Exploring a Framework of Unreadability in Narrative Fiction
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Edward Wells
Instructor University of the People
English Faculty
Coconino Community College
Orcid ID: **0000-0001-8982-3510**.

Abstract

This article explores a framework for analysis and discussion of unreadability in narrative fiction. The framework categorizes experiences of unreadability based on qualities of four recognized elements of narrative fiction which commonly generate the experience of unreadability among would-be-readers. These categories include text as object, fictional narration, fictional world, and fictional characters. The framework is applied to narrative fiction examples which reveal potential strengths such as bringing into focus the persistence of unreadability in spite of the application of alternative reading strategies, potential complexities of identifying the generative locus of unreadability within a quality, and some potential limits of such a framework.

Keywords: unreadability, narrative, fiction, framework, critical, approaches, theory, creative, writing

Exploring a Framework of Unreadability in Narrative Fiction

We might think to begin a conversation about a topic by defining the topic. However, some concepts resist definition while their existence seems self-evident. Then let Us consider this an exploration of unreadability within narrative fiction. As a basis for this scope, We can consider thoughts from "The Implied Fictional Narrator" by J. Alexander Bareis: "Fictional narrators are always based on fictional truths, they are the result of a game of make-believe, and hence the only evidence for a fictional narrator is always merely fictional. If it is impossible to imagine that the fictional work is narrated, then the work is not a narrative" (121). While this framework is presented for application to narrative fiction, we will, at times, consider illustrative texts and relevant thought beyond that scope in this article.

* Developed under the mentorship of Gretchen Gano, PhD, Prescott College

Despite considerable critical thought from specific perspectives on unreadability, which often include coping strategies to enable would-be readers to mark the text as read, there seems a lack of a standardized framework for talking about and exploring unreadability, which may remain even when coping strategies are enacted. The hope is that this exploration can occur over a series of digestible pieces. There may be space in another article about defining the concept of unreadability; at this point, though, I hope to simply inject the word into our collective minds and present a structure that may allow for discourse and exploration, similar to the plotting used in archaeological sites, allowing for considerations of unreadability in relation to a variety of fictions in a systematic way that enables conversations across specific critical perspectives.

The approach developed frames unreadability as relative and subjective. I will note here that I do not have the sense that Others writing on unreadability do not consider unreadability subjective. To the contrary, Bekhta, while establishing a binary of unreadability and readability notes that readability "has many connotations as well: from legibility, comprehensibility, clarity, to more subjective judgements" (16) So while We have agreed there seems to be some experience, unreadability, We are not, as a function of the experience's subjectivity, able to make a claim about the degree of unreadability a would-be-reader's exposure to a fiction might generate. However, what We would likely find is that any particular work, such as Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela*, may be described by a particular would-be reader as generating an experience of unreadability. Yet, such a subjective and general description of entire books seems fraught in generally applicable and detail-seeking thought and not the approach We will take here. Instead, We will develop our structure based on a categorization of unreadability based on the particular qualities of fiction which seem to commonly generate the experience of unreadability.
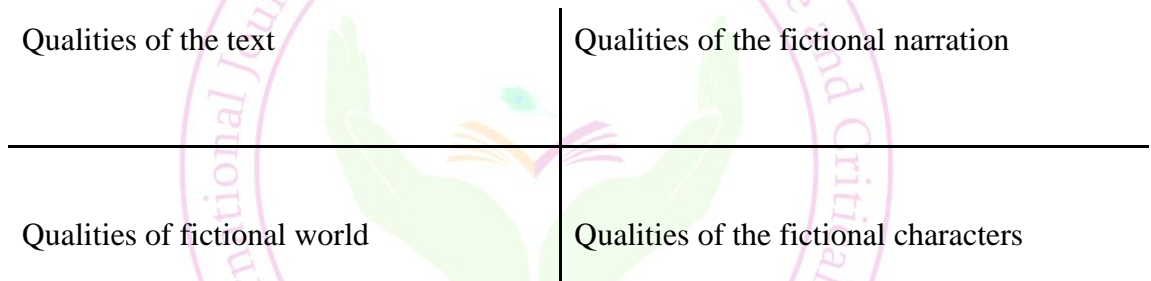
We will base our categorization on four standard elements found in fiction, which I have found common in generating the experience of unreadability. The use of these recognized elements seems apt not only because they are already recognized, but also because their use allows Us to avoid selecting or constructing an ontological framework for the examination of individual fiction texts. Despite this avoidance of scrutinizing ontology for any given fiction, there will be some instances of unreadability that may resist our arriving at certainty in

determining their connection to one or more qualities and other instances, which some individuals may discern as connected to more than one quality.

The categories:

  1) Qualities of the text.

  2) Qualities of the fictional narration.

  3) Qualities of the fictional world.

  4) Qualities of the fictional non-narrator characters within the world.

   We can conceptualize the process of applying this framework as a process of locating the loci of the quality that generates the experience of unreadability within a plot of quadrants.

Qualities of the text	Qualities of the fictional narration
Qualities of fictional world	Qualities of the fictional characters

Though, We will swiftly discover that many instances confound simple location and some seem to defy such entirely.

   This framework then may serve in the analysis and discussion of unreadability in narrative fiction, categorizing experiences of unreadability based on qualities of four recognized elements of narrative fiction which commonly generate the experience of unreadability among would-be-readers upon exposure. These categories include text, fictional narration, fictional world, and fictional characters. The framework will also be applied to a series of narrative fiction examples which reveal potential strengths such as bringing into focus the persistence of unreadability in spite of the application of alternative reading strategies in some instances, potential complexities of identifying the generative locus within a quality, and some potential limits to such a framework. The hope is to provide a tool We can use to shape a space in which We, as would-be-readers, can feel empowered in acknowledging the existence and persistence of

unreadability and become more comfortable with unreadability, begin to scrutinize unreadability across texts without endeavoring to vanquish it, and facilitate conversations about unreadability based on a shared vocabulary.
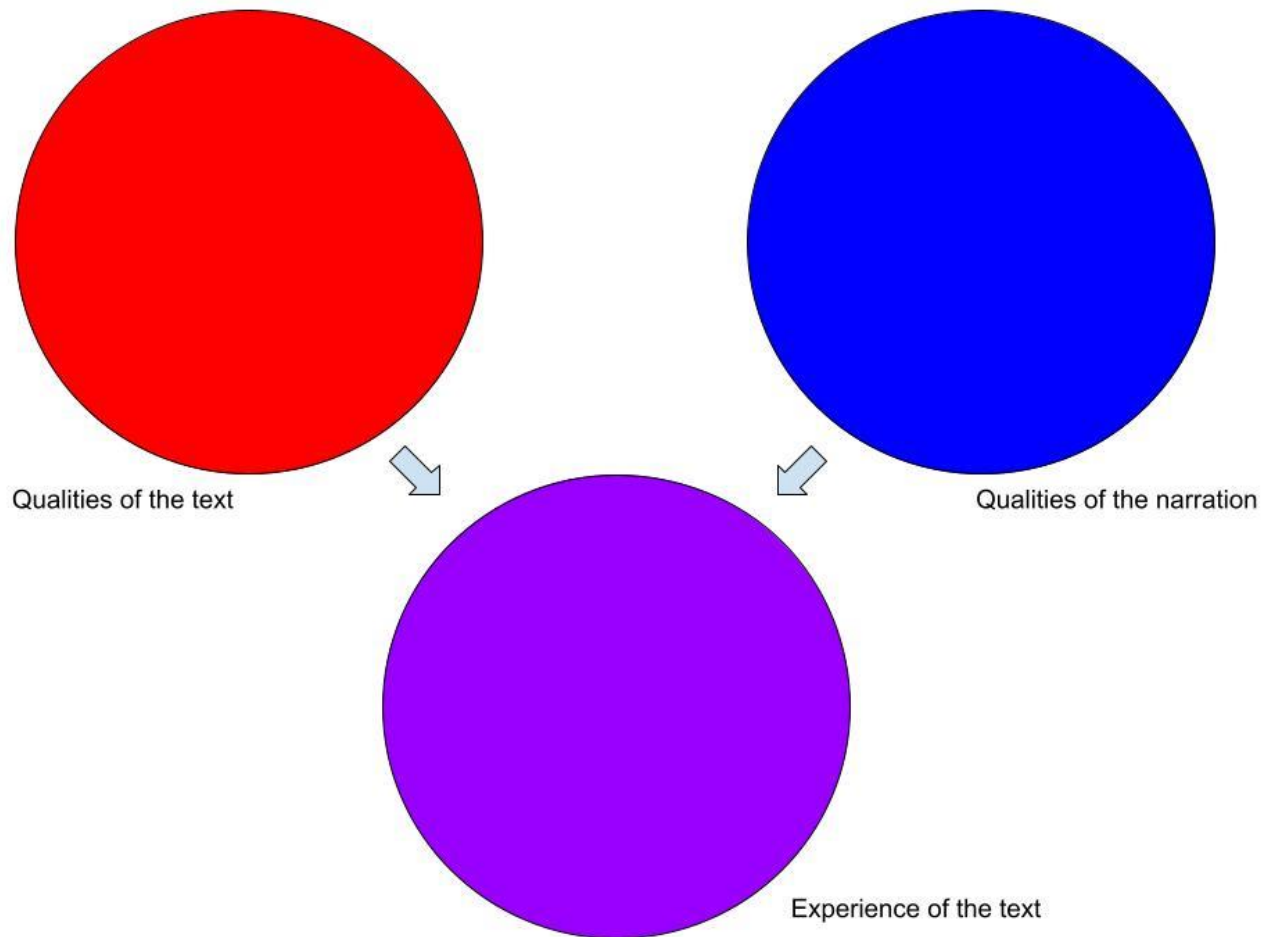
Qualities of the text

Unreadability connected to qualities of the text is often marked by material or visible characteristics of the text and, in some instances, is trivial. Bertrand Gervais writes in "Presbytère, hiéroglyphes et dernier mot: pour une définition de l'illisibilité" about illegibility and its implications for a would-be reader of a text. One frequent marker of illegibility is incompleteness. Obvious instances may be an incompleteness of letters, words, or of the larger text.

Some instances of unreadability marked by illegibility may be resolved via commonly recognized practices. Research into typoglycemia, the ability commonly held among humans to mentally complete incomplete text accurately, supports such a common basis for human abilities to mentally complete incomplete language with limitations. This measure of commonly accepted practice seems an initial starting point for an ethics of address to unreadability.

There are some significant distinctions when considering whether a quality is of the text. Primarily, these distinctions would be between a quality of the text and a quality of the narration. For example, the language of the text would be considered a quality of the narration as it is expressive or representative of the narrator. A less common instance might be illegible handwriting. This too, would be considered a quality of the narration. While intention is a fraught consideration in fiction, it seems to be a significant delineation in determining whether a quality is one of the text or of the narration.

Separating text and narration

Toward distinguishing between the qualities of the text and qualities of the narration, Bareis offers a consideration of agency: "(1) Since narratives present content in a certain way, (2) there has to be an agency behind both the decisions and the presentation; (3) The agency behind the narrative presentation is called narrator, and narrators differ according to the status of the narrative as either fictional or non-fictional; hence (4) fictional narratives have fictional narrators, and non-fictional narratives have non-fictional narrators" (125).

Exploring a Framework
Edward Wells

Qualities of the text

Qualities of the narration

Experience of the text

This visualization illustrates that in some instances the qualities of the narration and the text overlap in such a way that focusing on discerning between them might itself generate an experience of unreadability.

If something beyond the narrator's agency has shaped the quality then We locate it as a quality of the text. If the quality is a product of the fictional narrator's agency, then it would likely be considered a quality of the text. A notable intersection would be the fictional narrator of "Burn This" who "threw the *book* into a dark *garden* and let it, all *that winter*, rot" (Kapil). Is what is the resulting unreadability a quality of the narrator or of the text? Luckily for Us "Burn This" is a poem, so perhaps it is beyond our scope of scrutiny. Unluckily for Us, some poems may be read as narrative fictions, so perhaps We have not escaped the question.

Qualities of the text	Qualities of the fictional narration
X	X
Qualities of fictional world	Qualities of the fictional characters

XX = "Burn This" - We might describe this interrelation as an experience of unreadability generated in response to exposure to a quality of the text which was generated by the narrator rather than simply as a quality of the narration, as the resultant qualities do not present as a direct expression of the narrator, but rather a result of their actions.

Qualities of the narration

To start, We may consider complete and legible texts in the language of a language community other than the would-be readers' own. Cortázar's *Rayuela* may be unreadable in this sense to a would-be reader who is not of the Spanish language community. It is an expression of the narrator, a representation of a particular positionality.

This example of Cortázar's Spanish work is significant too, as it may be considered a trivial unreadability. The narration is written in an established language with an existent community, Hispanophones. Language learning is a practice recognized by members of multiple language communities. Therefore it is generally considered possible, provided adequate resources (capacity, time, materials, and support), that a would-be reader could learn Spanish and subsequently read Cortázar's Spanish text. Therefore the unreadability is revealed as trivial.

There are seemingly less trivial instances of unreadability connected to narration. Let Us turn to *Lucy Church Amiably* by Gertrude Stein, whose work many including Bekhta agree is unreadable (p 15).

> If it is chosen with a worth the pleasure of having denied an observation and at length three or two not about with the place of theirs in waiter. Wait await her. She and mean I mean I mean wait and wait and retreating from very much that has been returned has had the covering removed and at last and as there never had been any glass in the windows before eighteen forty two or thereabouts so she says. (Stein 65)

Exploring a Framework

Edward Wells

Here there seems to be completeness, in the sense that the text is not illegible. And remarkably, for Anglophones, the text seems to be in English. Yet, there is for many an experience of unreadability. Here the marker is the narration's non-standard grammatical quality. Specifically, the grammar differs from convention. Words repeat and appear in unexpected ways in places. Perhaps it is the distinction of these markers from markers such as the illegibility of incompleteness in conjunction with the fact that it seems to be a non-standard form of English rather than another language, but it is not rare for readers to experience this as an unreadability connected to the qualities of narration. For example, Michael D. Snediker describes *Lucy Church Amiably* in terms of a dementia text, "that the persons at stake might well suffer a form of dementia (even as we feel our own impairment in the face of the text's impairments)."

What Snediker is suggesting is an alternative reading strategy to the unreadability generated by qualities of the narration:

> *And with a nod she turned her head toward the falling water. Amiably* [(Stein qtd. in Snediker)].
> Were he to turn his head toward falling water, we might think Narcissus finding his own head falling, turning, as the water turns and falls. In turning her head toward Narcissus's reflection— Narcissus, like many figures in the Metamorphoses, might well be diagnosed, in the intractability of a logic unmoored from the world [sic], an absorption acutely indistinguishable or inseparable from withdrawal, as a person with early onset dementia— Echo may be nodding in agreement, or nodding off, nodding in a knowing way the contours of which, in Stein's austerity, we can only imagine.
> Is the water falling as a disruption of Narcissistic (which is to say readerly, demented) reflection, or is the water (narcissistically, readerly, dementedly) falling for itself, falling in love (again), falling into a trap? We do not know [sic], in the context of Stein's epigraph, the consequences of her turning head—the fungibility of gendered pronouns suggesting the myth of Echo & Narcissus as recalibration of Orpheus & Eurydice: no one can turn one's head in myth without consequence—beyond adverbial qualification.

Despite the craft this presents to Me, as reader of Snediker's strategy, there seems to be unignorable considerations for unreadability. In providing a diagnostic reading We perhaps engage in a Foucaultian power dynamic, in which the medical gaze functions as a power lens. We have reduced the narrator to a diagnosis. And seemingly more problematic is that the qualities which generated the initial unreadability remain, only now covered in a veil labeled "dementia," so that in a sense We might focus on this readable veil rather than the unreadable quality behind it.

Exploring a Framework
Edward Wells

There are other fictions that are distinctly connected to the category of qualities of narration. John Hawkes' *Sweet William: A Memoir of Old Horse* is a realist novel with very little divergence from standard grammar. Yet, there is one significant quality to the novel which generates unreadability for some. The narrator is a horse.

If a horse says "hello," do We have a basis to presume We understand that "hello?" An examination might echo some of the thoughts that emerged toward the end of our exploration of the text category. Is there some commonly accepted practice that justifies our claim to reading? And the granularity of the response might also inform Us of the magnitude of any triviality of any unreadability experienced by a would-be reader.

Lastly, in terms of narration, We might consider what I have started loosely referring to as a shift-toward-the-meta. While, in some critical thought this is a move that might resolve texts to an experience of readability, there are specific situations when such a shift may reveal only another layer which generates the experience of unreadability. For this, We will consider Samuel Beckett's *Lessness*.

We have noted in the example of *Lucy Church Amiably*, some would-be readers, such as Snediker, rely on the expectation of expressiveness or representativeness of the narrator to understand a text. In *Lessness*, there is a tension between the layer that rests at the level of the writer and the layer that rests at the level of the narrator. Beckett generated *Lessness* using chance operations[1], yet there is a legible text at the text of the narrator. So, the "successive gaps or incongruities in the narrative structure," observed by Elizabeth Drew and Mads Haahr defy reading at the level of narration and instead pushes some readers toward the meta layer. Such a shift toward the meta is not an uncommon coping mechanism in response to the experience of unreadability, yet the internal unreadability seems to remain.

Between narration and the world

Now that We are developing a sense of the framework, let Us problematize it. One of the primary challenges of applying this framework is that some of the major qualities I have identified overlap. Narration and world, is an overlap with "real-world" resonance. The difficulty of distinguishing between the mediation of a thing and the thing is a fundamental problem of

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1 While not all chance operations are random, they introduce chance into the generation of a text in less common ways, arguably diminishing the role of author agency or displacing it from its typical place in composition.

Exploring a Framework
Edward Wells

philosophy, any efforts toward objectivity, and particularly precarious in fiction, in part, from my perspective, because of the incomplete dataset innate to fictions. So, attempting to pull-apart whether the experience of unreadability is generated by a quality of the narrator's perspective or manner of describing the world contrasted with a quality of the world can prompt considerable engagement with a fiction, and in the spirit of making space for unreadability, may never be resolved. This identification of possibly inextricable overlaps is another fascinating product of this framework, rather than a limitation, from my perspective.

For some, the following fiction might be such an example. Consider this moment in the text.

> I backed slowly away from her face. I had seen it appear distinct from several angles during coitus, a play of light or her remarkable physiology. The roof of her open mouth brought memories of a friend in Southeast Asia, when her head was turned to the side and looking back at me there had been something thoughtless and undeveloped, and when she had looked long and straight into my eyes both down from above me and up from below, there had been the aesthetic of solid, human strength and grace.
>
> Now, the furl at the middle of her brow was an unknown landscape. I knew it was both the territory I had tried to avoid and something I did not understand.
>
> I heard my voice whisper, "I don't know what to do." As I looked from her hands holding the paper bag which held the cake box, which held the vegan cookies and cream cake up to that face which would not yield to comfort nor smile.
>
> And from where she stood barefoot in the brisk November night on the small four by five foot concrete porch she responded, "Maybe check in in a couple of days."
>
> The words were so distinct and certain that my mind closed on them, like the final words of a book that sets one out onto the course of their life.
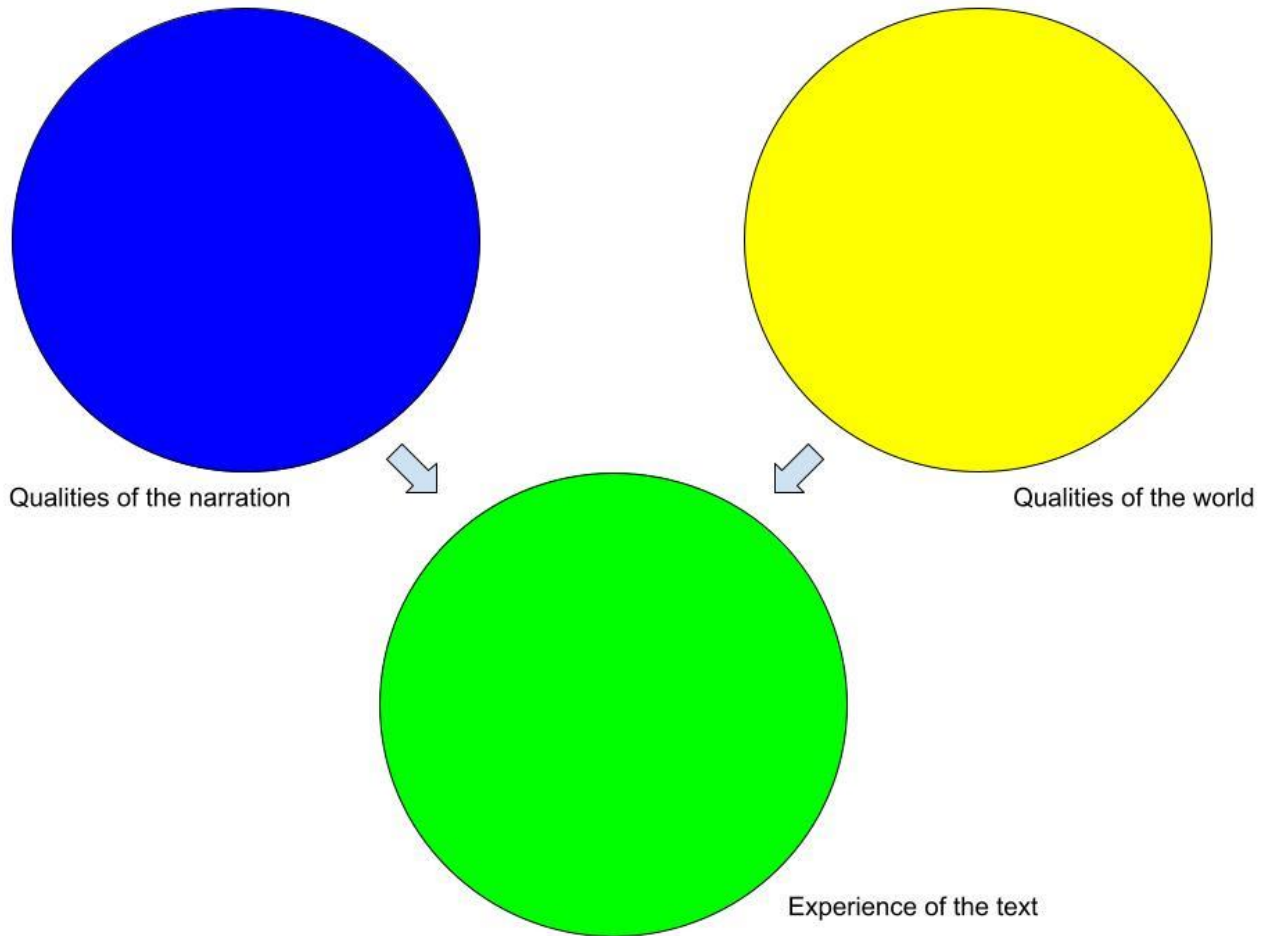>
> I slowly turned and my legs moved me toward the gate of her yard. Perhaps it was just before I reached her golden Honda, which seemed more black than the night sky, a wind or the wail of an impossible train passing between us shrieked around me and into my ears.
>
> "A W A Y!"
>
> Was that her breath on my neck? Why didn't my legs stop nor my body turn?

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1 While not all chance operations are random, they introduce chance into the generation of a text in less common ways, arguably diminishing the role of author agency or displacing it from its typical place in composition.

When pressed, can We determine whether these details, which for some may generate an experience of unreadability, are more accurately connected to qualities of the world or the narration?

Qualities of the narration

Qualities of the world

Experience of the text

This visualization illustrates that the qualities of the narration and the world overlap in such a way that focusing on discerning between them might itself generate an experience of unreadability.

Qualities of the text	Qualities of the fictional narration
	X
X	
Qualities of fictional world	Qualities of the fictional characters

Exploring a Framework
Edward Wells

XX = example text - Depending on our experience of the quality, We might describe this interrelation in one of the following ways: 1. An experience of unreadability generated by exposure to qualities of the fictional world as mediated by the fictional narration.

2. An experience of unreadability generated by exposure to qualities of the fictional narration in its representation/presentation of qualities of the fictional world.

Qualities of the world

Bekhta, Abbott, and Others devote considerable effort and space to developing and describing existent strategies for reading the unreadable. When We face the task of developing a concept of unreadability, We may look at some of those strategies more closely. For now, let Us consider a simple thought as We step into the world.

Jan Alber in "Impossible Storyworlds--and What to Do with Them" develops a short list of strategies would-be-readers use when confronted by the experience of unreadability. In speaking about one of the five strategies, Alber states, "examples of unnaturalness become more readable when we relate them to our literary knowledge and analyze them from a thematic angle ('foregrounding the thematic')" (82). What seems evident here is that some of these strategies that generate the experience of readability, do not resolve the experience of unreadability initially generated by a quality of the fiction. Instead, some of these strategies shift focus to other qualities of the fiction and sometimes perspective. Thus the would-be-reader experiencing readability, but unreadability may remain.

To step further into unreadability generated by exposure to qualities of the world, I will mention a particular distinction I sometimes use in regard to fiction: representation and presentation. While text can arguably only achieve representation, some fiction seems to be more directly presentational than other fiction. If We look back at our accretion of shared knowledge, Stein might have simply described, or represented, particular ways of thinking singular to *Lucy Church Amiably*, but instead, the narration within seems to present those particular ways of thinking.

Now, if We imagine a world, its events so removed, from the narrator or writer and in ways from the reader, that even a simple and direct representation cannot render that world

entirely readable. Jessica Lang considers such realities in *Textual Silence*. Lang leads Me to understand that any sort of reading of the unreadable is like witnessing without comprehension, which is not precisely what many of Us think of when We think of "reading." Lang says, "[t]o attempt to read the unreadable as if it were readable not only reduces the meaning and value of the text but also diminishes the integrity of the reader" (24). For Lang, the Holocaust is such a setting; its events are so traumatic and distant, not simply in time, that texts connected to it have this quality of unreadability. While it may seem beyond the usual purview of fiction, I present that these thoughts, with conceptual caveats more fittingly explored in a piece on a conceptual model of unreadability, seem to hold for fiction, too.

Now, perhaps We are on grounding that will support Us as We turn attention to unreadability generated by qualities of the world. Certainly, some fiction evidences that the world within a fiction may be the creation of an inner state of the narrator as Alber describes. And so, experiences of unreadability generated by such qualities would at some level fit into the category of qualities of the narration. Yet, in some fictions these qualities may simply be of the world, independent of the narration.

There are works of fiction that actively work to shape worlds with physical laws different from those of our world and unpredictable. One style of fiction, irrealism, sets out to confound readings that use strategies like those Alber (2009) and others such as reading for symbolism, psychoanalytic significance, and magical explanation. This pushes the reader toward a position from which They are to witness without comprehension in a complete sense.

> And when everything seemed to be making more sense, the corridor turned into a river. Nevertheless, at the end was a door eclipsed beneath the weight or fragility of the number One.
> […]
> "Maybe," he said, "at the end I'll find myself before the source of all mirrors, the delirium of things that are real." (Estrada)

So, We find that even worlds may defy reading either by authorial or narratorial intention or as a result of the exposure of a particular would-be-reader to a particular text. Alber and Bekhta offer possible strategies to render such readable. One strategy is naturalization. which for Me resonates with Enkvist's thoughts on making sense of a text via building a text world (9) around the fiction. Such a strategy seems to have subjective, inherent boundings. Another

strategy is narrativization, which too involves reading onto the text, in my understanding of Bekhta's description (17) of Alber's thoughts. It is understandable that We might be comfortable with such subjective practices. Many dominant epistemological and ontological perspectives are based in subjects reading onto the world (objects). And perhaps ultimately the choice of whether to recognize and preserve a space for unreadability will come down to a similar value judgement or pragmatic determination inherent in such perspectives.

There is a point considered in qualities of narration which is sometimes present in considerations of qualities of the world and which will carry Us into qualities of the characters. This is the compelling and complicating point of agency. And while there are overlaps of world and agency within narrative fiction, such as *Solaris*, in which a significant component of the world is an agent, We sometimes speak of such instances as the world being a character or place as character, for example. And these phrasings do seem to reveal something significant to the application of this framework. So, let Us consider a final quality in which agency arises distanced from narration, qualities of the characters.

Qualities of the characters

Lastly, We should consider instances when the text seems complete and legible, the narration seems standard, the world is sufficiently familiar, yet there exist characters within the text which resist our attempts to read them. There is an obvious example which Porter Abbott examines in "Unreadable Minds and the Captive Reader," the defiant scrivener, Bartleby from "Bartleby, the Scrivener" by Herman Melville. Abbott gives more space to Bartleby than We will here, yet what Abbott considers is a character who resists understanding. Despite readers (of the fiction) following the narrator through his investigation of Bartleby, the attentive and responsible reader finds themselves at the end of the fiction in a position similar to the one They began in, the position of would-be reader (of Bartleby).

There is another instance that I will mention briefly, *The Seal Wife* by Kathryn Harrison. In a similar way, the unnamed Aleut woman of this novel is an unreadable character. Abbott attends to this character by observing an emptiness in connection with this character, which at times is illustrated within the novel by the woman's literal absence. Further compounding the Aleut woman's unreadability is the fact she refuses to speak, literally producing no words for the would-be reader to reader. While the narrator of "Bartleby, the Scrivener" leads the reader

Exploring a Framework
Edward Wells

through an investigation, the text of *The Seal Wife* presents the unreadable character in contrast to another strikingly similar character, Miriam. Yet as Abbott describes, Miriam's unreadability resolves, finally readable as a pretense. It also seems notable that these two characters provide different presentations of unreadable characters. Bartleby's unreadability may be experienced as a fault which results in his death, while the Aleut woman's unreadability is framed as an attractive quality.

If We look back, *Sweet William: A Memoir of Old Horse* was shown to require certain scrutiny to discern its unreadability. Similarly, acknowledgment of the unreadability of the characters in *The Seal Wife* and "Bartleby, the Scrivener" requires a particular perspective as well. We might phrase this as "understanding that I do not understand" rather than assuming "the understanding that I do not understand is understanding." This distinction might be considered correlated to where privilege is considered to be located in the process of reading. If the would-be reader is in the position of privilege, then the would-be reader's understanding of not understanding might be asserted as understanding, which is to say the would-be reader has read and so has become reader. If the text is in the position of privilege, then the would-be reader must acknowledge their inability to understand and remain in the position of would-be reader. There is a third possibility, which may be seen as in-line with post-structuralism while resisting some post-structural approaches to reading.

Conclusion

There is one further note on this framework. Qualities of narration seem a prominent and common quality connected to unreadability in my examination of the literature. Its common significance however was a hurdle in the development of this framework. Consider that some plays and paintings may be considered non-narrative fictions as Bareis (122) points out. So, there seemed a tension between developing a robust and widely-applicable framework, one that includes address of qualities of narration and one that might include all fiction. Hopefully, despite the specificity I have set out here, which addresses narrative fiction, it has become evident to the reader that an adaptation of this framework, including the consideration of thoughts on unreadability connected to only specific qualities might be applied to any text, including non-fiction.

This then is our basic framework that might be used for the discussion of unreadability in narrative fiction. Where the intricacies of narrative fiction offer sophisticated challenges in some instances, the systematic attention to common qualities of narrative fiction seem to offer considerable benefits for both examination and discussion. Though the concept of unreadability is slippery, seemingly defying definition, this framework offers a foundation to discuss the topic without resorting to strategies intended to empower the would-be-reader to mark the text as read.

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Exploring a Framework
                                      Edward Wells

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