or Passini, or neither wins. But Hemingway shapes it so that Passini has the better argument. This shaping serves Hemingway’s local end of showing that Frederic has not thought deeply about his relation to the war and of inviting us to draw a parallel with his shallow understanding of his relationship with Catherine Barkley. This local end contributes to the global end of engaging us in Frederic’s movement toward a different and deeper knowledge of the war, the larger world, and Catherine, a knowledge that will ultimately challenge him—and us—far more than he can envision at the point of his debate with Passini.

Some material will lend itself to—or be resistant to—certain kinds of treatment (the pederasty in *Lolita* does not cry out for comic treatment), but sometimes writers deliberately work against these standard matches of material and treatment (as Nabokov does in his efforts to make Humbert Humbert more than just despicable). Furthermore, attending to the relation between material and treatment can illuminate the relation between biography, history, and rhetorical form, as we can compare the shape of a biographical or historical event against its shape in fiction.

3. **In interpreting a novel, rhetorical readers adopt an a posteriori instead of an a priori stance.** Although rhetorical reading, like all critical approaches, does operate with its own set of lenses that frame the text in one way rather than countless others, it seeks, within that frame, to read from the inside out rather than the outside in. This point is connected with my statement in the Introduction that *The Sound and the Fury* does not use stream-of-consciousness narration because it is a modernist novel, but rather is a modernist novel because it uses stream-of-consciousness

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narration. More generally, even as rhetorical readers remain aware of the influence of context and such matters as the foregrounded elements along the horizon of resources, they do not regard that context as determining an author's narrative project. In practical terms, this principle means that as I conduct my rhetorical readings, I will not pre-select for analysis across my examples particular cultural or thematic issues such as gender or violence or US foreign policy, but rather will seek to follow the designs of the individual narratives, including each one's foregrounding of some cultural or thematic issues rather than others. At the same time, I value studies that highlight various novelistic treatments of the same set of issues in a given historical period, and I believe that the results of rhetorical analysis can help inform such studies.

4. **In explaining how narrative creates its effects, rhetorical reading identifies a feedback loop among authorial agency, textual phenomena (including intertextual relations), and reader response.** In other words, rhetorical reading assumes, as already noted, that texts are designed by authors (whether consciously or not) to affect readers in particular ways. It also assumes that those authorial designs are conveyed through the occasions, words, techniques, structures, forms, and dialogic relations of texts as well as the genres and conventions readers use to understand them. It assumes further that since reader responses follow from those designs, those responses can also serve as an initial guide to the workings of the text—but since misreadings are possible, those responses should not be regarded as the final arbiter of those workings. This point underlines the importance of seeing authorial agency, textual phenomena, and reader response in a feedback loop. Thus, for example, my initial response to the Epilogue of *Invisible Man* was generally positive, in part because it expresses a faith in the ideals of freedom and democracy and in part because it ends the book on what seemed to me a much-needed optimistic note. But the more I examined Ellison's shaping of the Invisible Man's account of his experiences prior to the Epilogue, the more I found the vision he sets out there incompatible with that prior account. That finding, then, led me to revise my initial response and then to go on and ask why Ellison would be inconsistent in this way, and what consequences follow from that inconsistency. I offer my answers in Chapter 7.

I use the term "authorial agency" rather than "authorial intention" for several reasons. First, I believe it better emphasizes the interdependencies among the elements of the feedback loop. "Authorial intention" typically refers to something existing above and beyond textual phenomena and readerly response, something that allegedly governs both. In my view, the

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three elements are separable but still interdependent: if an actual author intends to do X but actually does Y, then her doing trumps her intending. For example, when Toni Morrison gives conflicting signals about the year that Sethe's older children fled from 124 Bluestone Road (see my discussion in Chapter 10), then we cannot simply say that what she actually intended matters more than what she expressed. Instead, if we make the reasonable assumption that Morrison did not intend to have her narrator indicate in one place that the boys left in 1873 and in another that they left several years before 1873, then we must conclude that the textual phenomena and the authorial agency are not working together—and thus that there is a small flaw in the novel.

This example also helps explain rhetorical reading's interest in distinguishing between the actual author (the Morrison who presumably did not want to leave these conflicting signals in her text) and the implied author (the Morrison who did leave them there), and in preferring to focus on the implied author. The implied author is the author in her role as writer (as opposed to her role as, say, daughter), and she communicates who she is in that role through her various choices about the textual phenomena. Because any actual author is likely, as Walt Whitman said, to "contain multitudes," and because any implied author is likely to contain, well, fewer multitudes (an implied author, for example, typically takes more consistent positions on various issues than actual authors), I regard the implied author as a streamlined version of the actual author. When I refer to an author in this book, I mean the implied author unless otherwise specified with a phrase such as "the historical author."

5. **Rhetorical reading regards the progression of a narrative—its synthesis of what I call textual and readerly dynamics—as the key means by which an author achieves his or her purposes, and rhetorical readers therefore often look to progression to understand the experience of reading.** To put this principle another way, analyzing the progression is a key to understanding the logic underlying a novel's construction, and understanding that logic goes a long way toward explaining a narrative's purposes and the experiences it offers its readers.

By textual dynamics, I mean the internal processes by which narratives move from beginning through middle to ending, and by readerly dynamics, I mean the corresponding cognitive, affective, ethical, and esthetic responses of the audience to those textual dynamics. The bridge between textual dynamics and readerly dynamics is formed by narrative judgments of three kinds: interpretive, ethical, and esthetic. These judgments constitute a bridge because they are encoded in the narrative yet made by readers,

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and, once made, their various interactions lead to readers' multi-layered responses. Because progression is such a key concept in rhetorical reading, I return to it in the next section of this chapter.

6. **Rhetorical reading identifies four key audiences involved in the rhetorical exchanges of novels, though it is just as accurate to say that it focuses on a subset of the actual audience (those flesh-and-blood readers who want to practice rhetorical reading), two primary positions that rhetorical readers adopt, and one intratextual audience.**<sup>2</sup> First, **flesh-and-blood rhetorical readers** typically join (or try to join) **the authorial audience**, the hypothetical group for whom the author writes—the group that shares the knowledge (including knowledge of historical background and of novelistic conventions), values, prejudices, fears, and experiences that the author expects in his or her readers, and the group that influences the author's constructive choices. Among other things, the concept of the authorial audience provides the bridge between history and rhetorical form, because it taps into what a historically situated author will assume about her audience's knowledge of the period and other raw material and into how she uses those assumptions in the shaping of her material. Because rhetorical readers seek to join the authorial audience and since this book is focused on rhetorical readers, I will often use "we" as a shorthand to refer to the authorial audience.

Second, rhetorical readers *pretend* to join **the narrative audience**, the audience that receives the narrator's text—an audience that exists in the narrator's world, that regards the characters and events as real rather than invented, and that accepts the basic facts of the storyworld regardless of whether they conform to the actual world. The narrative audience does not necessarily accept the narrator's portrayal as accurate, any more than the reader of a nonfictional text necessarily accepts everything represented as true; but the narrative audience does, as its default position, accept the world presented in the novel as a real one.

Finally, rhetorical readers recognize **a fourth audience**, one first identified by Gerald Prince (1980), the narratee. **The narratee** is the intratextual audience specifically addressed by the narrator, and the more the narratee is characterized, the more useful it is to distinguish between its position and that of the narrative audience. In addition, since the narratee is intratextual and the narrative audience a position the actual audience takes on, we can conceive of the narrative audience as an observer position within the storyworld—and one of the things it may observe is the interaction between narrator and narratee. For example, in *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert sometimes addresses himself to the "ladies and gentleman of the jury," and

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the narrative audience observes that address as another one of Humbert's many rhetorical ploys.

Finally, even as flesh-and-blood rhetorical readers seek to join the authorial audience, they maintain their own identities and values. Consequently, they engage in a two-step process of response: (1) reading within the position of the authorial audience and (2) assessing the experience offered by that position. For more on this point see the sections in this chapter on "Off-Kilter Narration" and "Respect, Disrespect, and Over-respect."

7. **Actual audiences of the novel develop interests and responses of three broad kinds, each related to a particular component of the narrative: mimetic, thematic, and synthetic.** Responses to the mimetic component involve readers' interests in the characters as possible people and in the narrative world as like our own, that is, hypothetically or conceptually possible and still compatible with the laws and limitations that govern the extratextual world. These responses to the mimetic component include our evolving judgments (ethical and some interpretive), emotions, desires, hopes, expectations, satisfactions, and disappointments. Responses to the thematic component involve readers' interests in the ideational function of the characters and in the cultural, historical, ideological, philosophical, or ethical issues being addressed by the narrative. Responses to the synthetic component involve an audience's interest in and attention to the characters and to the larger novel as artificial constructs, interests that link up with our esthetic judgments.

The relationship among an audience's relative interests in these different components will vary from novel to novel depending on the nature of its genre and progression. Some novels (especially those invested in creating the illusion that the storyworld is as real as our own, and that, therefore, the characters are acting autonomously within that world) are dominated by mimetic interests; some (including allegories and satires such as Robert Coover's *The Public Burning*) stress the thematic; others (including much postmodern metafiction) put priority on the synthetic. But the interests of many novels, including most of the ones discussed in this book, are more evenly distributed among two, or occasionally, all three of the components. Modernist novels tend to highlight both the mimetic and the thematic, while postmodern novels tend to foreground the synthetic and the thematic—sometimes but not always at the expense of the mimetic. (And remember: a tendency is not a rule.) Furthermore, developments in the course of a novel's progression can generate new relations among those interests. *Lolita* primarily foregrounds its mimetic and thematic interests until Nabokov has Humbert narrate his murder of Quilty. At that point,

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the synthetic becomes foregrounded because Nabokov picks up on various small signals that he has planted earlier to highlight the constructedness of his novel and even the postmodern question of whether it has a stable storyworld.

### Narrative Progression: An Expanded View

A general note: what follows is a detailed account of the general model that I will employ throughout my analyses of the individual novels. I would recommend that you read through it now, but do not worry if you do not take it all in. Instead, get a general impression and then refer back to this section as needed when you read the chapters on the individual novels.

As principle 5 above indicates, I define progression as the synthesis of a textual dynamics governing the movement of a narrative from beginning through middle to end and a readerly dynamics consisting of the authorial audience's trajectory of responses to that movement. The synthesis itself is governed by the implied author's purpose(s) in constructing the progression. Textual dynamics are generated by the introduction, complication, and resolution (often only partial) of two sets of unstable relations, the first set related to plot dynamics and the second set related to narratorial dynamics. The first set consists of those between, among, or within characters, or between characters and their situations, or existing in the storyworld independently of the characters, and I call those in this set *instabilities*. The second set consists of those among implied authors, narrators, and audiences, and I call them *tensions*. The most common kinds of tensions involve disparities of knowledge, of belief, and of values. For example, Morrison's *Beloved* begins with the sentences, "124 was spiteful. Full of baby's venom." The spitefulness of 124 is an instability, something disrupting the equilibrium of the storyworld, whereas the narrator's greater knowledge of 124 (what is it?) and of the paradox of "baby's venom" establishes tensions between implied author and narrator on the one side and authorial, narrative, and actual audiences on the other. Both the instability and the tension spur us to read on.

Readerly dynamics are generated by the audience's developing responses to the textual dynamics. The two opening sentences of *Beloved* generate curiosity as we register what seems to be a very ominous storyworld. Narratives with surprise endings point to the mutual interaction of textual and readerly dynamics: the textual dynamics are influenced by the goal of surprising the authorial audience just as that surprise comes in response to those textual dynamics.

Narrative judgments are the bridge between textual dynamics and readerly dynamics because they are encoded into narrative texts but generate the reader responses that in turn influence authorial choices about the



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textual dynamics. Three types of readerly judgment are central to the rhetorical experience of narrative:

- A. Interpretive judgments about the nature of events and other elements of the narrative.
- B. Ethical judgments about the moral value of characters and actions.
- C. Esthetic judgments about the artistic quality of the narrative and of its parts.

Thus, rhetorical reading seeks to identify the judgments that readers are guided to make, the consequences of those judgments for the ongoing interaction of the textual and readerly dynamics, and how those judgments and their interactions point toward the larger purpose(s) of the narrative. For reasons of space, I will focus in my analyses more on interpretive and ethical judgments than on esthetic ones.

All of these considerations lead to the following model for narrative progression, one that divides progression into the usual three parts—beginning, middle, and end—and then each part into four aspects, with the fourth attempting to capture the ongoing synthesis of textual and readerly dynamics.

<b>Beginning</b>	<b>Middle</b>	<b>Ending</b>
Exposition	Exposition	Exposition/Closure
Launch	Voyage	Arrival
Initiation	Interaction	Farewell
Entrance	Intermediate Configuration	Completion/Coherence

The items in the first two rows are aspects of *plot dynamics* (instabilities and their contexts); those in the third are aspects of *narratorial dynamics*, the ongoing relationships among implied authors, narrators, and audiences. The items in all three rows have consequences for readerly dynamics, consequences rooted in our interpretive, ethical, and esthetic judgments and that influence the larger movements of readerly dynamics identified in the fourth row.

Exposition includes everything that provides information about the narrative or narration, including the occasion of the telling (sometimes the author's occasion as well as the narrator's), the characters (listings of traits, past history, and so on), the setting of the action (time and place), and the events of the narrative. In beginnings, this exposition can include such things as illustrations and epigraphs (as in *Beloved*) as well as prologues (*Invisible Man*) and prefaces (*Lolita*). In endings, this exposition can include such things as epilogues (*Invisible Man* again). In addition, sometimes this ending exposition can include a signal that the narrative is coming to an end (e.g., Nick Carraway's comment

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that he visited Gatsby's dock one last time before he left the East), and in that way it contributes to the audience's sense of closure.

Launch, voyage, and arrival signify respectively the introduction, complication, and resolution (in whole or in part) of the global instabilities or tensions. I adopt the travel metaphor to signal that progression in narrative involves the representation of change over time.<sup>3</sup> Beyond that general point, accepting this model does not commit one to a preference for any particular trajectory of the instabilities: the initial ones may be introduced before or after an opening exposition, the complications in the voyage may arise out of tight causal links between events or from relatively discrete episodes, and the arrival may signal strong or weak resolution.

In *The Crying of Lot 49*, for example, the first sentence, with its report that Oedipa Maas had been named the executrix of Pierce Inverarity's will, constitutes the launch, because everything follows from Oedipa's effort to fulfill her duties. "Everything that follows" is Oedipa's voyage, as Pynchon complicates the initial global instability beyond recognition: Oedipa's attempt to execute the estate leads her into the dizzying investigation of Tristero. Her voyage ends in an unusual arrival because Pynchon does not resolve the instabilities about the Tristero but instead flaunts their unresolved state—and yet, as I shall try to show in Chapter 9, that move is the appropriate completion of the progression. In *Beloved*, on the other hand, the launch is not complete until the end of the first chapter, when Paul D chases the ghost (the source of the baby's venom) from 124 Bluestone Road, and, in so doing, sets each of the major characters, including himself and that ghost, along the paths that they will follow for the rest of the novel. That voyage leads to an arrival with some, but by no means all, of the instabilities resolved.

Initiation, interaction, and farewell signify respectively the initial narratorial dynamics, the continuation, alteration, or other development of them over the course of the novel, and their final stage. In *A Farewell to Arms*, for example, the implied Hemingway initially establishes Frederic Henry as an unreliable interpreter and evaluator of his situation and then traces Frederic's gradual movement toward nearly complete reliability. In *The Age of Innocence*, the interaction, which moves back and forth between Wharton's reliable, sometimes ironic, communication through her authoritative narrator and more indirect communication through a restriction to Newland Archer's fallible perspective, is consistent with the initiation.

The farewell can vary along a broad spectrum. At one end, there is narration that remains tied to the actions of one or more characters but also sends a strong implicit signal about the implied author-narrator-audience relationships, as in Hemingway's final sentence: "I went out and left the hospital and walked back to the hotel in the rain" (p. 581). At the other end is narration that highlights

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the implied author–narrator–narratee–audience relationships as in the Invisible Man’s Epilogue as a whole and in his famous concluding question in particular, “who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” (581).

Entrance, intermediate configuration, and completion/coherence designate the general readerly decisions, at each stage of the narrative, that follow from the interaction of the textual and readerly dynamics. More specifically, entrance identifies both the imaginative movement of the actual reader into the story-world at the moment of launch and the authorial audience’s initial hypothesis (often inchoate) about the overall direction and shape of the narrative as it is experienced at the time of reading, what I call its configuration. Intermediate configuration, then, identifies the ways in which that hypothesis gets confirmed, revised, or otherwise complicated throughout the middle. For instance, our hypotheses about the future direction of *Lolita* change dramatically once Humbert Humbert stops trying to defend himself and begins to acknowledge some of the horrors of his two years of abusing Dolores.

Completion/coherence refers to the authorial audience’s final and retrospective sense of the shape and purposes of the narrative as a whole, which may or may not require a significant reconsideration of earlier hypotheses about configuration. Narratives with surprise endings lead to the most radical reconfiguration, but none of our novels relies heavily on reconfiguration through surprise. Instead, we more commonly have completion by means of the logical extension of, or slight twist to, the voyage’s patterns of complicating and resolving instabilities and tensions. One reason that most readers find the irresolution of *Lot 49* appropriate is that the voyage has taught us to look for completion/coherence not in the working out of the instabilities but rather at a more general thematic level: in this world, instabilities get complicated but they do not get resolved.

Completion/coherence includes the authorial audience’s interpretive, ethical, and esthetic judgments of the whole narrative. In the case of *Lot 49*, rhetorical readers will make the interpretive judgment that the arrival provides a very weak resolution to the global instabilities and tensions but then go on to make the ethical and esthetic judgments that such a weak resolution is appropriate given the progression of the beginning and middle and what they suggest about the overall purposes of the narrative.

As I conduct my analyses of the rhetorical form of my chosen novels, I shall draw on all the elements of this model, but, given limitations of space and patience (yours!), I shall, in different chapters, give more attention to some elements than others. In general, I give the most attention to launch, voyage, and arrival, and to initiation, interaction, and farewell. Furthermore, for purposes of consistency, I will in each chapter give special attention to the novel’s beginning and its ending.

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### **Ethics of the Telling and Ethics of the Told**

Rhetorical reading's interest in the ethical dimension of our reading experience leads to a distinction between the ethics of the telling and the ethics of the told. One way to approach the distinction is through the identification of four different ethical positions relevant to our reading experience:

1. that of the characters within the storyworld; how they behave toward others—and how they judge them—has an ethical dimension.
2. that of the narrator in relation to the telling, the told, and to the audience; narrators who lie are ethically different from narrators who unintentionally misreport.
3. that of the implied author in relation to the telling, the told, and the authorial audience; this position includes the ethics underlying the implied author's handling of the overall progression; the implied author's choices in these aspects of constructing the novel establish a multilayered relationship with the audience, and one of those layers is ethical.
4. that of the flesh-and-blood rhetorical reader in relation to the set of values, beliefs, and locations operating in positions 1–3.

Position 1 designates the ethics of the told; and positions 2 and 3 the ethics of the telling. Position 4 returns us to the point about rhetorical reading being a two-step process, with the second step being the assessment of the experience of reading in the authorial audience. The larger point about these four ethical positions is that they are constantly interacting as we read. Rhetorical criticism unpacks that interaction, often by distinguishing between the ethics of the told and the ethics of the telling.

### **Off-Kilter, Unreliable, and Deficient Narration: A Rhetorical Model**

In connection with my interest in narratorial dynamics and with the prominence of unreliable narration on the horizon of resources during both the modernist and postmodernist periods, I want to sketch my model for analyzing it. The model starts by identifying an overarching category of narration that audiences find that they cannot take at face value, what I call off-kilter narration. It then distinguishes between two kinds of off-kilter narration: unreliable and deficient. Unreliable narration is intentionally off-kilter, and authors use it to communicate to audiences things that the narrator is not aware of; deficient narration, on the other hand, is unintentionally off-kilter, because authors want

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its audiences to take the narration at face value but audiences find that they cannot. When Fitzgerald has Nick say “I am one of the few honest people I have ever known,” he does not want us to take Nick’s statement at face value. On the other hand, when the Invisible Man declares in his Epilogue that his grandfather’s deathbed speech about yessing white men to death must have been about affirming the principle of freedom that the United States was founded on, Ellison wants us to endorse that interpretation, but we may find it difficult to do so because the interpretation does not follow from the previous progression. If we do not endorse the Invisible Man’s conclusion, then we would regard his narration as deficient. Another way to put the distinction is that in unreliable narration only the narrator is off-kilter but in deficient narration both implied author and narrator are, in the view of members of the actual rather than authorial audience, off-kilter.<sup>4</sup>

This model becomes more fine-grained by relating off-kilter narration to the typical functions of narrators. In addition to stipulating certain givens of the storyworld (e.g., that there are characters with these names acting in this setting at this time), narrators perform three main tasks, and these tasks can be located along three distinct axes of communication. (1) Narrators **report** on settings, characters, and events (who did what and where) along *the axis of events and existents (characters and settings)*. (2) Narrators **read or interpret** what they report (this action had this meaning) along *the axis of perception and interpretation*. (3) They **ethically evaluate (or regard)** characters and their actions (e.g., Nick Carraway claiming that he is one of the few honest men he has ever known) along the axis of ethical values. Consequently, narrators can be unreliable by giving reports, interpretations, or evaluations that deviate from those that would be offered by the implied author, and they can be deficient by giving reports, interpretations, or evaluations that the implied author endorses and his actual audience cannot.

This model regards unreliability as a function of the relation between the implied author and the narrator, not as either a function of the relation between the narrator’s perspective and some hypothetical purely objective perspective, or as a function of the relation between the narrator and the actual reader. Selectivity and subjectivity are part of the nature of narrative, so the hypothetical purely objective perspective does not exist. Even narration that is restricted to reporting will emphasize some elements of what it reports rather than others. With pure objectivity out of the question, the issue then is whether the narrator’s selective view aligns with the implied author’s selective view. For example, a narrator may make a racist ethical evaluation (see Jason Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*) and in such a case, all nonracist readers will find that evaluation offensive. But that racist evaluation may or may not be reliable. If the implied author is nonracist (and competent), he will find a way to signal that he does

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not endorse the narrator's racist evaluation. If the implied author is racist, he is likely to endorse the narrator's evaluation—and, therefore, we will judge it as deficient.

Given the typical functions of narrators, we can identify three main subtypes of off-kilter narration and a variation of each kind to give us a total of six. The types emerge more clearly if we initially focus on unreliability. Narrators can **misreport** (by, for example, distorting what happened, getting the order of events wrong, or even outright lying). Narrators can **misread or misinterpret** (naïve narrators demonstrate their naïveté by their inability to understand what is happening right before their eyes). And narrators can **misregard or misevaluate** (judging evil characters to be good and vice versa). The variations arise when a narrator's reporting, reading, or regarding is reliable as far as it goes, but it clearly does not go far enough. Thus, we have three other kinds of unreliability: **underreporting, underreading, and underregarding**.

These subtypes of unreliable narration have their counterparts in deficient narration. An implied author can set a novel in the Washington, DC of 2012, and join the narrator in deficiently reporting that the White House is located in Dupont Circle. Or he can join the narrator in deficiently interpreting some event or character or some set of events and characters (as perhaps happens in the Epilogue of *Invisible Man*), or in deficiently evaluating an event or character (our racist implied author). I will give more attention to unreliable narration than to deficient narration in this book, but I will consider a few salient cases of deficiency.

In addition, not all off-kilter narration has the same consequences for the affective and ethical dimensions of our experience. While much unreliability—for example, Humbert Humbert's efforts to justify his pedophilia—increases the distance between the narrator and authorial audience, other unreliability, such as Huck Finn's judgment that he will go to Hell for not reporting Jim as a runaway slave, closes the distance. Thus, the effects of unreliable narration can vary along a spectrum from **bonding** to **estranging**.

## Respect, Disrespect, and Over-respect

I conclude this account of rhetorical reading with a few points that I regard as not just theoretical but also ethical. The goal of rhetorical reading is neither to establish the brilliance of the implied author and the perfection of the novel, nor to establish the superiority of the critic's politics, ethics, or general world view to those of the implied author. Its goal is to illuminate the potential for productive, multi-layered communicative exchanges between implied authors and actual audiences, and its strategy is to respect the implied author and

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the novel without unduly disrespecting or over-respecting them. In this sense, rhetorical reading's chief ethical value is justice.

Some implied authors are extremely admirable, some despicable, and most somewhere in between. As readers we gravitate toward the admirable ones, but of course even these are likely to exhibit human imperfection. Rather than seeking either to rationalize such imperfection or to regard it as the basis for rejecting its implied author and her work, the rhetorical critic wants to acknowledge the imperfection and then explore it—in the sense of seeking to understand how it might shed further light on what the implied author was trying to accomplish and what some of the obstacles to that accomplishment were. At various points in this book, I will address what I consider to be flaws in these novels (such as deficient narration), but, in no case, do I find that the flaws lead me to disrespect their implied authors and their larger achievements.

I would also like to extend the value of justice to what I ask of my readers. The principles of rhetorical reading and the various concepts that support those principles provide aids to interpretation rather than a machine that guarantees wholly correct interpretations every time anyone cranks it up. In addition, I remain acutely aware that each of my novels is a more complex rhetorical act than I can do justice to here and that rhetorical reading does not eliminate the fallibility of its practitioner. Thus, I advise my readers to treat all my conclusions as hypotheses rather than established facts. Paying more attention to aspects of the novels that I do not discuss may indicate significant limitations of my analyses. And my accounts of those aspects I do take up may be wrong (that is, I may be engaging in deficient interpretation) again and again and again. What I ask from my readers, then, is neither over-respect nor disrespect but simple respect, which, in practical terms, means a willingness to take my reasoning seriously but also a willingness to extend, revise, or otherwise correct it. In this way, we can collectively deepen our own respect for the particular achievements of our ten implied authors and their novels and what they suggest about the achievements of American fiction, 1920–2010.

## Notes

1. With Peter J. Rabinowitz I have written a similar account of six of these principles in *Narrative Theory* (principle two, about material and treatment, is new to this version). I am grateful to Peter for many productive conversations about these principles and about rhetorical reading.
2. This model of the audience has been developed by Peter J. Rabinowitz (see “Truth” and *Before*), though my version of it gives more prominence to the narratee, a concept developed by Gerald Prince, than Rabinowitz does.

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3. In Part Two of *Experiencing Fiction* (see Phelan, 2007), I discuss the relation of progression in narrative to progression in lyric and in portraiture, whose progressions are not governed primarily by change over time, and especially in hybrid forms of lyric narrative and portrait narrative.
4. For more on off-kilter narration see my “Implied Author, Deficient Narration.” (Phelan, 2011).

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### Further Reading

Aristotle, *Poetics*.