

Article

Narration as Characterization in First-Person Realist Fiction: Complicating a Universally Acknowledged Truth

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Abstract

I argue that the universally accepted assumption that in realist fiction a character narrator's narration contributes to their characterization needs to be complicated. Working with a conception of narrative as rhetoric that highlights readerly interest in the author's handling of the mimetic, thematic, and synthetic components of narrative, I suggest that the question about narration as characterization is one about the relation between the mimetic (character as possible person) and synthetic (character as invented construct) components. In addition, understanding the mimetic-synthetic relation requires attention to issues at the macro and micro levels of such narratives. At the macro level, I note the importance of (1) the tacit knowledge, shared by both authors and audiences, of the fictionality of character narration, which means authors write and readers read with an interest in its payoffs; and of (2) the recognition that character narration functions simultaneously along two tracks of communication: that between the character narrator and their narratee, and that between the author and their audience. These macro level matters then provide a frame within which authors and readers understand what happens at the micro level. At that level, I identify seven features of a character's telling that have the potential to be used for characterization—voice, occasion, un/reliability, authority, self-consciousness, narrative control, and aesthetics. I also note that these features have their counterparts in the author's telling. Finally, I propose that characterization via narration results from the interaction between the salient features of the character's telling and their counterparts in the author's telling. I develop these points through the analysis of four diverse case studies: Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess," Nadine Gordimer's "Homage," and Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*.

Keywords: character narration; characterization; narration; fictionality; rhetorical narratology; *Huckleberry Finn*; "My Last Duchess"; "Homage"; *A Farewell to Arms*



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1. Introduction

It is a truth universally acknowledged that in realist fiction a character narrator's narration contributes to their characterization. However little known the views or feelings of character narrators and their authors on this matter, this truth is so firmly fixed in the minds of literary critics and theorists that there is almost no scholarship directly addressing it.¹ In this essay, I will re-examine this truth, not to debunk it but to complicate it. (I note in passing that Jane Austen, despite her ironic first sentence, devotes *Pride and Prejudice* to the story of how her single men of good fortune, Bingley and Darcy, find their wives.) I will complicate the truth by analyzing the HOW of characterization through narration, and I will ground my complication in a conception of narrative as rhetoric that I'll elaborate below.

More specifically, I will focus on both macro and micro levels of the rhetoric of character narration. At the macro level, I attend to the consequences of two related matters: (1) the tacit knowledge, shared by both authors and audiences, of the fictionality of character narration; (2) the recognition that character narration functions simultaneously along two tracks of communication: that between the character narrator and their narratee, and that between the author and their audience. One consequence of point #1 is that the tacit knowledge orients rhetorical readers to read fiction for its payoffs—affective, ethical, thematic, aesthetic, and more. Literary fiction matters both for the affective, ethical, and aesthetic experiences it offers and for its potential to alter its audiences’ understanding of and responses to the actual world.

One consequence of point #2 is that character narration in fiction gives readers only one text, but two tellers (author and narrator), two audiences (narratee and authorial audience), and two sets of purposes (narrator’s and author’s). The challenge for an author of character narration, then, is to make that single text work satisfactorily for both tracks of communication (see [Phelan 2005](#), *Living to Tell about It* for further discussion, including comparisons and contrasts with structuralist and cognitive approaches; below I’ll say more about what I mean by the phrase “work satisfactorily”).

At the micro level, I identify and discuss the seven features of a character’s narration that have the potential to contribute to their characterization: voice, occasion, un/reliability, authority, self-consciousness, aesthetics, and narrative control. My overarching claims are that the macro features have significant consequences for authorial handling of the micro features and that attending to these consequences yields new insights into the relation between narration and characterization in first person realist fiction.

Before I go further into the theoretical discussion, I would like to listen—and invite you to listen—to some remarkable character narrators whose performances I will discuss below. If you are in a place where you can read aloud, I encourage you to do so.

First Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn: ([Twain 2004](#))

The widow rung a bell for supper, and you had to come to time. When you got to the table, you couldn’t go right to eating, but you had to wait for the widow to tuck down her head and grumble a little over the victuals, though there weren’t really anything the matter with them. That is, nothing only everything was cooked by itself. In a barrel of odds and ends it is different; things get mixed up, and the juice kind of swaps around, and things go better. (*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, pp. 32–33)

Next Robert Browning’s the Duke of Ferrara ([Browning 2009](#)):

She thanked men—good but thanked
 Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked
 My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
 With anybody’s gift. Who’d stoop to blame
 This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
 In speech—(which I have not)—to make your will
 Quite clear to such an one, and say, “Just this
 Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
 Or there exceed the mark”—and if she let
 Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
 Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,
 —E’en then would be some stooping, and I choose
 Never to stoop.....

I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together.
(“My Last Duchess,” ll. 31–46)

Then, Nadine Gordimer’s unnamed assassin in “Homage” ([Gordimer 2004](#)):

He took his wife, like any ordinary citizen, to that corner where the entrance goes down to the subway trains and as he stood back to let her pass ahead of him I did it. I did just as they paid me to, as they tested my marksmanship for, right in the back of the skull. As he fell and I turned to run, I did it again, as they paid me to, to make sure.

She made the mistake of dropping on her knees to him before she looked up to see who had done it. (*Loot*, p. 136)

Finally, Ernest Hemingway’s Frederic Henry ([Hemingway 1929](#)):

I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain. We had heard them, on proclamations that were slapped up by billposters over other proclamations, now for a long time, and I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it. There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity. Certain numbers were the same way and certain dates and these with the names of the places were all you could say and have them mean anything. Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or allow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates. (p. 141).

Now that we’ve listened, I jump to evaluation, focusing on the challenge each author faces in making the passage work satisfactorily for both the narrator-narratee track and the author-authorial audience track of narrative communication, while also using the narration as characterization. I submit that Twain, Browning, and Gordimer successfully meet the challenge, and that they do so in diverse ways. Hemingway, by contrast, does not. In the rest of the essay, I will focus on the distinctive quality of each author’s use of narration as characterization and how they complicate the universally acknowledged truth about narration as characterization. I will also seek to justify my evaluations of the four case studies. But first I need to say more about my conception of narrative as rhetoric.

2. Narrative as Rhetoric: Fictionality and the MTS Model

Conceiving of narrative as rhetoric entails regarding narrative as both a way of knowing and a way of doing. In other words, narrative is not just a structure of meaning, as structuralist narratology and approaches indebted to it assume, but also an action, a way of doing something in the world.² Hence the central place of “purpose(s)” in the rhetorical definition of narrative: somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened.

This conception underlies the project of rhetorical poetics, the effort to theorize the elements of narrative (e.g., plot, character, time, space, narration) and the ways in which authors can use them to achieve purposes in relation to particular audiences. There are two additional features of rhetorical poetics especially relevant to this essay: (1) the distinction between rhetorical reading and rhetorical interpretation; and (2) the mimetic, thematic, and synthetic model (MTS) for discussing authorial construction and readerly interest in narrative.

1. Rhetorical reading and rhetorical interpretation. Just as Aristotle was interested in grounding his *Poetics* ([Aristotle 1895](#)) in the experience of viewing tragedy, rhetorical poetics is interested in grounding its proposals in the experience of reading literature in general and literary narrative in particular. Where Aristotle was interested in how the construction of a tragedy led to its arousal of pity and fear and the purgation of those emo-

tions, rhetorical poetics is interested in how the construction of narrative has consequences for the trajectory of readerly emotions, thoughts, judgments and other responses across a narrative's beginning, middle, and end³. Unlike Aristotle, however, rhetorical poetics does not assume that all readers respond in the same way, and, consequently, it does not presume to tell anyone how they **should** read. Instead, rhetorical poetics focuses on the experiences of that subset of actual readers who read with an interest in discerning authorial purposes. I call that subset rhetorical readers, and I refer to their experiences as rhetorical reading. These experiences then become the phenomena that rhetorical interpretation seeks to understand by identifying their sources in the author's particular construction of the text, their shaping it in some ways rather than others.

2. The MTS model. This model provides a general framework for rhetorical interpretation by identifying three components of authorial construction and rhetorical readers' interests. These three components exist simultaneously and thus interact, but, for analytical purposes, we can distinguish among them. The mimetic is the source of readers' emotional responses, the thematic of readers' ideational responses, and the synthetic of readers' aesthetic ones. Here are working definitions:

The mimetic component refers to the narrative's imitations of—or references to—the actual world including such matters as characters functioning as possible or, in nonfiction actual, people and events following the cause-effect logic of the extratextual world. The thematic component refers to the ideational, ethical, and ideological dimensions of the narrative. The synthetic refers to the narrative as a constructed object, something artificial rather than natural, something fashioned rather than found (for more, see [Clark and Phelan 2020](#)).

My interest in how an author uses narration as characterization in first person realist fiction is primarily an interest in the relationship between the mimetic and the synthetic components of authorial construction, but that interest often extends to how that relationship has consequences for the thematic component. With the mimetic, authors rely on the taken-for-granted extratextual phenomenon that how we talk, including how we tell stories, influences others' perceptions of our characters. (As I write that sentence, I am self-conscious about the inferences you are currently making about my character.) With the synthetic, authors give their own particular shaping to that link between how characters tell and who they are. Furthermore, authors work with the relationship between the mimetic and the synthetic as they try to meet the dual demands of character narration, that is, having the character narrator's single text work satisfactorily for both the character narrator's telling to their narratee and their own telling to rhetorical readers even as that narration functions as characterization.

3. Narration as Characterization at the Micro-Level

As I argue in *Living to Tell about It*, authors use narrators to perform three main functions: reporting, interpreting, and evaluating. As narrators carry out those functions, authors can draw on seven features of their telling to contribute to their characterization, the last five of which involve matters of degree: (1) voice, (2) occasion, (3) un/reliability, (4) authority, (5) self-consciousness, (6) narrative control, and (7) aesthetic achievement. Each of these features is worthy of extensive commentary, including the extent to which it might overlap with others, but here I'll restrict myself to brief definitions.

By voice, I mean the synthesis of style, tone, and values (ethical and ideological) that informs an utterance. In some cases, rhythm can also contribute to voice (see [Phelan 2010](#); [Phelan 2014](#); on rhythm, see [Hoffman 2022](#)).

By occasion, I mean when, where, and to whom the narrator tells. The same narration on different occasions can characterize a narrator in remarkably different ways.

By reliability, I mean the extent to which an author endorses a narrator's reporting, interpreting, and evaluating. Unreliability entails an author indicating their divergent views of those narrator functions.

By authority, I mean the self-assurance and confidence with which a character narrator conducts their reporting, interpreting, and evaluating (for more, see [Lanser 1992](#)).

By self-consciousness, I mean the extent to which the narrator displays an awareness of their own telling through reflections on it.

By narrative control, I mean the extent to which the narrator's shaping of their materials—their plotting, their explicit commentary, and so on—whether done self-consciously or not, enables them to achieve their purposes. An unself-conscious narrator can have narrative control, and a self-conscious narrator can lack it.

By aesthetics, I mean the extent to which all these other features of the narration indicate not only that the narration has significant artistic quality but also that the narrator is the agent who produces that quality. For example, in *Lolita*, Vladimir Nabokov gives Humbert Humbert considerable aesthetic power ([Nabokov 1991](#)), but in "Haircut," Ring Lardner gives Whitey the barber only minimal agency for the story's aesthetic quality ([Lardner 1957](#)).

Now when we consider the dual demands of character narration, we can recognize that these aspects of a character narrator's telling have their counterparts in the author's telling. Consequently, narration as characterization depends on the interaction between those features in the character's telling and in the author's telling. Unreliable narration provides a quick and clear illustration: the author's authority, reliability, and control provide the ground upon which readers make judgments about a narrator's unreliability. In the passage from *Huckleberry Finn*, readers rely on Twain's authority and control to infer that Huck is both reliably reporting that the Widow Douglas grumbles and unreliably interpreting that the grumbling is just grumbling, not the Widow's way of saying grace. In this sense, we can say that Twain double-voices the single text of Huck's narration and that this double-voicing contributes to Huck's characterization by highlighting both his naivete about the ways of the "sivilized" world and his literal-mindedness. I'll have more to say about this sentence as I turn to a fuller analysis of the passage.

4. The Interaction of the Micro and Macro Rhetoric in *Huckleberry Finn*

The passage is the novel's third paragraph, and it exemplifies the default relationship of narration as reinforcing or adding to characterization. Twain does not initially give any strong signals about the occasion of the narration, other than that Huck is telling retrospectively. At the end of the narrative, Twain indicates that Huck is telling shortly after the action, in the interval between the events at Phelps Farm and Huck's "lighting out for the [Indian] Territory." That temporal dimension of the occasion fits with Huck's use of his teenage vernacular voice.

At the beginning of the action, Huck the character is resourceful, clever, and naïve. He has minimal book-learning and is more at home in nature than in the Christian household of the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson. Huck lives day-to-day without any clear goals for his future or any fixed ethical principles. Twain seeks to render Huck's narration as consistent with this characterization, and, in so doing, to foreground the mimetic component of Huck's narration and keep the synthetic in the background.

In this passage, the key features that contribute to Huck's characterization are his teenage vernacular voice, his authority, and his mixture of reliability and unreliability. To be sure, Twain's rendering of Huck as unself-conscious⁴, unconcerned with narrative control, or the aesthetic dimension of his telling are consistent with his characterization

as uneducated, but Twain does not actively rely on these features to characterize Huck in this passage.

Turning then to voice, I note that the passage does not capture all the modulations Twain gives it in the novel, but the passage does show one modulation to good effect. Huck's diction and syntax mark him as a vernacular speaker, and his tone is earnest, even as he expresses kindness toward the widow and a preference for the foodways of the less civilized. The modulation comes as Huck moves from reporting to interpreting, including his claim of considerable authority in the last sentence. There he confidently passes judgment on the relative merits of the Widow's servings and what one gets in a barrel of odds and ends. I'll return to this sentence shortly.

Twain's most salient use of narration as characterization comes in the sentence of unreliable interpreting. As noted above, Twain uses the unreliability to underline two of Huck's traits: his naivete about the ways of the "sivilized" and his literal-mindedness. Twain's double-voicing marks the humor of the passage as unintended by the naïve, literal-minded Huck but intended by Twain. Furthermore, although Huck misinterprets the widow's utterance, he reliably reports how she speaks: the widow is, in fact, "grumbll[ing] a little" over the food. In this way, Twain uses Huck's combination of reliable reporting and unreliable interpreting to defamiliarize the act of saying grace. That defamiliarization gives Huck's unreliable interpreting bonding effects for rhetorical readers. In this sentence—and in many others throughout the narrative—Twain not only reinforces Huck's naivete but then uses that trait to make him a sympathetic and unwittingly perceptive observer of his world. Furthermore, Twain makes Huck's literal-mindedness an important mimetic trait of Huck's character because it not only leads to other defamiliarizations but also plays a role in some of his ethical decision-making. Most significantly, it informs his climactic choice to go to hell rather than send the letter to Miss Watson informing her of Jim's whereabouts so that she can find him and re-enslave him. Indeed, the power of the scene stems in part from the pull of Huck's literal-mindedness ("if I tear up the letter, I'll go to hell") against his intuitive ethical judgments, and the eventual triumph of his intuition. A less literal-minded character could come to realize what Twain invites his rhetorical readers to conclude: the Christian morality that Huck has absorbed is the problem, not his decision to tear up the letter.

Now let's look more closely at the final sentence of the passage: "In a barrel of odds and ends it is different; things get mixed up, and the juice kind of swaps around, and things go better." Here Twain shows Huck moving into an interpretive assessment of the quality of the Widow's food. Twain continues to build on the humorous quality of Huck's narration by juxtaposing Huck's naïve and literal-minded misinterpreting with Huck's authoritative claim about the superior taste of food in a barrel. Thus, Huck's naivete exists alongside his teenager's willingness to pass judgments on his world. In this case, Huck's naïve authority leads him to privilege the "unsivilized" way of eating over the Widow's civilized approach.

Now let's look more closely at the syntax and rhythm of that sentence. They point to an implausible mimetic artistry, an aesthetic craft beyond the capacity of a character as minimally educated as Huck. Huck starts with a prepositional phrase ("In a barrel of odds and ends") and a generalized claim ("it is different"). He then uses a semi-colon to link that claim to the support for it. He delivers that support in three clauses ("things get mixed up, and the juice kind of swaps around, and things go better") that include a deft handling of repetition with a difference in the first and third of these clauses. What's more the first and third clauses each have four syllables, and the second has eight, an arrangement that gives the sentence its subtle rhythm. Moving to the macro level, I submit that rhetorical readers attribute the aesthetic quality of the sentence not to Huck but to Twain.

At the same time, the sentence doesn't jump off the page as one that is so mimetically implausible that it breaks the dominant relationship between the mimetic and synthetic components of the narration. The continuities with Huck's previous narration, especially with his vernacular diction (note the repetition of "things") help explain that effect. But again, shifting to the macro level adds to the explanation. Because rhetorical readers have tacit knowledge that Twain is the agent behind Huck's narration, they read in part with an interest in the aesthetic dimension of his handling of that narration. Twain shows his hand as the constructor of Huck's telling but not all that overtly—and rhetorical readers are fine with that.

I round off this discussion by noting that there are other places in the novel where Twain returns to this kind of relationship between his agency and Huck's for the aesthetic dimensions of the narration. The most notable is Huck's description of the sunrise over the Mississippi River in Chapter XIX. That passage does add to Twain's characterization of Huck as someone at home in and appreciative of nature but it does not transform him into a sophisticated wordsmith. Twain is the agent to whom that description applies, as he stays with Huck's diction but manages the syntax, sound, and sense to create a prose poem. Here is an excerpt:

The first thing to see, looking away over the water, was a kind of dull line—that 'twas the woods on the other side—you couldn't make nothing else out; then a pale place in the sky; then more paleness, spreading around; then the river softened up, a way off, and warn't black any more but gray; you could see little dark spots drifting along, ever so far away—trading scows and such things; and long black streaks—rafts. . . . (124).

In sum, while Twain does use Huck's narration for purposes of characterization and typically makes the narration fit with that characterization, he does not make every stroke of the narration a stroke of the characterization. And rhetorical readers are fine with that because they read with their tacit knowledge that Huck is a synthetic construct that Twain uses in his thematic explorations of the institution of slavery, of the relation between Christianity and that institution, and many other matters. This knowledge in turn allows rhetorical readers to recognize that, by sometimes loosening the fit between narration and characterization, Twain adds to the aesthetic quality of his construction, an addition valuable in itself and one that helps make his thematizing more persuasive.

5. Macro and Micro Rhetoric in "My Last Duchess"

In going from Twain to Browning, we move from a case in which the author's aesthetic interests at the synthetic level of construction subtly and briefly override his commitment to mimetic characterization to one in which the author's aesthetics interests are prominently displayed. But even as this display calls attention to the poem's synthetic component, rhetorical readers remain deeply interested in the mimetic characterization of the speaker. Indeed, that characterization is the central purpose of the poem, which I regard as an exemplary portrait narrative (for more, see [Phelan 2007](#)). In such texts, the author's purpose is to reveal the character of the speaker (or, in portrait narratives with noncharacter narration, of the protagonist). The progression of a portrait narrative is not rooted in plot with its pattern of instability-complication-resolution but in the gradual revelation of the character's mimetic component. To put this point another way, Browning's goal is to accomplish in his verbal medium what Fra Pandolf does in his visual one: construct a portrait of a subject that renders them standing before their audience "as if [they] were alive" (l.2).

The most remarkable feature of the poem, evident in the passage I have quoted, takes us right to the macro level of its rhetoric. The Duke speaks in rhymed iambic pentameter couplets, but those couplets don't contribute to the Duke's characterization. I'd like to

dwell on this point: the text presents every word, phrase, clause, and sentence as part of the Duke's speech, yet rhetorical readers do not assign the iambic pentameter and the couplets to him but to Browning.⁵ This phenomenon is the same as the one we've seen in Twain's last sentence, but now on steroids. Again, it points to the power of rhetorical readers' tacit knowledge of fictionality. Because that knowledge includes the awareness of Browning as the constructor of the poem, it makes possible the split in agency between Browning as poet craftsman and Duke as mimetic character delivering a message to the narratee. As a result of this split, Browning is deeply invested in the aesthetics of the poem, while the Duke is indifferent to the aesthetic dimensions of his speech. I'll return to the split agency after I've considered the other microfeatures of the character narration.

Browning uses the Duke's voice, authority, unreliability, and self-consciousness to contribute significantly to his characterization. The Duke's voice is formal, imperious, and self-regarding. He is also authoritative and at least somewhat self-conscious, as his false modesty about not being a skillful speaker indicates. He is an unreliable interpreter and evaluator of the Duchess's kindness and generosity and even more of his own behavior. Indeed, he is a murderer who seems proud of what he has done. Strikingly, however, Browning makes the issues of occasion and narrative control even more salient for the Duke's characterization. Indeed, the interpretive crux of the poem is whether he exercises or loses narrative control. Although it's possible to read the poem as one in which the Duke unwittingly and unwisely reveals that he had the duchess put to death, I follow Ralph Rader and others who contend that he is in full control ([Rader 2011](#)). The Duke's address to his narratee indicates he has deliberately decided to show him the portrait of his last Duchess:

Will't please you sit and look at her? I said
 "Fra Pandolf" by design, for never read
 Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
 The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
 But to myself they turned (since none puts by
 The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
 And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
 How such a glance came there; so, not the first
 Are you to turn and ask thus. (ll. 5–13)

But perhaps he loses control once he starts discussing the portrait? Let's look at the lines just after the Duke reveals what he has done to the duchess.

We'll meet
 The company below then. I repeat,
 The Count your master's known munificence
 Is ample warrant that no just pretense
 Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
 Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
 At starting, is my object. (ll. 47–53)

Browning takes advantage of the dual tracks of character narration here to engage in a remarkable double communication, one involving both narrative control and occasion. The Duke's communication to the narratee involves conventional, albeit suspect, claims about his motives for marrying the next duchess. But Browning's communication to rhetorical readers involves a disclosure that has strong ripple effects on their understanding of the

Duke's character because it also completes their understanding of the occasion of the Duke's telling. It is only at this late point in the poem that Browning finally discloses the identity of the Duke's narratee. Thus, rhetorical readers recognize that the Duke not only had the duchess murdered but also that he has either the audacity—or the foolishness and stupidity—to use the visit from the Count's emissary to disclose the murder. Purposeful audacity is the more compelling hypothesis because it persuasively explains so many details of the Duke's address. In addition to being consistent with the Duke's attributing the interest in the portrait to the emissary, this reading fits with both the Duke's clear desire that the next Duchess not be like the last one and with the pride that keeps him from what he regards as stooping. So he finds a brilliant way to send the message without stooping, that is, by embedding a warning in what is ostensibly a friendly, guided tour of his art collection. In this way, the Duke's narrative control adds significantly to rhetorical readers' understanding of his character.

The Duke, however, doesn't care about the aesthetic dimension of his warning-without-stooping. He just wants the warning to land with the emissary so that he will carry it back to the Count and the next duchess. Browning, on the other hand, cares a great deal about the aesthetics of his poem even as he does not want that attention to interfere with rhetorical readers' investment in the gradual revelation of the Duke's character. Browning's care for aesthetics is evident not only in the iambic pentameter rhymed couplets but also in the consistent enjambment of the lines that mutes their rhyming. That care is also evident in the delayed disclosure of the Duke's narratee and its important ripple effects on rhetorical readers' understanding of the Duke's purposeful audacity. Browning could have easily revealed the identity of the Duke's narratee at the beginning of the poem—"I greet you, sir, with all the respect due to a messenger from the Count." But such initial clarity about the narratee would have worked against his readers' gradual recognition of how just monstrous the Duke is.

At the same time, the delay makes Browning's handling of the mimetic-synthetic relation more difficult. Since the Duke and the emissary both know that the Count is the emissary's master, it is not at all necessary for the Duke to say to the emissary "The Count your master's" but it is absolutely necessary for Browning to convey that information to his readers. The Duke's line is an instance of what I've called redundant telling, necessary disclosure (see the Introduction to *Living to Tell*). And Browning makes the redundancy as inconspicuous as possible by conveying it via a possessive appositive in a sentence that soon moves to his compliment about the Count's generosity (for more, see *Living to Tell About It*).

In addition to what the delayed disclosure and the redundant telling reveal about Browning's concern with the aesthetics of the poem, they also allow me to draw two other conclusions. Like the prosody, they are crucial aspects of *the Duke's narration but he is not the agent responsible for how they add to his characterization because the Duke didn't delay the disclosure, only Browning did*. Second, like the syntactic improbability of the last sentence of the passage from *Huck Finn*, the delayed disclosure and redundant telling do not disrupt rhetorical readers' tracking of the mimetic component of the character narrator.

Nevertheless, Browning's clear concern for the aesthetic dimension of his poem does have an effect on rhetorical reading. Those concerns foreground the double rhetorical action—the Duke's in relation to the narratee and Browning in relation to his target audience—so that rhetorical readers simultaneously focus on the Duke's character (the mimetic component) and on Browning's construction of it (the synthetic). To return to my general point about portrait narrative, we might say that Browning is declaring to his rhetorical readers: look at my verbal portrait of the Duke; there he stands as if alive. Furthermore, that claim is more arresting the more readers register the Duke's pride,

imperiousness, authority, casual cruelty, self-satisfaction, and desire for control over everyone he encounters from the emissary to the Count, and from his last duchess to his next. Strikingly, while Browning uses Duke's narration in his gallery tour to contribute significantly to his authorial communication of those traits, rhetorical interpretation reveals that fully comprehending his character depends on attending to more than just the Duke's own narration.

6. The Effects of Authorial Framing in "Homage"

Gordimer's story, like Browning's poem, is a portrait narrative, but it represents another kind of relationship between narration and characterization. The passage I have chosen is different from the passages from *Huck Finn* and "My Last Duchess" because it is dominated by the character narrator's reporting rather than his interpreting and evaluating, and what he reports goes a long way toward characterizing him.

Nevertheless, in this passage and others in the five-page story, the character narrator's interpreting and evaluating interact with that reporting in ways that contribute to his characterization. Furthermore, that interpretation is sometimes reliable and sometimes unreliable and the evaluation often unreliable. In this case, the HOW of the relationship between narration and characterization depends less on the assassin's distinctive voice, his authority, his self-consciousness, his narrative control, or his aesthetics, and more on the play between reliable reporting and interpreting, on the one hand, and sometimes unreliable interpreting and often unreliable evaluating, on the other. In this respect, the story is a case in which the interaction between the character narrator's telling and the author's framing of that telling via her authority, reliability and control is as significant a contribution to the characterization as the textual features of the narration itself.

In addition, the major issue about the mimetic-synthetic relationship involves readerly access to the character narrator's monologue rather than to textual features of it. Gordimer begins the monologue this way: "Read my lips. Because I don't speak. You're sitting there, and when the train lurches you seem to bend forward to hear. But I don't speak." This narration characterizes the assassin as having an approach/avoidance conflict about publicly sharing his story (evident in his interpreting the fellow passenger's bending toward him when the train lurches as an interest in hearing and in his statement "But I don't speak"). But Gordimer relies on rhetorical readers' tacit knowledge of fictionality so that they don't also pause and ask, "well, how then do we have access to the interior monologue?" Instead, they read on interested in the possible payoffs of the access licensed by the story's fictionality. One payoff begins here in the approach/avoidance conflict: Gordimer humanizes the assassin as she paints her psychologically complex portrait of him.

The passage I have quoted comes from early in the story. Before it, the character narrator rehearses his backstory, explaining how those who hired him to commit the assassination "find men like me" (135). Such men are refugees, and "they find us" in a refugee camp: "they found me and they saved me, they can do anything, they got me in here with papers and a name they gave me" (135). This framing via the character narrator's reliable reporting, interpreting, and evaluating adds an important layer to the ethical dimension of the story: the character narrator did not seek out his occupation but rather was coerced into it. He is not one who relishes his role. This backstory does not absolve him of ethical responsibility for either his action or his response to it, but it does somewhat mitigate rhetorical readers' negative ethical judgments: there are other, more powerful agents behind the assassination who bear even greater responsibility for it and who also have considerable responsibility for the character narrator's current condition. These agents simply use the character narrator for their own ends. They pay him only

half of what they promised, and after the deed, they abandon him. This backstory further contributes to Gordimer's portrait painting.

Here is the passage again.

He took his wife, like any ordinary citizen, to that corner where the entrance goes down to the subway trains and as he stood back to let her pass ahead of him I did it. I did just as they paid me to, as they tested my marksmanship for, right in the back of the skull. As he fell and I turned to run, I did it again, as they paid me to, to make sure.

She made the mistake of dropping on her knees to him before she looked up to see who had done it. (136).

Unlike the passages from *Huck Finn* and "My Last Duchess," this one is dominated by the character narrator's reporting. That reporting is reliable, and so are his repeated interpretive assertions that he acted "just as they paid me to." Conspicuous by their absence are any comments evaluating the ethics of his action. He says nothing about how he feels about having done the deed or about how he judges himself—or even those who coerced him into becoming an assassin—now that he's done it. He also says nothing about how he imagines the statesman's wife must feel.

Gordimer layers the ethical judgments of the character narrator in ways that far exceed any judgments he's aware of. Thus, he's not aware of how his rehearsal of the event characterizes him. She indicates that the character narrator's misevaluating shows that, without a clear moral compass of his own, he has taken on the value system of the "they" who hired him: if he did what they paid him to do, he acted well. She also invites rhetorical readers to consider whether his repetition indicates that at some level he senses that those values are deficient.

Be that as it may, Gordimer uses the character narrator's combined misinterpretation and misevaluation of the wife's immediate response to reveal the inadequacy of those values. Gordimer assumes that her rhetorical readers will take the wife's immediate concern for her husband as not a mistake at all but rather a sign of her love and her fear. By having the assassin label it a mistake, Gordimer paints him as a man incapable of empathy, something that of course is mimetically plausible. In this way, Gordimer unsentimentally underlines the character narrator's ethical deficiencies even as she links them to his backstory.

After this narrative material, Gordimer keeps the character narrator's telling focused on his current situation and again uses unreliability to add more brushstrokes to her portrait. The character narrator comments that "It's said, I know, that you return to the scene of what you did. *I never go near.*" But then he later notes that "They put him in the bit of public garden in front of the church *that's near the subway station*" and that he puts flowers on the grave (emphasis mine). This misreporting further reveals his mental torture. He is not lying, not trying to deceive himself, but his desire not to be caught is so strong that he is not aware of his self-contradiction. That desire leads him to deny that he has gone anywhere near the scene of the crime (since doing so would put him at risk of being caught) even as it leads him to lay flowers on the head of state's grave.

Gordimer's final paragraph, which details his act of "homage," completes the portrait and helps me round out the account of how the relation between his narration and Gordimer's framing of it adds to his characterization.

I've been there. I've seen. I don't keep away. It's a place like any other place, to me. Every time I go there, following the others over the crunch of feet on the path. I see even young people weeping, they put down their flowers and sometimes sheets of paper with what looks like lines of poems written there (I can't read this language well), and I see that the inquiry goes on, it will not end until they find the face, until the back of nobody turns about. And that will never happen. Now I do what the others do. It's the way to be safe,

perfectly safe. Today I bought a cheap bunch of red roses held by an elastic band wound tight between their crushed leaves and wet thorns, and laid it there, before the engraved stone, behind the low railing, where my name is buried with him. (139).

Gordimer's finishing touches include more unreliable interpreting and evaluating: the grave is clearly more than "any other place" to him, and it is not at all clear that continually returning so near to the scene of the crime is "the way to be safe, perfectly safe." Furthermore, the contrast between the character narrator's concerns—with the ongoing inquiry and the question of whether he will be identified—and those of the actual mourners implicitly underlines his deficient ethics. This contrast points to the conspicuous absence of any consideration by the character narrator of the individual humanity of the head of state, on what it means to have murdered him, and on what his loss means for his wife and for the citizens of his country. In this way, Gordimer increases the estranging effects of his misevaluating.

The last sentence adds the final strokes to the portrait. By having the character narrator link the burial of his name with the burial of the head of state, Gordimer implicitly contrasts the two burials. The head of state remains a substantial figure, someone that others willingly pay homage to, while the character narrator has, in killing the head of state, also assassinated his own identity. Thus, in laying the flowers on the grave, he is doing more than taking steps to ensure his safety: he is mourning, albeit with a "cheap bunch of red roses," his lost self.

Let us now consider how the tacit knowledge of the story's fictionality influences rhetorical interpretation of its payoffs. That knowledge helps us to understand the story as a thought experiment addressing the question, what is it like to be an assassin who has been coerced into his behavior? Gordimer answers by using the character narrator's own telling to humanize him. Such a person need not be a sadist or an amoral individual but rather may be caught up in a situation beyond their control and may live in psychic pain after doing what he was paid to do. But to do what he has done and to respond primarily with fear for his safety, however understandable, is also evidence of his ethical deficiency. More generally, Gordimer's use of narration as characterization offers insight into and generates layered affective and ethical responses to the psyche of an assassin that a clinical study of one is unlikely to achieve.

7. The Problem of Occasion in *A Farewell to Arms*

I will be brief here because I want to highlight what seems to me unsuccessful about the passage from *A Farewell to Arms*.⁶ To be clear, I find that this passage is atypical: in the rest of the novel Hemingway typically meets the challenge of having the narration effectively work along both tracks of communication (narrator to narratee; author to target audience). The passage is marked by wholly reliable interpretation and evaluation, and, indeed, it is an instance of what I call mask narration: Hemingway uses Frederic Henry to give voice to his own beliefs about the gap between the rhetoric that promotes war and the grim realities of war itself. The passage aligns the voice, the authority, the control, and the aesthetics of Frederic and Hemingway. Yet the passage is an instance of the synthetic overriding the mimetic in a way that is aesthetically deficient. The deficiency arises not from anything in the passage itself but rather from *the occasion* that produces it. Given Hemingway's characterization of Frederic Henry through both his narration and his actions up to this point in the narrative, this set piece is mimetically implausible. To put the point another way, Hemingway's effort to characterize Frederic through this speech does not fit well with his previous use of Frederic's narration as characterization.

Until this point in the narrative, Hemingway has framed Frederic's narration to reveal that he is a callow young man, unable to grasp that the violence of World War I reflects

the underlying destructiveness of the world, and out of his depth in his relationship with Catherine Barkley who understands those matters. He has joined the ambulance corps of the Italian army because he was in Italy and spoke Italian. He has been blown up “while . . . eating cheese” (61), but does not yet grasp the destructiveness of the war and the world. He has spent the summer in Milan with Catherine while convalescing from his knee surgery, and has taken some slow steps toward her understanding. But he has unthinkingly left her in Milan to return to the ambulance corps, even though he knows that she is pregnant. Thus, when another member of the corps, Gino, says, “We won’t talk about losing. There is enough talk about losing. What has been done this summer cannot have been done in vain” (141), and Frederic responds with the set piece about “*always* being embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain” (emphasis added), the narration runs counter to Hemingway’s previous characterization of Frederic. To put this point another way, Hemingway has not yet established Frederic as a plausible mask through which to express his own beliefs. Consequently, it’s as if Hemingway is casting the Frederic rhetorical readers have come to know aside and speaking in his own voice. In this way, Hemingway does not successfully meet the challenge of having the single text work satisfactorily for both tracks of communication.

8. Conclusions

I do not claim that my four brief case studies cover the range of relations between narration and characterization in first-person realist fiction. Indeed, I would welcome further case studies in which authors made salient other features of character narration than the ones in these case studies. But I submit that my sample of four does indicate that (a) first-person realist fiction does contain a wide range of relations between narration and characterization; and (b) that those relations depend on the interaction of the various features of the character’s narration to their narratee (voice, occasion, un/reliability, authority, self-consciousness, narrative control, and aesthetic achievement) with their counterparts in the author’s telling to their target audience. Furthermore, these findings are themselves rooted in two macro features of character narration in realist fiction: the phenomenon of authors using a single text to convey two tellers, two audiences, and at least two purposes; and authors’ and readers’ tacit knowledge of fictionality that invites them to focus on the payoffs of narration as characterization. Finally, I suggest that this essay productively complicates the universally acknowledged truth that character narrators’ narration contributes to their characterization, and I welcome further complications by other narratologists.

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Notes

- ¹ A search in the MLA Bibliography in April 2025 for “narration as characterization” yielded multiple essays that take the truth for granted as they analyze aspects of narration in relation to larger arguments about the novels they interpret. For example, Gerald Monsman sees the verbal play and irony of Olive Schreiner’s character narrator Waldo in Olive Schreiner’s *Story of an African Farm* indicative of his character and marshals that view in his defense of the quality of Schreiner’s novel (Monsman 1985). Similarly, Yili Tang quotes the fetus narrator in Ian McEwan’s *Nutshell* in order to draw conclusions about his character and then analyzes the rhetoric and ethics of his character narration (Tang 2020). Not surprisingly, a search for “unreliable narration” yields

hundreds of results (758 to be exact), but sampling these essays again shows that they rely on the universally acknowledged truth rather than question it. The one essay that I regard as in the same spirit as mine is by Henrik Skov Nielsen, who advances a fascinating argument that sometimes narrator and character do not overlap at all (Nielsen 2004).

I develop this point about the distinctiveness of rhetorical poetics in *Somebody Telling Somebody Else* (Phelan 2017).

To get a broader view of the concept of imitation underlying Aristotle's definition of tragedy as an "imitation of an action," see also his *Categories* and *On Interpretation* (Aristotle 1938).

Interestingly, Twain does occasionally represent Huck as self-conscious about his telling, notably in the first and last paragraphs and in Chapter XVI: "Anybody that don't believe yet, that it's foolishness to handle a snake skin, after all that that snake-skin done for us, will believe it now if they read on and see what more it done for us" (p. 106).

I am indebted to Ralph Rader for this observation. Moreover, his reading of the poem very much informs the one I offer here.

This discussion expands upon my previous commentary on the passage in *Living to Tell about It* (Phelan 2005, pp. 201–3).

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