

Peter J. Rabinowitz, *Before Reading/ Narrative Conventions\* and the Politics of Interpretation*

Rules of reading to get author's expected meaning: rules of notice, rules of signification, rules of configuration, rules of coherence.

Rules of Notice

These conventions tell us which details are important. Everything is *not* important--readers need to decide what is important. Rules of notice tell us where to concentrate our focus and how to build a scaffold that will serve as a basic structure on which to build an interpretation.

✓ 1) Privileged position: titles, beginnings, endings, subsections, epigraphs, descriptive subtitles. Titles tell readers where to concentrate and provide a core around which we can organize an interpretation. Last sentences cannot serve to focus a reading experience (at least not an initial reading experience), but they often serve to scaffold our retrospective interpretation of the book.

2) Privileged words: threats, warnings, and promises are important because of their role in predicting the shape of a text.

3) Privileged placement: details at climactic moments deserve notice:

- when a character's moral choice serves as a linchpin for the development of the plot,
- when an event changes a major character's relationship to other characters,

4) Rules of Rupture--distractions that should be noticed

- blatantly irrelevant detail (Tom and Gatsby exchanging cars)
- inappropriate actions or words (Mersault's actions at his mother's funeral)

5) Miscellaneous things to notice: repetitions (words, phrases, scenes); metaphors and similes; typography (italics and capital letters).

↳ *Color of Water, James McBride*

\* Convention: Any method, device, or rule that is accepted by explicit or tacit agreement; a rule or approved technique in conduct or art. Rabinowitz focuses on conventions that govern 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and 21<sup>st</sup> century American and Western European narratives.

of

✓ Mice & men

a writer never puts in a warning or threat without acting on it.

3) Rule of Imminent Cataclysm: If a story begins at a specified moment right before a generally known upheaval (the Holocaust), we are probably being asked to read with expectation that the upheaval will influence the course of the novel.

4) Rules of Balance: focus: By knowing the focus of the novel, the reader can determine the boundaries of the novel's universe and thus make some predictions about the course the novel will take. Two obvious things that give focus: the title, the first character named.

5) Rules of Balance: action.

- Reasonable to assume that repetitions will be continued until they are blocked (3 little pigs, "T'll huff....")
- Diverse strands of action will in some way be linked; plot lines will merge.
- Antecedent/consequent patterns in relationships: as a general rule, we expect the strong attractions and dissonances between major characters will have consequences. Be especially alert to relational tensions introduced at the beginning of a narrative. (Pride and Prejudice)
- Other antecedent/consequent patterns: warnings and promises should alert us, but only (mostly) when they're made by major characters.

### Rules of Coherence (Unity)

Rules of configuration lead readers to ask, "How will it work out?" Rules of coherence ask, "Did the way it worked out make sense?"

1) Basic rule of coherence: We assume that a book is coherent and that apparent flaws in its construction are intentional and meaning-bearing. Rules of coherence are invoked whenever a text appears to resist this assumption.

## Rules of Signification

These conventions tell readers how to recast, symbolize, or draw the significance from the rules of notice.

1) Rules of source: Who is speaking? the author or the narrator?

*Not told in and person  
very often*

2) Rules of Snap Moral Judgment: authors often need quick ways to set up reader's expectations about characters—either because the characters are too minor for full development or because the author needs an initial scaffolding that can then be developed (or undercut ironically) as the novel progresses.

✓ • Readers are to judge characters by their exterior, until the text gives us sufficient reason to judge them in some other way. "Physical appearance, in other words, can be assumed to stand metaphorically for inner quality."

• Others snap judgment clues: eyes; sound (Daisy in Great Gatsby); names (Miss Havisham, Mr. Grandgrind); how characters judge other characters; moral failings: one moral failings naturally accompanies another; characters who violate others' physical or emotional space are not to be trusted; negative allusions (referring to someone as a Lady Macbeth); linking ethical qualities to aesthetic taste: characters with "correct" aesthetic views are also morally correct.

## Rules of Configuration

These are predictive rules. They allow us to make guesses about what will happen in the text. When certain elements appear, rules of configuration activate certain expectations. Rules of configuration are just as important when they turn out as when they don't turn out.

1) Rules of Undermining—readers can expect situations of inertia to be upset. A stable situation at the beginning is going to change (Emma, Bleak House). The probability that a state of affairs will change depends, in part, on the reliability of the person claiming it to be permanent.

2) Rule of Chutzpah: when a character makes a bold claim (Bigger Thomas) it's likely he or she will be undermined. This rule does not apply in detective novels, especially with famous detectives.