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Meaning and Effect in Fiction: An Evolutionary Model of Interpretation Illustrated with a Reading of “Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”

A Usable Model of Human Nature

Over the past forty years or so, the evolutionary human sciences have gradually developed a good working model of human nature. The early sociobiological emphasis on reproductive success was modified by the evolutionary psychologists' insistence on “proximate” or mid-level motives. Evolutionary psychologists, emphasizing “modules” or hard-wired bits of cognitive machinery, left out “general intelligence,” but a broader conception of human cognitive architecture has corrected that mistake. Early sociobiologists tended to limit human social interaction to kinship and the exchange of favors, but biologists and anthropologists have now developed much more complete and adequate accounts of specifically human capacities for cooperative group endeavor. Evolutionists in the humanities have been making increasingly effective arguments that forms of imaginative culture — the arts, religions, ideologies — are integral parts of the human adaptive repertory. Those arguments converge with the now rapidly developing concept of “gene-culture co-evolution” — the idea that humans are genetically disposed to produce culture, and that over evolutionary time culture alters the human genome. Early evolutionary psychology grouped its mid-level or “proximate” motives into open-ended lists. Those lists are now being replaced with “human life history theory”: the idea of a systemic organization of all the components of human nature. Beneath all variation in the details of organization, the life history of every species forms a reproductive cycle. In the case of human beings, successful parental care produces children capable, when grown, of forming adult pair bonds, becoming functional members of a community, and caring for children of their own. Human life history theory thus integrates the sociobiologists' “ultimate” level of casual explanation — reproductive success — with the evolutionary psychologists' mid-level explanations focusing on immediate motives such as mating, parenting, and striving for ~~xxx~~ social status.¹

In common parlance, when people use the phrase “human nature,” they usually have in mind basic human motives: survival, mating, parenting, favoring kin, and acting as members of a social group. In all affiliative social relations — lovers,

friends, families, communities — there is a perpetual tension between egoistic and prosocial impulses. Since people tend to hide or mute expressions of self-interest and magnify prosocial dispositions, hypocrisy and deceit are endemic to social life. Hence the prevalence of satire in literary representations of human behavior. But satire is effective because it can contrast hypocrisy and deceit with honesty and decency. Human nature includes the capacity for love, the desire for companionship, loyalty, and a sense of justice. Human nature is important in fiction because most stories are built out of basic human motives and emotions. Stories are about struggling to survive, seeking romantic love, maintaining family relationships, satisfying ambitions, making friends, forming coalitions, and striving against enemies.

The elements of human nature are the genetically transmitted dispositions that are typical of the human species as a whole. “Human universals” are behavioral dispositions common to all known cultures (Brown, *Human Universals*; Brown, “Human Universals”). Instances include rites and rituals signaling different phases of life; “marriage” as a publicly recognized right of exclusive sexual access; myths and narratives describing the origins of a social group, and the use of spoken language. Universals vary in form from culture to culture. All cultures have language, but not the same language. All recognize transitions from childhood to adulthood, but not at precisely the same time, in precisely the same stages, or with precisely the same rituals. All cultures have marriage, but some cultures are polygynous, some at least nominally monogamous, and a very few, under special conditions, are polyandrous (Symons, *Evolution*). All cultures have stories of origin, but folktales, myths, and histories vary depending on ecology, forms of subsistence, religion, and the influence of tradition.

Robert Scholes once remarked that “we were natural for eons before we were cultural — before we were human, even — but so what? We are cultural now, and culture is the domain of the humanities” (298). That declaration contains a basic conceptual error. We are both natural and cultural, and the two things intertwine. Culture is not what you get when you eliminate human nature; it is what you get when you combine evolved human motives and emotions with peculiarly human capacities for intellect and imagination — for language, the arts, religion, technology, ideology, and science. Culture organizes the elements of human nature into public norms and shared forms of imaginative experience.

Fiction and Human Nature

Fiction does not take us outside the range of human nature into something else — “convention,” or “culture,” or “literary tradition.” Ultimately, it’s all human

nature. Meanings and effects are built out of the elements of human nature that are organized by culture. Individual identity, too, is just some particular selection and organization of motives and emotions available within the total repertory of common human characteristics. In fiction, the imagination articulates those motives and emotions, and the imagination is itself part of human nature. Like the desire for mating or forming friendships, avoiding danger and gaining physical comfort, fulfilling the needs of the imagination is a primary human need.

“Imagination” is a common-language term for a combined set of mental operations that involve mental imagery, rational thinking, narrative structures, and aesthetic responsiveness. Most imaginative experience is imbued with specific emotional qualities such as fear, anxiety, anger, excitement, boredom, desire, pleasure, sorrow, joy. In literary works that create highly structured sequences of mental images, emotional responses are organized in sequences that, like narrative structures, have a beginning, middle, and end. Emotionally charged imaginative sequences give shape and meaning to human life. We create stories about our own lives (McAdams), and every culture creates collective stories such as creation myths and tribal narratives. We use our own personal narratives and those of our cultures to organize our behavior. We adopt social roles — student, teacher, doctor, lawyer, warrior, merchant, priest — and act out those roles, becoming what we have imagined ourselves to be. Imagined social roles can be so powerful that they induce people to suppress basic human needs, like sex, or to sacrifice their own lives for the good of the group. Though capable of suppressing some of the impulses of human nature, imagination never breaks free from human nature. People suppress one impulse only to give more play to another. Priests who willingly frustrate their own sexual needs are also satisfying their need for survival — eternal survival, as they imagine. Soldiers who jump onto grenades are sacrificing their lives in order to save the lives of comrades; they are motivated by comradesly impulses engrained in human nature by the dynamics of conflict between social groups. Imagination is part of human nature, but human nature — motives and passions — is the fuel and substance of imaginative structures.

Literary Darwinists sometimes write as if they suppose that identifying average or typical behavior in literary texts is their main job. (Barash and Barash offer a signal instance.) In performing that job, they evidently feel that they are affirming the importance of “human nature” as a subject and offering supporting evidence that human universals do in fact exist. As an interpretive strategy, that isn’t always wrong, but it is always incomplete. Meaning doesn’t arise out of subject matter alone. It arises out of the way authors look at and respond to a subject, how they

depict it, the stance they take toward it. It arises also from how readers respond to both the subject and the author's stance. But again, that doesn't get us away from "human nature." Taking interpretive perspective into account only gets us away from average or typical forms of human behavior. It lets us take into account differences in cultural norms and differences in individual identity among authors and readers. It also allows us to reject the naïve notion that meaning and effect can be located in subject matter alone.

Henry James once remarked that "the deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer" (64). That's almost right. Take half a dozen writers; give them a plot situation or even a whole plot outline; and chances are that they will produce stories that vary widely in thematic structure, tone, and style. The "quality" of the story — what I'm calling its "meaning" and "effect" — can never truly be reduced to the depicted events. Meaning and effect don't come from events; they come from the interpretation of events: first the author's interpretation, and then the reader's interpretation of the author's interpretation.

Quality of mind, "point of view," perspective, interpretation — that's where literary meaning occurs. You can't just look at the depicted events. All that's true, and yet interpretation does not occur in a vacuum. Interpretation is interpretation about real things that exercise force on our thoughts and feelings. To feel the force of this observation, consider the way Hamlet overstates the case for interpretive power. "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so" (2.3.241–42). With all due respect to Hamlet, no one can think his way out of being physically tortured. If your fingernails are being pulled out with pliers while boiling water is being poured over your groin, no matter how hard you think, you aren't going to think, "this is good." Hamlet can make bitter jests about fratricide and incest, but he cannot make himself think that either is a good thing. Reality matters.

A Finite Fictional Universe

"Meaning" and "effect" in fiction are complicated and various, but the elements that make them up are simple and finite. More than half a century ago, the great literary scholar and theorist Meyer Abrams decisively isolated the finite structure of the literary situation, reducing it to four basic components: authors, readers, the world they share, and texts (*Mirror*). We can easily enough translate these terms into more general biological terms: organisms (authors and readers); their shared environment (the earth); and a communicative signal between them. Organisms and environments form a comprehensive cosmos. Things in the biological world and in fiction belong to either one or the other. There is nothing beyond them. In fiction, organisms are characters, and environments are settings. Plots are just

what organisms do, and what happens to them, during a segment of time. The communications organisms make to other organisms require the medium of sight, sound, smell, or some other bit of the environment. That's it. That's the whole shebang. We need not multiply conceptual entities. Instead, we can start with this simple set of components and break each component down into smaller pieces as need requires. Once we have found the level of analytic resolution necessary for any given interpretive purpose, we can stop.

Fictional works depict some sequence of events, imbue that depiction with the attitudes that distinguish the author's perspective, and invite the reader to share in the author's imagined world. It's in that sharing that meaning and effect occur. We are all individuals, and yet we share feelings and ideas. Literary scholars make a business out of generating interpretive variations on *Hamlet*, among other tales. But that's a going enterprise only because generations of readers have understood and resonated to the chief themes of the story. Human nature consists in common dispositions — motives and emotions — that cause most people to experience similar life events in similar ways. The culture someone lives in organizes the elements of human nature into collective, shared beliefs, attitudes, and values. That's a second level for shared understanding. But then individual authors have distinct personalities and a set of life circumstances that are somewhat different for every individual person. They communicate their individual vision to their readers. That's the third level, and the last.

The author's "quality of mind," to use James' term, colors everything he or she sees. Authors want readers to see with them and to feel with them. They hold out an invitation for readers to share their imagined world. It's easy enough to refuse. Just don't pick up the book; don't go to the play or movie. If you accept the invitation, it's presumably because you are willing and able to enter into that imagined world and share the author's perspective on the depicted events.

Rapport is never perfect, either in life or in literature. We might accept the author's invitation only prospectively, conditionally, and then continue reading out of curiosity or perverse fascination, perhaps twitching with disgust, shuddering with dismay, or muttering vile imprecations. Or we might stand back, cool, detached, and analytical, half sharing what the author wants us to think and feel, but holding our own thoughts in reserve. To give an instance, when I first read George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch*, I was utterly enthralled, enchanted, infatuated. It was the most wonderful thing I had ever read. But romantic infatuations don't last. One eventually sobers up. As romance settles into a long-term relationship, some couples become antagonistic. Divorce looms on the horizon. For luckier couples, affection

and respect take the place of infatuation. That’s what happened to me with Eliot. Over the years, while re-reading and teaching *Middlemarch*, I gradually became skeptical about some of Eliot’s ideas; I was no longer able fully to inhabit some of the images that shape her imagination; and I was no longer willing or able to resonate fully to the emotions she wished to elicit. Even so, I still read *Middlemarch* with admiration and pleasure. I still learn from it, and thus realize, sometimes with relief, that I hadn’t been such a fool after all, in my dazzled younger days.

What Happens at Owl Creek Bridge

A diagram can fix in our minds the finite character of the elements involved in interpreting meaning and effect in fiction (fig. 1).

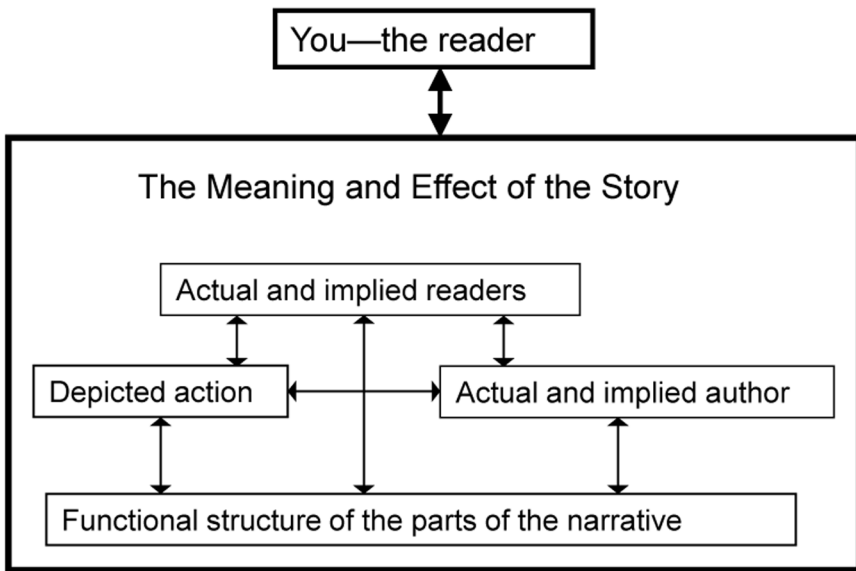


Figure 1. You and the story

The upper and lower boxes in figure one reduce the world to just two things: you, the reader, and the story you are reading. The bigger box on the bottom includes everything involved in producing the meaning the story has for you and the effect it has on you. If someone were to ask you, “What’s that story about?” most likely you would respond by focusing first on “depicted action.” “It’s about an incident in the Civil War. A southern civilian tries to burn down a Federal bridge, gets caught, and is being hanged off the side of the bridge. When they let him drop, the rope breaks; he lands in the water, swims away, gets on dry land, and makes it back

to his own plantation home. The very moment he is about to embrace his wife, his neck snaps and he is left dead, swinging beneath the bridge. It turns out that the escape was just the fantasy he had in the split second before he dies.” This is a plot summary — the main characters, the setting, and the incidents in the story (Ambrose Bierce’s “Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”). This is the right place to start. Without the incidents reported in the summary, there’s no story. Everything else depends on the incidents and has reference to them. But the plot summary isn’t the whole story, so to speak. If you were to go on talking about the story, you would probably say something about Ambrose Bierce. You might say, for instance, that he wrote many stories about the American Civil War, and that perhaps more than any other author writing on that particular war, he captured the cruelty and horror at the heart of war. You might also say that this story leaves a question mark in your own mind. You’re not quite sure what Bierce’s stance toward the incidents of the story actually is. He seems to have some contempt for the main character, Farquhar, who has been tricked into the suicidal mission by a Federal scout in disguise. It’s only when he is on the verge of death that Farquhar gains some insight into the horror of death, realizing how foolish he has been to play at war as if it were a boy’s game, and thus inadvertently to throw away his own life. Yet, the contempt seems mixed with compassion. Bierce evokes for the reader the joy Farquhar feels in escaping and returning to his life. But of course, all that is a trick. The reader too has been duped, not by a Federal scout but by Bierce. Most readers cannot help identifying with Farquhar and feeling a rush of relief and joy as the rope snaps and he evades the Federal troops shooting at him. And then the reader, too, is snapped brutally back to reality, pushed off to a cool, objective distance from which to observe the body. “Peyton Farquhar was dead; his body, with a broken neck, swung gently from side to side beneath the timbers of the Owl Creek Bridge” (18).

You have to wonder, what is the point of this story? Why manipulate the reader in this way? Is it just for shock value? There seems to be far too much at stake for that. You might be puzzled, but still, you feel you’ve learned something, or several things. Not moral lessons, exactly, but rather expansions of understanding about human experience. You’ve seen the yawning gap that opens up for Farquhar twice, once when he steps out of child’s play into the horror of approaching death, and again, when he is snapped out of desperate fantasy and transformed into a lump of insentient matter swaying beneath the bridge. If your own imaginative sense of adventure in war is like Farquhar’s before he goes to the bridge, a new imaginative dimension will have opened up for you, as it has for Farquhar. If, like most of us, you tend to evade unbearably painful prospects by fantasies of escape, you will have

had the sensation, uncomfortable but salutary, of seeing that tendency encompassed within a perspective too tough and grim to tolerate such nonsense.

We started with a plot summary, but as we were thinking about the story, we brought in the author as a decisively important factor. The author, with his own highly particular “quality of mind,” gives us the story from his perspective, and he thus gives us his sense of the story, his feeling about it, the way it shapes itself in his own imagination. We also took in the reader, both the actual readers — you and me — and the implied reader. The implied reader is the reader we can infer Bierce envisions for his story. For this story, the implied reader is susceptible to fantasies of escape and capable of sufficient empathy so that he identifies with Farquhar and is, accordingly, shocked and saddened at his death.

Looking back over the story, a little shamefacedly, after a first reading, most readers will notice that Bierce puts in plenty of clues along the way — things that couldn’t possibly actually occur. After he drops from the bridge, Farquhar’s senses are preternaturally, impossibly heightened. “He looked at the forest on the bank of the stream, saw the individual trees, the leaves and the veining of each leaf — saw the very insects upon them” (14). A sentry on the bridge shoots at him. “The man in the water saw the eye of the man on the bridge gazing into his own through the sights of the rifle. He observed that it was a grey eye” (15). As he nears home, the landscape becomes geometric and unreal; Farquhar makes the final leg of his journey on a perfectly straight road stretching toward the horizon, with no houses or fields on either side of the road. He sees enormous golden stars in unfamiliar constellations “arranged in some order which had a secret and malign significance” (17). Such clues play on the reader’s expectations, troubling the emotional current leading toward a happy conclusion; and they also evoke the hallucinatory delirium of a man being hanged. “His eyes felt congested; he could no longer close them. His tongue was swollen with thirst; he relieved it by thrusting it forward from between his teeth into the cool air” (17). As in a dream, actual physical conditions intermingle with the fantasy images stimulated by them. All this is horrible, of course, ghoulishly clever, but it is not just the sadistic voyeurism of slasher movies. Like most serious fiction, “Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” evokes inner experience, giving us a glimpse into other minds, exploiting our capacities for empathy and also nourishing them.

As we’ve been thinking about the depicted events and the play of perspectives among author, characters, and readers, we have also, necessarily, taken some account of the organization of the narrative, not all — not the flashback structure, beginning with the hanging, shifting to the background episode with the Federal scout, then

cutting back to the moment Farquhar drops from the bridge; and not the brilliant device through which Bierce brings us into Farquhar's rising hysterical panic as he stands on the plank extending from the bridge: he hears a hammer striking an anvil with maddening force and intensity. "The sounds increased in strength and sharpness. They hurt his ear like the thrust of a knife; he feared he would shriek. What he heard was the ticking of his watch" (11). Though we haven't taken account of all the main features in the narrative, we've noticed enough of them to see that they are crucial elements in the meaning and effect of the whole.

When we step back and put all the pieces together into a whole, we are formulating propositions at the highest level of organization in the story: tonal and thematic structure. Tonal structure is the orchestrated sequence of emotions that take place in the story: Farquhar's emotions, Bierce's emotions reflected in his "tone," and our own emotions as we become absorbed in Farquhar's experience and also register Bierce's tone. Thematic structure is the way Bierce's ideas shape his understanding of the incident he depicts — ideas about subjects such as life and death, war, folly, panic, hope, and the tricks of perspective our minds can play on us.

All of this is what actually happens when you read a fictional narrative. You are reading the story, but the story does not consist only of the events represented in the story. It consists also of the author's stance toward the depicted events and toward the reader, the manipulation of the reader's responses, the devices of the narrative, the sequence of evoked emotions, and the ideas and reflections suggested by all these factors. The categories in figure one are not overstrained academic abstractions; they are essential aspects of your own actual experience as you read a story.

The categories in figure one are simple and basic, but their relations are complex and subtle. The double-pointed arrows connecting all the categories indicate that they interact. For instance, you, the reader, are reading and interpreting the story, and the story is having an impact on your mind. The author — simultaneously the actual author about whom we have biographical information, and the implied author, whose attitudes can be inferred from the presentation of the story — is responsible for producing characters, setting, and plot. The reverse arrow-head pointing from the depicted action back to the author signifies that the story, though produced by the author, also acts on the author, influencing his or her own mind even as he or she writes. That kind of reciprocation is easiest to see in the comments authors often make about a story "taking on a life of its own." Characters can sometimes surprise their creators. Authors sometimes weep or laugh over incidents that they have themselves invented.

The double-headed arrows linking the actual and implied readers to the other elements in figure one signify that readers are not just passive recipients of stories. The author must consult with readers, anticipating their responses; readers are affected by depicted events, but they also preemptively constrain what might be depicted. Overt scenes of sexual activity do not appear in most Victorian novels, not because the authors lacked the skill to depict them, but because readers of the time would not have tolerated such scenes. Authors use the functional structure of the parts of the narrative — the abrupt shift back to real time in Bierce’s story, for instance — to manipulate readers, but authors have to intuit the cognitive processes in readers that make such manipulation possible. In this respect, meaning and effect are like an electrical circuit in which the reader is necessary to complete the circuit. Imagine a stand-up comic telling a joke that falls absolutely flat. If a joke falls flat in the audience, it might make a sound, but the sound isn’t funny. But even that is to concede too much to the passivity of the reader. No reader is ever wholly and permanently absorbed within a story. Readers stand outside a story, criticizing it, and linking it with thoughts and feelings about other things, including other stories. In this sense, the reader is like an amoeba absorbing a particle of food. The food becomes part of the amoeba, entering its tissues, but the amoeba transforms the particle in the process, assimilating it to its own metabolism.

You the Reader, and Other Readers

Now that we’ve put the main pieces of meaning and effect into place and have illustrated them with Bierce’s story, we’re ready to look at a more expansive, detailed version of the diagram in figure 1 (see fig. 2):

Enough has already been said, for the time being, about depicted action and about the actual and implied author. A little more needs to be said about the functional structure of the parts and the role played by you, the reader, the person who makes sense of it all.

First, the functional structure of the parts. If you were a typical undergraduate English major, this is most of what you’d be doing: using standard analytic categories for “close reading” of individual literary works. The danger of using such categories is that they can easily degenerate into a tediously explicit analysis of the obvious. And in any case, they offer little or nothing by way of “explanation.” Performing a close reading is roughly parallel to dissecting a frog in a high-school biology class, or in a more advanced version of that exercise, dissecting a cadaver in medical school. It’s a matter of finding and naming parts, like a recruit breaking down a rifle in basic training. Useful, pedagogically, but not very interesting, at least not unless it is made to serve some larger purpose.

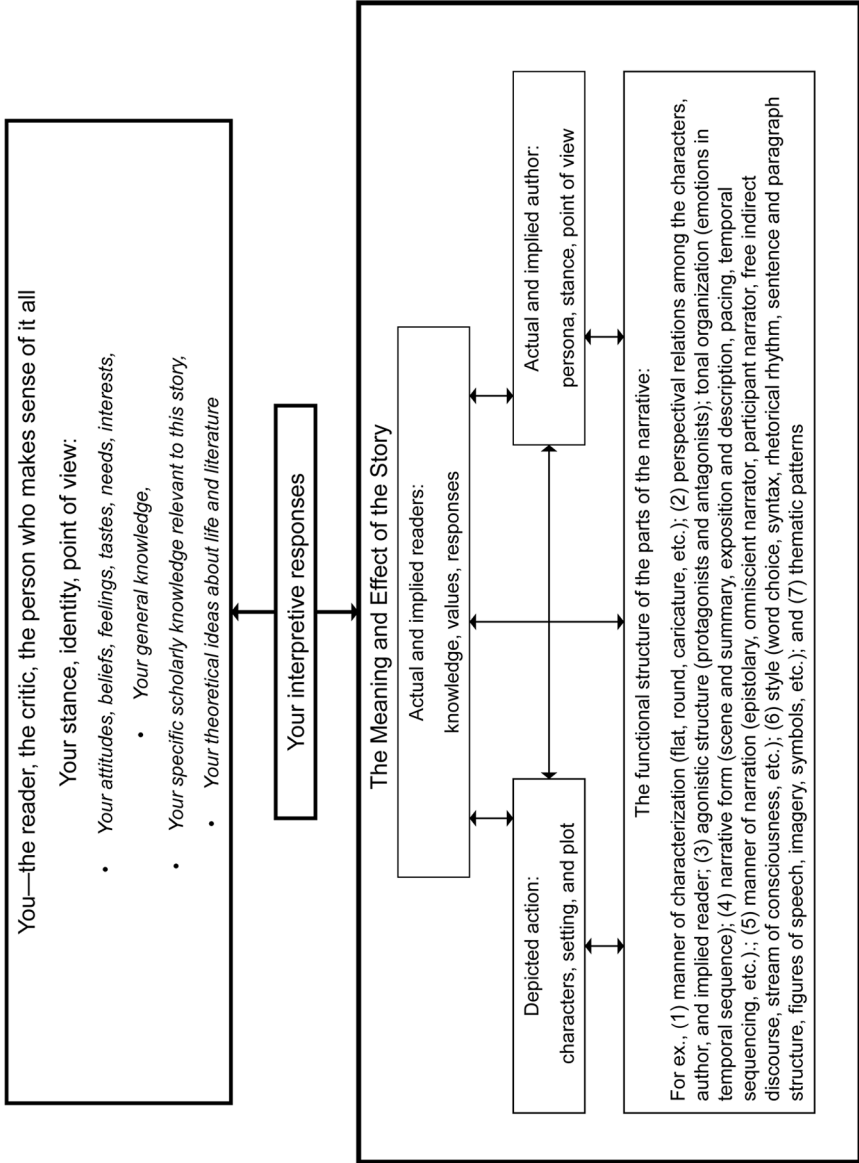


Figure 2. The elements of interpretation

The larger purposes served by close reading can derive from only one source — from you, the person who makes sense of it all. Everything you think and feel enters into your responses to stories — all your ideas, interests, attitudes, and tastes. Whether or not you consciously subscribe to some large-scale set of theoretical ideas about the world — religious, philosophical, ideological, or biological — you do have general views on life; you also have expectations about what stories are and how they work; and those expectations imply general ideas. You, too, then, are a philosopher and a literary theorist, at least in embryo. All your general views on life and fiction enter into your efforts to make sense of a story.

The diagram in figure two contains two sets of actual readers: you (in the upper box), and others (in the lower box). That's because your experience of a novel or movie includes your awareness of how other actual readers or viewers have responded to it. This sort of collective response is systematized in the practice of professional scholars. If you are an academic critic intending to publish a critique of a novel, you would probably go the *MLA Annual Bibliography* and look up the whole history of published responses to that novel. Each of those publications represents some other actual reader. If you succeed in publishing an article on the novel in an academic journal, in most cases you won't be describing only what you individually think about the novel. Instead, you'll be comparing your ideas on the novel to what other readers have said about it. You might build on the work of some scholars, elaborating or qualifying their interpretive propositions, and you will probably contrast your ideas with those of scholars with whom you disagree.

If you're not a professional scholar, you still locate your responses in relation to those of other people. The novel you pick up at an airport bookstore typically contains blurbs that clue you in to the kind of entertainment you can expect. A blurb by a writer you admire has more sale value for you than a blurb by a writer you don't. If a novel or film makes a strong impact on you, over time you probably compare your responses with the responses of other people. Someone might point out a connection you hadn't noticed or describe a feeling you also had but had not yet consciously articulated.

Say you're standing in a noisy cocktail party, making conversation with strangers, and someone mentions William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, Carson McCullers' *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, or Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. "Oh, you've read that too? What did you think?" It's the beginning of a beautiful friendship. That can also go the other way. Speaking intimately with friends or relatives, you might have heard someone explain a fizzled romantic relationship by noting differences in responses to a book or film. "We went to the Jason Robards'

movie *A Thousand Clowns*. She said it was the best movie she had ever seen. That was just too depressing. I never told her why I broke it off. I said it was me, not her.” Or *The Lion in Winter*, with Katherine Hepburn and Peter O’Toole. “Wow, that was a great movie. I’m so glad you suggested we go to it. I had a wonderful time! You’ll call me again, right?”

Meaning and effect don’t stop the moment you read the last page of a novel or stand up in the theater, ready to exit. Meaning and effect accumulate over time. The responses of others are part of that accumulation. Others help you see. And seeing how others respond offers insights into their mental character. If the insights are important enough, you might generalize from them in ways that expand your understanding of life. All of that is part of your experience of a novel or film.

What’s Theory Got to Do with It?

All interpretive accounts necessarily presuppose some larger encompassing framework of general ideas — usually an intermingling of common sense notions of agents and actions, folk psychological beliefs about basic human motives and emotions, and beliefs specific to a culture (about ghosts, for examples, or the nature of the soul). In addition to these common sources, academic critics typically now also invoke some set of psychological, social, and epistemological ideas. An evolutionary perspective on fiction offers an alternative to specific academic theories. In this section, I give a quick historical overview of the way professional literary scholars have brought their perspectives to bear on interpreting stories.

During the middle decades of the twentieth century, most literary scholars were humanists. Like the Victorian critic Matthew Arnold, they presented themselves as curators of “the best which has been thought and said in the world” (235). They celebrated the great works of Western culture and tacitly, in the process, celebrated Western civilization itself. The poststructuralists who took over from the humanists some thirty years ago typically reverse that rationale for literary study. Instead of celebrating Western civilization, they use literary analysis to expose oppression and injustice lurking beneath the positive values of the dominant culture: racism, sexism, colonialist ethnic elitism, and bias against homosexuals.

While invoking a cultural rationale for their scholarly work, humanists also aimed at producing objective scholarly knowledge. Poststructuralists, in contrast, typically dispute the very possibility of objective knowledge. Even so, they aggressively champion theoretical explanation in a way the humanists never did. The humanist period harbored a few Marxists, Freudians, and Jungian archetypalists, but for the most part the humanists eschewed explicit general theories derived from neighboring disciplines in the social sciences — that is, from economics, sociology,

psychology, and anthropology. As the larger explanatory background for their criticism, humanists depended on broad reading in the “liberal arts” — especially in history, philosophy, and literature. One might say that they were non-theoretical, except that they did have a theory to support their appeal to common knowledge. The theory is that human experience is too complex and subtle to be captured by any single theory — Marxism, for instance, or Freudian psychoanalysis. Humanists with a theoretical bent often embrace “pluralism,” meaning that they adopt terms from a variety of theories, for local descriptive and analytic purposes, but deny the ultimate encompassing validity of any single theory. (For an exemplary instance, see Abrams, *Doing Things*).

The poststructuralist revolution, while reversing the ideological rationale of the humanists, also rejected the humanist reliance on educated common sense. In the place of common sense, poststructuralists typically make explicit appeal to a standard blend of speculative theories from European thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The core elements of this blend are Marxism, Freudian psychoanalysis, and deconstructive linguistic philosophy, and it has strong admixtures from feminism and gender theory. The adherents of this theoretical blend usually refer to it not as “poststructuralist theory” but simply as “Theory,” with a capital T. The French cultural historian Michel Foucault most fully exemplifies this blend and has thus for the past twenty-five years or so been the most respected and influential theorist in the literary academy.

It is time to say good-bye to all that. Marxism is obsolete in economics and sociology; Freudian psychoanalysis is obsolete in psychology; deconstructive linguistic philosophy has no place in scientific linguistics. Most educated people are what Christina Hoff Sommers calls “equity feminists,” in contrast to “gender feminists.” Equity feminists believe in equality of opportunity for women. “Gender feminists” typically affirm that biological sex has no bearing on gender identity. In place of Marxism, Freudianism, deconstruction, and gender feminism, evolutionists in the humanities adopt the “biocultural” framework: the idea that biologically grounded, genetically transmitted human dispositions interact with specific environmental and cultural conditions. This too is a theory, in legitimate intellectual competition with other theories (fig. 3).

Like poststructuralism, “Literary Darwinism” aims at being all-encompassing. It has one immense advantage over poststructuralist theory, though: it does not depend on obsolete and scientifically invalidated ideas. If evolutionary ideas offer legitimate, true forms of explanatory reduction, Darwinist explanation can “reduce” stories to simpler principles without being “reductive.” When the adjective “reductive” is

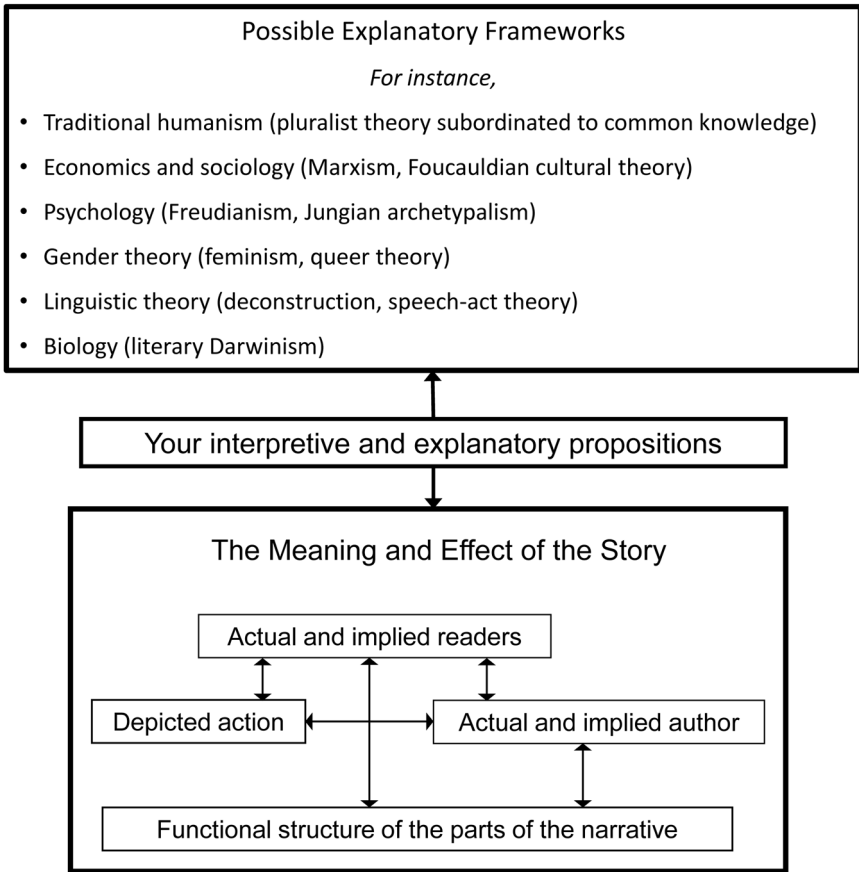


Figure 3. Theory and interpretation

used as a pejorative, it means that a theorist has lopped off parts of a story, or has distorted parts, to make the story fit inside the theory. Biocultural critique should be able to provide causal explanations without that kind of Procrustean maiming. Consequently, it should be able to match the poststructuralists in explanatory scope and also meet the humanists on their own ground, losing nothing from the complexity of literary experience. If the evolutionary model of human nature is a true model, it can synthesize the best insights of both humanists and poststructuralists, correcting their erroneous ideas, moving past their limitations, and encompassing them within a scientifically valid understanding of life and fiction.

To be worthwhile both as criticism and as specifically evolutionary commentary, practical evolutionary criticism must satisfy two distinct criteria. It must take in particularities in the interplay of perspectives of authors, characters, and readers. Those particularities involve all the nuances of tone and style that are the province of traditional close reading. The other criterion is that critics must formulate specifically evolutionary ideas that encompass and explain literary meaning. The reading of "Owl Creek Bridge" in this essay represents an effort to satisfy those two criteria.

Evolutionary critics are much more likely to overlook point of view than to overlook basic motives and emotions. Consequently, in the reading presented here, I have foregrounded the idea of perspectival interplay. The encompassing evolutionary ideas are lodged at the point at which evolutionary psychology converges with the common understanding. The passion for survival, the terror of death and love of life, and yearning for wife and children are common basic motives rooted in our evolved human nature. We need not distort those motives with false reductions to underlying Freudian, Marxist, or Derridean ideas. Lethal conflict between groups, in which members of alien groups become prey, with no claim on empathic understanding, is also an ingrained part of human nature (Liddle, Shackelford, and Weekes-Shackelford; Potts and Hayden). The interplay of perspectives, so finely manipulated in stories like "Owl Creek Bridge," is another universal aspect of human experience: Theory of Mind, empathy, perspective taking. Those social and cognitive capacities are an integral part of our specifically human cognitive repertory (Baron-Cohen). So too is the power of self-delusion and confabulation (Gottschall). In constructing his story, Bierce makes use of all these aspects of our universal human nature. He presupposes that readers will intuitively understand them and respond to them with spontaneous and predictable emotions.

Before reading "Owl Creek Bridge," none of us would ever have had a particular sequence of emotions and recognitions quite like the one Bierce provides for us. He is a highly individualized personality, with a sharply delineated individual perspective. That too is a human universal — the reality of particular individual identities. Successful stories simultaneously draw on our common nature and create new and unique moments of imaginative experience. Good criticism has always evoked both those aspects of literature. Now, though, for the first time in history, we can encompass both aspects within a scientifically based understanding of our universal human nature, our individuality, and the nature of imaginative experience. Practical criticism will still always depend in good measure on the quality of mind of individual critics, but individual critics can only benefit from having more complete and adequate conceptions about their subject.

Note

¹ On proximate motives, see Pinker; Symons, “Use and Misuse.” On general intelligence, see Mithen; Geary; Sterelny. On social adaptations, see Boehm; D. S. Wilson. On imaginative culture, see Boyd; Boyd, Carroll, and Gottschall; Carroll, *Reading Human Nature*; Dutton; Dissanayake; E. O. Wilson, ch. 10. On gene-culture co-evolution, see Carroll, “Human Life History”; Cochran and Harpending; Lumsden and Wilson; Whiten et al. On human life history theory, see Low; Lummaa; Kaplan and Gangestad; Lancaster and Kaplan.

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