

## Judgments, Progression, and the Rhetorical Experience of Narrative

### Introduction

When we first begin reading narratives (or having them read to us), we learn both that they typically have good guys (or gals) and bad guys (or gals) and that the narratives themselves typically signal which characters are which. Consider this passage from Ring Lardner's "Haircut" (1926) in which Lardner's narrator, Whitey the barber, tells his new customer from out of town a little about Jim Kendall and his wife:

"As I say, she'd of divorced Jim, only she seen that she couldn't support herself and the kids and she was always hopin' that some day Jim would cut out his habits and give her more than two or three dollars a week.

They was a time when she would go to whoever he was workin' for and ask them to give her his wages, but after she done this once or twice, he beat her to it by borrowin' most of his pay in advance. He told it all round town, how he had outfoxed his Missus. He certainly was a caution!"

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What stands out here is not only that we judge Kendall much more negatively than Whitey does (we recognize Jim's selfishness and meanness; Whitey regards him as an entertaining trickster), but also that we judge Whitey negatively as well (though not mean and selfish himself, he is so morally imperceptive that he does not recognize Jim's meanness and selfishness). But as we judge this character and this narrator negatively, we are also approving the moral vision of Ring Lardner because we feel he is guiding us to make those judgments. In addition, we are tacitly registering Lardner's skill in communicating these judgments to us while using only Whitey's discourse. We regard Kendall as cruel and therefore dangerous, Whitey as obtuse and perhaps therefore dangerous, and Lardner as a skilled practitioner with whom we'd like to collaborate further.

Extrapolating from this brief example, I offer three broad claims.<sup>1</sup> (1) The judgments we readers of narrative make about characters and tellers (both narrators and authors) are crucial to our experience – and understanding – of narrative form. By form, I mean the particular fashioning of the elements, techniques, and structure of a narrative in the service of a set of purposes. (2) Narrative form, in turn, is experienced through the temporal process of reading and responding to narrative;

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1: For some substantiation and elaboration of these claims, see *Experiencing Fiction*.

consequently, to account for that experience of form we need to focus on narrative progression, that is, the synthesis of both the textual dynamics that govern the movement of narrative from beginning through middle to end, and the readerly dynamics that both follow from and influence those textual dynamics. (3) As key elements of narrative experience, narrative judgments and narrative progressions are responsible for the various components of that experience, especially the significant interrelation of form, ethics, and aesthetics – although judgments and progressions do not totally explain everything we might want to know about ethics and aesthetics.

### Three Kinds of Judgment

These claims in turn open the door to more specific theses about the interrelation between judgments and progressions. I have space here to consider just this one. *Readers make three main types of narrative judgments, each of which has the potential to overlap with or affect the other two: interpretive judgments about the nature of actions or other elements of the narrative, ethical judgments about the moral value of characters and actions, and aesthetic judgments about the artistic quality of the narrative and of its parts.* Corollary 1: a single action may evoke multiple kinds of judgment. Corollary 2: because characters' actions include their judgments, readers often judge characters' judgments. The following short tale provides an opportunity for us to see what this thesis means in practice.

The Crimson Candle, by Ambrose Bierce (1899):

A man lying at the point of death called his wife to his bedside and said:

“I am about to leave you forever; give me, therefore, one last proof of your affection and fidelity, for, according to our holy religion, a married man seeking admittance at the gate of Heaven is required to swear that he has never defiled himself with an unworthy woman. In my desk you will find a crimson candle, which has been blessed by the High Priest and has a peculiar mystical significance. Swear to me that while it is in existence you will not remarry.”

The Woman swore and the Man died. At the funeral the Woman stood at the head of the bier, holding a lighted crimson candle till it was wasted entirely away.

The man's initial request is based on a so-called religious principle which he interprets in his own way, and our judgment of that interpretation has consequences for our ethical judgment of him. He interprets the principle to say that the test of whether he has “defiled himself with an unworthy woman” is not his behavior while alive but rather his wife's behavior after his death. Not only do we judge his interpretation as off-base, we can, in retrospect, legitimately wonder whether his wife made a similar judgment and so felt freer to act as she did. In addition, we can see that the husband's interpretation fits with his ethical character as someone who assumes that his wife's role is to serve him in both life and death.

The husband and wife also make different interpretive judgments about the nature of the commitment entailed by her oath, and these interpretive judgments overlap with ethical ones. In fact, their interpretive judgments are about the ethical obligation the wife incurs with her sworn promise.

The husband assumes that her promise binds her to remain unmarried indefinitely. The wife finds a loophole in the language, one that allows her to fulfill the letter of the promise at the funeral and then be liberated from it. We readers need to make an interpretive judgment about the characters' judgments; we need, that is, to decide about the validity of the wife's interpretation of her oath.

Not surprisingly, since the characters' interpretive judgments overlap with ethical judgments, the audience's judgments are also overlapping. Indeed, it is possible that the force of one judgment will determine the other. If, for example, we say that the wife has found a valid loophole in her promise, we may also be inclined to say that it is an ethically just fulfillment of that promise. And the other way around. Similarly, if we say that the wife's interpretive judgment is not valid, we may also be inclined to say that she is guilty of breaking her promise. And, once again, the other way around. However, since it is also possible to separate the legal and the ethical, we may decide that the wife's interpretive judgment is not legally valid because she knew that her husband would not regard her burning the candle at the funeral as a fulfillment of her promise. But we may simultaneously make a positive ethical judgment of her action because we see it as an appropriate response to the husband's ethically deficient actions of misinterpreting the principle for his selfish ends and of insisting on her promise.

The decisions we make about these ethical questions will have consequences for our aesthetic judgments, by which I mean our assessments of a narrative's quality. Indeed, for us to make a positive aesthetic judgment of the story, we need to make a positive ethical judgment of the wife, since the story gets its punch from the sudden revelation of the wife's response to her husband's selfish act of extracting the promise. If we judge the wife as acting in an ethically deficient manner, we will not take nearly the same pleasure in that revelation, and will regard it as a slighter aesthetic achievement.

In short, focusing on judgments and progressions provides a way into worthwhile questions about the interrelations of form, ethics, and aesthetics—and into our complex experiences with narrative.

## References

- Bierce, Ambrose. *Fantastic Fables*. London: G.P. Putnam Sons. 1899.  
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