Experiencing Fiction

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The work of Part Two follows from—and is designed to substantiate—the claim that some of the most innovative and effective short stories and dialogue poems of the past century are hybrid forms of narrative, lyric, and/or portraiture that narrative theory has not yet done justice to. A partial list of such stories indicates that a diverse group of writers have experimented with these hybrid forms and that the hybrids themselves are of multiple kinds: Robert Frost’s “Home Burial,” Virginia Woolf’s, “Slater’s Pins Have No Points,” Ernest Hemingway’s “Now I Lay Me,” and “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,” Tillie Olsen’s “I Stand Here Ironing,” J.D. Salinger’s “Uncle Wiggly in Connecticut,” Eudora Welty’s “Powerhouse,” Sandra Cisneros’s “Woman Hollering Creek,” and “Barbie-Q,” Alice Munro’s “Prue,” John Edgar Wideman’s “Doc’s Story,” and Ann Beattie’s “Janus.” Even some brief observations about a selection of these stories will show the diversity of relations between lyric, portraiture, and narrative among the group. Cisneros’s “Woman Hollering Creek,” as I will argue at greater length shortly, introduces a major instability, then switches primarily to a lyric revelation of that unstable situation throughout its middle, and then switches back to a narrative mode in the final sections of the story. Hemingway’s “Now I Lay Me” uses Nick Adams’s metamemory—his recall of nights he spent remembering his past—as a way not to recount any change in Nick but rather to reveal both his desire for and repulsion from intimacy. Wideman’s “Doc’s Story,” to take just one more example, uses an embedded narrative about a character other than the protagonist as a key to the revelation of the protagonist’s desire for his lost love. Munro’s “Prue,” as I’ll discuss in the next chapter, employs two mini-narratives as key means in its unfolding portrait of the protagonist’s character and situation.
In order to develop an adequate understanding of these hybrid forms, we need (1) to develop a more extensive list of such works; and (2) to conduct detailed examinations of the individual stories and poems with an eye both to their particular dynamics and to the general principles underlying them. In *Living to Tell about It*, I have offered a small contribution to this second task through close analyses of “Now I Lay Me” and “Doc’s Story” as part of my larger investigation into the rhetoric and ethics of character narration. In this part of *Experiencing Fiction*, I attempt a more substantial contribution by focusing on five works—in this chapter, “Woman Hollering Creek” and “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place”; in the next “Prue” and “Janus”; and in the final chapter “Home Burial”—and by bringing the hybridity of portrait narratives into the conversation. One consequence of this addition is to prompt some further reflection on the concept of narrativity from the perspective of rhetorical theory. I will offer those reflections at the end of chapter 9, and I start here by reviewing what the Introduction had to say about narrativity, lyricality, and portraiture.

That discussion identifies the fundamental elements of narrativity on the textual side as character, event, and change, and on the readerly side as judgment, affect, and ethics. With lyricality, each of these fundamentals is different in some important way. On the textual side, character is better described as speaker. Event gets displaced by thought, attitude, belief, or emotion; while event may be present, it is subordinated to the expression of one or more of these elements. Change, too, becomes optional; it may occur—as in meditative lyrics where speakers reach decisions—but it is not necessary. On the readerly side, ethical judgment drops out and is replaced by participation, an entering into the speaker’s situation and perspective without judging it. That participation in turn influences the affective side of the experience—we share the speaker’s feelings or take on the speaker’s thoughts, beliefs, or attitudes. Finally, as a result of the replacement of judgment by participation our ethical evaluation is of that participation—and thus it is simultaneously an evaluation that applies to the whole work.

The contrast with narrative will help clarify this point. An implied author of a narrative may guide us to judge a character as ethically deficient in his or her actions, and we may regard that negative ethical judgment as a positive feature of our reading experience. To take just one example, much of the pleasure in reading *Persuasion* involves our sharing the implied Austen’s negative ethical judgments of Sir Walter Elliot and many of her characters. The implied author of a lyric, by contrast, by inviting our participation in the speaker’s perspective, tacitly asks us
to approve of that perspective, to regard it as ethically legitimate. Thus, our ethical evaluation of that participation is an ethical evaluation of the central experience offered by the poem. (Here we see a dramatic example of the way Level Three aesthetic judgments follow from ethical judgments. Although we may make positive first-order aesthetic judgments of, say, the poet’s handling of such formal matters as rhythm, rhyme, and word choice, if we do not judge our participation in the speaker’s perspective as ethically desirable, we will ultimately judge the poem as aesthetically flawed.)

The space between narrativity and lyricality is occupied by portraiture, a rhetorical design inviting the authorial audience to apprehend the revelation of character. If narrativity can be reduced to somebody telling that something happened, and lyricality can be reduced to somebody telling that something is, portraiture can be reduced to somebody telling that someone is. In portraiture, events typically are present, but not because they are essential to the progression of a story of change but because they are an effective means to reveal character. Change is not present, because portraiture is focused on depicting a character at a particular moment or a particular phase of life that we understand as ongoing. On the readerly side, ethical judgment is present, and our affective experience is rooted in our coming to apprehend and judge the character, and so, too, is our second-order aesthetic experience. As with narrative, both positive and negative ethical judgments of the portrayed character can be the basis for satisfactory aesthetic experiences. Indeed, as in Browning’s “My Last Duchess,” the skillful revelation of a brilliant but despicable character can provide an especially satisfying reading experience.

I want to underline the point that these conceptions of narrativity, lyricality, and portraiture are heuristic accounts of pure forms, not recipes for writing or for analyzing individual works. Authors are of course free to combine the fundamental elements of the pure forms in any way they wish, and rhetorical critics set themselves the task of reasoning back from the multilayered effects of those individual works to their causes in those combinations of elements.

I have chosen to analyze “Woman Hollering Creek” and “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” in this chapter in part because these two lyric narratives are themselves quite different from each other and from both “Now I Lay Me” and “Doc’s Story.” In “A Clean Well-Lighted Place,” the lyric dimension only gradually emerges but then becomes central to its effect. In “Woman Hollering Creek,” as I noted above, we start with signals of narrative, but then switch to a lyric progression for most of the story, and
then switch back to a strongly narrative progression in its final sections. Thus, the juxtaposition of the two stories should help illuminate what is distinctive about each even as it indicates something of the variety of progression in lyric narratives. Furthermore, while “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” relies on a fairly specialized ethical system, one closely associated with Hemingway himself and that many flesh-and-blood readers are not likely to bring to the story themselves, “Woman Hollering Creek” relies on a more conventional underlying ethical system that most flesh-and-blood readers will bring to the story. As a result, the relations between ethics and aesthetics in the two stories also provide an opportunity for productive comparisons.

I connect my analysis of “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” to the long-standing debate about the attribution of dialogue in the story and about Scribner’s decision to alter the text after Hemingway’s death. In this way, Hemingway’s story can function as a kind of New York for me: if my attention to judgment and progression can make it here, with a problem that seems largely to be the province of manuscript and biographical study, then such attention can presumably make it anywhere. To put this point another way, if rhetorical poetics can help adjudicate this controversy about the decision to alter Hemingway’s text, then it can claim to be worthy of the attention of readers who are not themselves rhetorical critics. I shall argue that attending to progression and judgment and their relation to the lyric narrative hybridity of the story indicates that Scribner made the right call.

Even as “Woman Hollering Creek” relies on a set of widely accepted ethical positions, it is an aesthetically innovative work, an experiment in voice and temporality melded with an experiment in progression. Cisneros uses many voices and fourteen discrete sections to tell the story of Cleófilas Hernandez’s unhappy marriage to a husband who abuses her and of her escape home to her father and brothers. No one voice displays an explicit awareness of the interrelation among the sections; there are no transitional devices and no explicit cross-references between them. The fourteen narrative sections are like different pieces of a mosaic whose overall shape and design the authorial audience needs to deduce. Furthermore, the most salient features of that design are the introduction of the global instability at the end of section one—Cleófilas’s unhappiness; the frequent shifts in voice and temporality within and between sections; the lyric exploration of the global instability in sections 2 through 11; and the shift to a narrative resolution in sections 12 through 14. I shall argue that Cisneros’s management of these elements of the story makes “Woman
Hollering Creek” not only a distinctive lyric narrative hybrid but also an aesthetic achievement on a par with “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place.”

A New Approach to the Textual Controversy about “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place”

Any analysis of Hemingway’s story needs to address the long and ongoing critical debate over the attribution of the dialogue between his two waiters, and, in particular, needs to take a stand on whether the textual emendation by Scribners’ in 1965 is appropriate. The debate is about whether the older waiter or the younger waiter speaks the line, “You said she cut him down” (289), referring to the old deaf customer, and thus, which waiter has prior knowledge of the customer’s suicide attempt. The attribution matters because it affects our understanding of the attribution of nineteen lines of dialogue (among other things, it affects our answer to the question of which waiter introduces the concept of “nothing” into their first conversation about the customer). Not surprisingly, our decisions about that attribution have larger consequences for our interpretive judgments about the relations between the speakers and about the overall trajectory of the progression. Here is the disputed line in its immediate context, as it appeared in all editions of the story until 1965. The younger waiter is clearly marked as the speaker of the first line:

“A wife would be no good to him [the old deaf customer] now.”
“You can’t tell. He might be better with a wife.”
“His niece looks after him.”
“I know. You said she cut him down.”
“I wouldn’t want to be that old. An old man is a nasty thing.”
(20)

The manuscript of the story in the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston indicates that Hemingway inserted the sentences “I know. You said she cut him down” rather than composed them as part of single, smooth sequence. [item 337, of the Ernest Hemingway Collection, Kennedy Library, p. 4]. Since the younger waiter is clearly marked as the speaker of “A wife would be no good to him now,” the older waiter seems to be the speaker of “I know. You said she cut him down.” Consequently, Hemingway’s insertion indicates that the younger waiter is the one with prior knowledge of the customer’s suicide attempt. That attribution, in turn, means that the
younger waiter introduces the concept of “nothing” into the story, though it is the older waiter who reflects on “nothing” at the end of the story.

The problem with the pre-1965 text is that other evidence points to the older waiter as the one with the prior knowledge, including knowledge that the customer’s niece interrupted the suicide attempt. Hemingway clearly identifies the younger waiter as the one who serves the customer his brandy, and who then returns to his fellow worker and begins this conversation.

“He’s drunk now,” he said.
“He’s drunk every night.”
“What did he want to kill himself for?”
“How should I know.”
“How did he do it?”
“He hung himself with a rope.”
“Who cut him down?”
“His niece.” (289)

Since this conversation continues on to the inserted lines, those lines seem to introduce an inconsistency about which waiter knows what. In addition, the older waiter is more sympathetic to the customer’s desire to linger at the café and this alignment fits with (though of course it doesn’t definitively prove) the reading that he is the one who knows something about the customer’s life. In order to eliminate the inconsistency, Charles Scribner, Jr., with permission from Mary Hemingway, authorized the change in the text. Here is the revision in its immediate context, where once again the first line belongs to the younger waiter.

“A wife would be no good to him now.”
“You can’t tell. He might be better with a wife.”
“His niece looks after him. You said she cut him down.”
“I know. “
“I wouldn’t want to be that old. An old man is a nasty thing.”

(289)

Besides eliminating the inconsistency in which waiter knows about the customer’s suicide attempt, the change retrospectively marks the older waiter as the one to introduce the concept of “nothing” into the story (the concept that becomes the thematic center of the story [“It was all a nothing and a man was nothing too,” as the older waiter puts it later]), and, thus,
establishes strong continuity between his mentioning the concept at the beginning and his meditating upon it at the end.

Scribners’ decision delighted one group of Hemingway critics, including John Hagopian, who recommended the change, even as it distressed another group, who have continued to justify the originally published text. These critics appeal not only to the manuscript evidence but also to Hemingway’s practice in other stories of using line breaks in quoted dialogue to signal pauses rather than shifts of speakers. Thus, for example, one can apply this logic to both “He’s drunk now” and “He’s drunk every night” and read each line as spoken by the younger waiter, with the line break signaling a pause.

Because the debate has focused so closely on the early conversations between the waiters and considered them from multiple angles, and because good arguments have been made for multiple ways of attributing the lines, I do not believe that we can resolve the issue by more close reading of the dialogue, or even of the manuscript in the Kennedy Library. Instead, I suggest that we approach the controversy from the perspective provided by attention to judgments, progression, and the relation between lyricality and narrativity in the story, especially as these issues apply to the second half of the story, about which there is no textual dispute.

Lyric Participation and Narrative Judgment in “A Clean Well-Lighted Place”

Charles May’s case against the 1965 emendation provides an excellent starting point. May very astutely observes that, if the older waiter learns of the suicide attempt from the younger waiter, then is “forced to confront his affinity with the old man’s despair, he arrives at his nada prayer at the end as a result of the story” (328). May’s larger point is that what’s at stake in the attribution debate is a view of the story “as a static or a dynamic action”: if the older waiter already knows of the suicide attempt, nothing substantial happens to him during the waiters’ conversations. Strikingly, May assumes rather than argues for the superiority of the dynamic to the static view, and that assumption authorizes his preference for the pre-1965 version of the story.

1. Among the key contributors to the debate, those on the side of the emendation include Hagopian, Bennett, and Lodge, while those on the side of the pre-1965 text include May (1971), Kerner (1975, 1985, 1992), Reinert, and Ryan Smith (“A Note”), Kerner (“Foundation”) and Kann offer useful discussions of the manuscript evidence. Smith’s 1989 Reader’s Guide provides an excellent summary of the debate to that point.
From my perspective, May’s assumption rests upon another one: short stories should be driven by the principles of narrativity. If, however, we adopt a more expansive view of the short story (and indeed, of the novella and the novel) and acknowledge that highly effective stories can also be—and, in fact, have also been—built on other principles, including those of lyricality and portraiture, and of hybrid combinations of all three modes, then May’s initial assumption no longer seems warranted. Furthermore, and equally important, the evidence of the second half of the story does not support the conclusion that the older waiter’s purported new knowledge of the customer’s suicide attempt brings about the nada prayer. He speaks and thinks of himself not as a man with new insight or a deeper sense of despair but rather as a man who has been in the same condition for a long time: “I am one of those who like to stay late at the café” (290). “What did he fear? It was not fear or dread. It was a nothing that he knew too well” (291). The man who prays the nada prayer is one who has known that nothing for a long time, not one suddenly driven to the prayer in the face of new knowledge. To put this case another way, if Hemingway wants his audience to see the waiter’s prayer as a result of new knowledge about the old customer, Hemingway includes some textual details that work against that interpretive judgment. These same details, however, fit very well with the interpretive judgment that the older waiter does not learn anything new in the present time of the story. That hypothesis in turn raises the question of how Hemingway generates the textual and readerly dynamics of the progression, and that question invites us to consider his use of some elements of lyricality.

Testing May’s assumption and conclusion, in other words, leads us to remain open to the idea that the 1965 emendation was appropriate because it fits with Hemingway’s choice of a hybrid lyric narrative form to create the effects he sought. The story has obvious elements of narrativity: a retrospective narrator reports a clear sequence of events, involving a protagonist whom we observe and judge, as it follows the older waiter from his initial conversations with the younger waiter to their closing the café and then on to the older waiter’s nada prayer, his visit to another bar, and his final ironic remark about insomnia. Nevertheless, Hemingway constructs this sequence of events and audience response so that it lacks strong narrativity, as we can see, even if we bracket the debate about the attribution of dialogue.

The first paragraph introduces a mild instability, but it is never complicated and easily resolved: “while he [the old customer] was a good client

2. May’s own further work on the short story form itself indicates that he has a much more capacious view of the form; see, for example, his 2004 essay.
they knew that if he became too drunk he would leave without paying, so they kept watch on him" (288). The first conversation between the waiters introduces a mild tension about which waiter speaks which lines, but this tension does not give the story much forward movement. The subsequent conversations between the waiters introduce the potential for a progression by instability, since these conversations indicate differences in their attitudes toward the old customer with the younger waiter expressing disrespect and impatience and the older waiter showing sympathy and consideration. Indeed, as David Lodge points out, these differences between the waiters become greater as the conversations continue, but this potential for these differences to be the global instability of a narrative never gets realized. Similarly, the younger waiter’s disrespectful treatment of the old customer provides another potential for a progression by instability between two characters that does not get realized. Rather than launching the narrative movement of the story, these mild instabilities function primarily as a means by which Hemingway reveals, either directly or indirectly, the older waiter’s character and especially his attitudes. Indeed, once we recognize that what would be false starts in a progression by narrative are positive moves in the revelation of the older waiter’s attitudes, we can also recognize that revelation as part of a progression with a different underlying logic from that of a straight narrative.

The unusual logic of the progression is also evident when we consider the location of launch and entrance in this story and their consequences for arrival and completion. The launch and entrance do not occur until its last page (there are 4 pages in the Finca Vigia edition), when the older waiter “continue[s] the conversation with himself” (291). It is not until then that the authorial audience can confidently recognize that the story’s central instability is not one between any of the characters but rather one involving the older waiter’s relation to the nothingness of existence. Furthermore, this location of the launch and entrance and the reference to the “nothing that he knew too well” underlines the disclosure of this instability as one that is ongoing—something that long pre-exists the narrated event. The location, the reference, and the lack of development of the earlier instabilities also mean that we do not develop any strong expectation that the story will resolve the instability. We expect, instead, that the rest of the story will explore that instability. This expectation raises questions about what would constitute effective arrival and completion to this unusual progression, an issue I will return to below.

These points enable us to gloss Hemingway’s own hyperbolic claim in “The Art of the Short Story” about what he left out of the story: “Another
One consequence of Hemingway’s delayed location of the entrance is that its retrospective light helps us better configure what we’ve read before. Looking at the movement from middle to end with the benefit of this retrospective light, we can recognize that Hemingway (a) increasingly emphasizes the older waiter as a superior ethical character to the younger waiter; (b) more fully reveals the older waiter’s attitudes and invites the audience to stop judging him and simply participate in his expression of them; and, finally, (c) again separates the audience from the character for a final ethical judgment. It is the movement from ethical judgment to participation and back to judgment that I am most interested in because it further illuminates the nature of the story’s progression and because it sheds light on the debate about the attribution of dialogue.

Through the conversations between the waiters as they are closing up, Hemingway represents the older waiter consistently challenging the younger waiter’s ways of thinking while also always treating him with respect. In other words, the older waiter invites the younger waiter to rethink the ethical judgments he makes about the relation between his own wishes and those of the customer.

“Why didn’t you let him stay and drink? . . . It is not half-past two.”
“I want to go home to bed.”
“What is an hour?”
“More to me than to him.”
“An hour is the same.” (290)

The younger waiter, as we have previously seen in his interactions with the customer, is self-absorbed, while the older waiter is other-directed. He does not take the conversation down a road that would encourage the young man’s self-absorption (no “I know what you mean” or even “how is your wife?”) but always brings things back to what would be better for
the customer. The older waiter implicitly asks the younger waiter to adjust his attitudes, but he also manages to do it in a way that never causes a breach in his relation with the younger waiter. This conversation, in short, establishes the older waiter as the superior ethical character.

Later in the conversation, Hemingway has the older waiter himself articulate the differences between him and his coworker.

“I am of those who like to stay late at the café. . . . With all those who do not want to go to bed. With all those who need a light for the night.”

“I want to go home and into bed.”

“We are of two different kinds. . . . Each night I am reluctant to close up because there may be some one who needs the café.”

In part, this conversation simply reveals a difference in personal preference, and, as such, there is no negative ethical judgment tied to the younger waiter’s preference. But the older waiter’s mention of his affinity with and interest in staying open for those “who need a light for the night” further aligns him with the old deaf customer. Because he is interested in doing something, however simple, for such people, the conversation also aligns him with the implied Hemingway’s beliefs and values: the night is a time when one can be overwhelmed by the nothingness of existence, but there are temporary refuges available, and the act of providing them can itself be a stay against that nothingness.

Furthermore, this conversation and the attitudes that the older waiter expresses in the story’s last paragraphs reveal that his ethical judgment about the value of keeping the café open late is tightly linked to his aesthetic judgment about the kind of café that is valuable: a clean, well-lighted one. The last paragraphs reveal that these ethical/aesthetic judgments are themselves a consequence of the older waiter’s prior, underlying interpretive and ethical judgment: “it was all a nothing and a man was nothing too” (291). As noted above, this judgment is fully endorsed by Hemingway, but its nihilism will be resisted by many flesh-and-blood readers. Indeed, I am among those who cannot endorse it. I will have more to say about this difference between the implied Hemingway’s ethical values and my own, but first I need to look more closely at the story’s final paragraphs.

Once the older waiter turns off the light and leaves the café, Hemingway shifts the narrative technique from the report of conversation to an extensive use of internal focalization, a shift that greatly facilitates the audience’s gradual participation in the older waiter’s perspective. Heming-
way carefully guides the audience into that perspective by the way he handles voice and focalization; his method is to move us gradually to a point of full participation in the nada prayer. “What did he fear? It was not fear or dread. It was a nothing that he knew too well. It was all a nothing and a man was nothing too. It was only that and light was all it needed and a certain cleanness and order” (291). Here we have both the vision and the voice of the older waiter but we are still observing him, seeing him from the outside. That angle of vision changes in the nada prayer.

In that prayer, Hemingway uses the Spanish word rather than the English word for nothing, in order to emphasize its every appearance in the prayer and to reinforce the juxtaposition between the language of faith and that of utter disbelief. Furthermore, by employing both the vision and voice of the waiter, by adapting the Our Father, the most familiar prayer in Christianity, and by quickly establishing the pattern of substitution of “nada” for the important nouns of the prayer, Hemingway, in effect, invites us to anticipate his substitutions: “Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name, thy kingdom ______ thy will be ______ in ______ as it is in ______.” With “The Hail Mary” he switches from “nada” back to “nothing,” a sign that he is ending his prayer, but the switch does not interfere with our anticipation of his substitutions. “Hail nothing full of nothing, ______ is with thee” (291). In short, in the prayer Hemingway completes the authorial audience’s movement from outside the waiter observing and judging him to inside his perspective participating in it. In this respect the prayer is not only the thematic but also the lyrical climax of the story.

Hemingway, however, does not end with this climax but returns to principles of narrativity by once again showing the waiter interacting with another character and, most importantly, by moving us back into the observer role and asking us to judge him once again. Strikingly, the story does not record but leaves us to infer the older waiter’s physical motion between his turning off the light in his café and his arrival at the bar where he stops for his nightcap. His interaction with the barman shows the waiter still in the grip of his awareness of nothingness but also able to deal with that awareness with irony:

“What’s yours?” asked the barman.
“Nada.”
“Otro loca mas,” said the barman and turned away. (291)

Having had his ironic joke, the waiter drops the game and asks for “A little cup” of coffee, though his next comment indicates that he continues
to be preoccupied by his previous thoughts. He renders an aesthetic judgment that also has an ethical dimension. “The light is very bright and pleasant but the bar is unpolished” (291). The bar is ultimately not a satisfactory refuge, and so he does not stay. After he leaves, he anticipates what will happen next: “Now, without thinking further, he would go home to his room. He would lie in the bed and finally, with daylight, he would go to sleep. After all, he said to himself. It is probably only insomnia. Many must have it” (291). The irony of the final two lines stems from the waiter’s self-deflating interpretive judgment—I don’t have existential angst but simple insomnia. His ironic adoption of the attitude of one who “lived in it but did not feel it” indicates that he will neither take himself too seriously nor deny what he knows. What Hemingway gives us between the late entrance and this farewell are both an inside look at the older waiter’s contemplation of the nothing that he knew too well and an external look at how he responds to his intimate acquaintance with that nothing. Hemingway asks us to endorse both the contemplation and the response, the waiter’s ability to face the fundamental truth about the pervasiveness of nada and his ability to poke ironic fun at his own awareness.

Our endorsement of the older waiter’s response, in turn, intensifies the effect of the nada prayer. The lyrical nature of the prayer means that Hemingway is adopting the technique of what I call “mask narration,” that is, using the waiter as an effective and almost direct means to convey his own views. In the nada prayer, the older waiter becomes, in effect, a character narrator, and the lyricality of the prayer effectively merges him with both the implied Hemingway and the authorial audience. The power of that merger is heightened because of our ethical judgments of the older waiter before—and after—that moment. Consequently, Hemingway’s invitation to share in the older waiter’s perspective, to take on these interpretive and ethical judgments about the nature of existence is very strong.

If my analysis of the role of judgment in this latter part of the story is close to being on target, then Scribners’ revision of the text is the correct call. If the story is built primarily on principles of narrativity and the younger waiter introduces the idea of nothing into the story, which in turn sets the older waiter on this path to thinking about nothing, we can still regard it as having genuine ethical and aesthetic merit. It is a story in which Hemingway uses his ethical system as the basis for a story of significant change. But even laying aside the recalcitrant evidence of the second half of the story, this hypothesis leaves us with an older waiter whose interpretive and ethical judgments both during the prayer and in

3. For a fuller discussion see the Epilogue to Living to Tell about It.
his response to his newly acquired knowledge are less impressive precisely because they are first-time judgments. A story which treats this night in the older waiter’s life not as a night of discovery but rather as one in a long series of nights in which the same despair-inducing knowledge is faced yet value is affirmed is a greater story for at least two related reasons. (1) It essentially encompasses the story of change as part of its backstory. That story of change had to occur in some form or another for this story to exist, but (2) this story focuses on the more difficult ethical problem of how to live with the knowledge acquired during the change.

At the same time, to return to the discussion of rhetorical aesthetics in the previous chapter, this argument for the superiority of the revised version of the story is only an argument about a comparative aesthetic judgment in these two cases. With these materials of character, event, attitude/belief, judgment and participation—indeed with these two almost identical versions of the text of the story—we can use the principles of rhetorical poetics to judge one as an aesthetically greater achievement, but we cannot extract aesthetic universals from this example. Hemingway himself, in *A Farewell to Arms*, develops a very powerful narrative of change which shows Frederick Henry’s gradual acquisition of the knowledge that the older waiter has well before “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” begins. But because so many of the other materials of the two stories are different, I believe it is much more difficult to make a comparative aesthetic judgment of them.

Let me return to the details of the progression. The movement of the final paragraphs also sheds light on the readerly dynamics connected with Hemingway’s building the story on an ethical system whose key principle is that “It was all a nothing and a man was nothing too.” First, the lyric participation allows us to take on the belief in those ethics temporarily. Second, the movement back to judgment shows that the consequences of the ethical beliefs are not themselves nihilistic and that there are other important principles of the system: self-deprecating irony is a superior response to the knowledge of nothingness than the more logical despair; to the extent that response enables one to go on and provide comfort for others who recognize what Carlos Baker has aptly called the Something That is Nothing it is even more valuable. Indeed, when we think about the ethics of the telling here, the way in which Hemingway crafts his innovative communication about the older waiter’s attitudes, we can see that Hemingway’s story itself stands as a clean, well-lighted place for his audience. What all this means is that the story does not wholly rise or fall on whether we can endorse the ethical principle that “it was all a nothing and
a man was nothing too.” In my own case, I can endorse this premise only in my blackest bleakest moments—or on some occasions when I’m in the midst of reading the story—but my more common disagreement with that premise does not destroy my satisfaction in and admiration for the story. I remain moved by the innovative nature of its lyric-narrative hybridity and by the ethics of its telling, its effort not just to promulgate a nihilistic world view but also to provide some counterbalance to such a view. In other words, recognizing the story as itself a version of the older waiter’s clean, well-lighted place enhances my understanding of Hemingway’s aesthetic achievement in this story, and it also helps me understand why I can value the story so highly without fully accepting its most fundamental interpretive and ethical positions. Again this overall aesthetic judgment is a second-order one, since it follows from both the interpretive and ethical judgments in the story. But because the story itself foregrounds both the older waiter’s aesthetic judgments (“The light is very bright and pleasant but the bar is unpolished”) and their interrelation with his sound ethical judgments, the connection between our ethical and our aesthetic judgments is arguably tighter than in any of the other narratives we’ve looked at.

The Beginning and Middle of “Woman Hollering Creek"

In contrast to “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,” “Woman Hollering Creek” is built on a set of ethical positions that most of its flesh-and-blood readers are likely to endorse: to name just a few, women are as valuable as men; spousal abuse is a horrible crime; women who have a sense of their own value should be cherished; women who move toward a recognition of their own value should also be cherished. The story’s effectiveness, then, depends not on its ability to have its audience try on challenging ethical positions, but rather on the way it deploys these widely accepted positions while making the specific situation represented fresh rather than clichéd and moving rather than flat. The progression is crucial to these effects, and it is quite different from the progression of Hemingway’s story. As noted above, the beginning introduces a global instability, the middle is given over to the lyric exploration of that instability, and then the ending shifts to the narrative mode as it brings about the resolution of the instability. I begin with a description of the main narrative line so that we can better appreciate the way Cisneros builds principles of lyricality into her treatment of this narrative material.
In Mexico Cleófilas Enriqueta DeLeón Hernández marries Juan Pedro Martínez Sánchez and crosses the border with him to Seguín, Texas. Isolated in the new culture, Cleófilas soon has to endure beatings from her husband and the likelihood of his infidelity. She has few cultural resources to draw on other than her memory of her father’s love and his promise that he would never abandon her. Unexpectedly aided by Graciela and Felice, two sympathetic Chicanas, the pregnant Cleófilas begins her journey back across the border. Cleófilas is initially amazed by everything about Felice, especially by Felice’s “hollering like Tarzan” as they cross the creek called “La Gritona.” The amazement leads to the climactic moment described in the story’s concluding sentences: “Then Felice began laughing again, but it wasn’t Felice laughing. It was gurgling out of her own throat, a long ribbon of laughter, like water” (56).

It’s also important to identify at the outset the cultural narratives in relation to which “Woman Hollering Creek” is situating itself. It’s clearly a story of border crossing, and in 1991 such a story by a Chicana writer will have Gloria Anzaldúa’s Borderlands/La Frontera as an intertext. While “Woman Hollering Creek” is not Anzaldua’s book rendered as allegory, Anzaldúa’s discussion of the borders of identity and of mestiza consciousness is relevant to the story. As Cleófilas crosses the border from Mexico to Texas and then back again to Mexico, her primary identity changes from daughter to wife and back again to daughter, but the ending suggests that her return to daughter is a return with a difference.

More specifically, “Woman Hollering Creek” sets up Cleófilas’s story against the backdrop of the telenovelas in Mexico, commercialized tales of romance and passion used to sell cosmetics and clothes. These telenovelas shape Cleófilas’s ideas—and those of the other Mexican women in the story—about love, marriage, and consumerism. The grim reality of Cleófilas’s story functions as an anti-telenovela, an exposure of their dangerous ideological messages about the value of suffering for love and their association of romance with certain clothes, cosmetics, and other fashions.

“Woman Hollering Creek” is also in part a feminist coming-to-consciousness narrative. Graciela, Felice, La Gritona, and of course Cleófilas herself all contribute to Cleófilas’s sudden recognition that there is a life for women beyond the roles of daughter, wife, and mother. While this recognition of course does not alter the material conditions of her life, it does alter her understanding of what is possible for women. Finally, the story works with the myth of “La Llorona,” the maternal figure who is weeping for her lost children, and my analysis will address how Cisneros rewrites the myth.
Let us now turn to consider the story’s beginning, the first of its fourteen sections. I start with the temporal exposition and the initiation in the opening paragraphs.

The day Don Serafín gave Juan Pedro Martínez Sánchez permission to take his daughter Cleófilas Enriqueta DeLeón Hernández as his bride, across her father’s threshold, over several miles of dirt road and several miles of paved, over one border and beyond to a town en el otro lado—on the other side—already did he divine the morning his daughter would raise her hand over her eyes, look south, and dream of returning to chores that never ended, six good-for-nothing brothers, and one old man’s complaints.

He had said, after all, in the hubbub of parting: I am your father, I will never abandon you. He had said that, hadn’t he, when he hugged and then let her go. But at the moment Cleófilas was busy looking for Chela, her maid of honor, to fulfill their bouquet conspiracy. She would not remember her father’s words until later: I am your father, I will never abandon you.

Only now as a mother did she remember. Now, when she and Juan Pedrito sat by the creek’s edge. How when a man and a woman love each other, sometimes that love sours. But a parent’s love for a child, a child’s for its parents, is another thing entirely.

This is what Cleófilas thought evenings when Juan Pedro did not come home, and she lay on her side of the bed listening to the hollow roar of the interstate, a distant dog barking, the pecan trees rustling like ladies in stiff petticoats—shh-shh-shh, shh-shh-shh—soothing her to sleep. (43–44)

These paragraphs move across three different temporal moments:

_Time 1 and Time 2:_ Cisneros begins with what appears to be a narrative summary, in past tense, of the thoughts of Cleófilas’s father, focalized first through the narrator, then through him, and finally through Cleófilas: “The day Don Serafin gave Juan Pedro Martinez Sanchez permission to take his daughter Cleofilas Enriqueta DeLeon Hernandez as his bride, across her father’s threshold . . . already did he divine the morning his daughter would raise her hand over her eyes, look south, and dream of returning . . .” (43). The first half of the sentence suggests that the Narrative Now, that is, the temporal moment from which we can identify past and future, is Cleófilas’s wedding day, but, the second half establishes the Narrative Now as the morning Cleófilas would look to return home.
As the narration continues, we learn that Don Serafín did not literally “divine the morning” his daughter would dream of returning but rather that Cleófilas makes an interpretive judgment that his parting words (or her summary translation of them), “I am your father, I will never abandon you,” implied such a divination (“He had said that, hadn’t he”). This inference in turn suggests that the shift in the focalization is not from the narrator to Cleófilas’s father but right to Cleófilas herself. She is thinking of his words and their meaning on this morning, this “now” of the present time, when she looks to return home: “Only now as a mother did she remember. Now, when she and Juan Pedrito sat by the creek’s edge” (43). This last sentence actually wavers a bit between singulative and iterative narration—it could be either—but the previous reference to “the morning” tips the scales in favor of the singulative.

**Time 3:** As the narration continues into the summary statement of the last paragraph of the section, the Narrative Now shifts again. “This is what Cleófilas thought evenings when Juan Pedro did not come home” (44; my emphasis). The Now is not the morning when Cleófilas is by the creek but evenings when she is in her bed. Furthermore, evenings marks the clear shift from singulative to iterative narration: Cleófilas’s memory of her father’s promise is not a singular event occurring on a particular morning or during a particular outing to the creek but something that she experiences over and over again.

This unusual movement of the temporal exposition has multiple effects. First, it is part of an initiation in which Cisneros immerses us in the perspective of her protagonist in order to give us some sense of how she experiences time. For Cleófilas, time does not move in straight linear fashion but rather jumps from one moment to another, past and present intermingle, and any one moment is layered with other similar or contrasting moments. Second, the exposition emphasizes the global instability, Cleófilas’s unhappiness in her marriage and her longing to return home. The first section gradually unfolds this instability, culminating in the shift to the iterative description at the end of the section. That shift in turn reduces the degree of narrativity in the launch. Although the global instability is introduced, the shift from singulative to iterative emphasizes this instability as something that is ongoing and something that may well continue. Of course the instability may be complicated in the very next section, but this launch does not propel us toward any such complication. Consider the difference between this launch and the one that occurs at the end of Chapter 3 of *Persuasion*, where the narrative suddenly kicks into a higher gear. If there is any changing of gears at the end of this section, it is a downshift.
Third, both of these effects contribute to the authorial audience’s ethical judgments of Cleófilas as wronged by her husband and, thus, deserving of our sympathy. To be sure, other elements of the treatment also support that judgment: her willingness to return to “chores that never ended, six good-for-nothing brothers, and one old man’s complaints” (44); her loneliness on the “evenings when Juan Pedro did not come home.” This combination of effects means that, at the end of the first section, we enter a world where we observe and judge, but also one in which there is already the beginning of lyric revelation.

Moving on to the middle of the narrative, we discover that throughout the voyage Cisneros continues to show that Cleófilas’s experience of time is both layered and full of gaps and that our initial judgments get reinforced as more of her situation gets revealed. It is impossible to place sections one to eleven on a clear time-line (although we can place some individual sections in relation to each other) or to determine how much time passes between many of the juxtaposed sections. Indeed, we cannot determine with any confidence whether the Narrative Now of the action in sections two to eleven ever advances past the point we reach at the end of section one. In addition, more than once, Cisneros presents what initially appears to be a singular event and reveals it to be part of a repetitive pattern. The last two sentences of section five, a section that begins as a description of the “first time” Juan Pedro beats Cleófilas, provide a telling example of this technique: “She could think of nothing to say, said nothing. Just stroked the dark curls of the man who wept and would weep like a child, his tears of repentance and shame, this time and each” (48; my emphasis). With the four monosyllabic words I have stressed, Cisneros transforms what appears to be a singular, distinct event into one that is indefinitely repeated—and experienced essentially the same way every time. Again, the effect is to emphasize the lyric exploration of her static, emotionally and physically painful situation, but our interpretive and ethical judgments of that situation reinforce our desire for some narrative movement that will allow her to escape it—even as the middle sections do not contain any clear means for such movement.

To put this point another way, after introducing the central instability in section one, Cleófilas’s unhappy marriage, and the possible, though imperfect, resolution, her return home, Cisneros neither complicates nor begins to resolve this instability until section twelve. Just as there is no sense of launch toward new complications at the end of section one, there is no sense of a voyage toward a destination in the middle sections. Instead the voyage explores the depth and texture of the instability, giving us a greater awareness of its layers. It’s not just that her love has soured but
that she is in a situation where she gets beaten, something that raises the stakes for any attempt to escape. If she should try and fail, she would face even more abuse. Furthermore, although we continue to observe and judge Cleófilas and that situation rather than participate in it as we do in the nada prayer, Cisneros’s technique of focalizing the narrative through Cleófilas deepens our sympathy for her.

Although the middle does not complicate the global instability, it does introduce and complicate a significant tension: what is the meaning behind the name of the creek La Gritona? In section four, we learn that Cleófilas wants to know that meaning, but “no one could say whether the woman hollered from anger or pain” and, indeed, “Woman Hollering” was “a name no one from these parts questioned, little less understood” (46). At the end of section four, we learn that upon first hearing the name, Cleófilas “had laughed” because she thought it “such a funny name for a creek so pretty and full of happily ever after” (47). In section nine, we see that Cleófilas, now a mother, no longer thinks that the creek’s name is funny or that its sound is full of happily ever after. Instead, she wonders whether the creek, with “its high, silver voice,” is “La Llorona, the weeping woman. La Llorona, who drowned her own children” (51). She becomes “sure” that La Llorona is calling to her. The link between “La Gritona,” “La Llorona,” and Cleófilas’s situation suggests that Cleófilas is right to be sure, and so, this tension appears to be resolved in a way that again deepens our sense of Cleófilas’s sorrow and grief.

A third significant feature of the middle is that Cisneros gives us two pairs of sections that are each repetitions with a difference. Section nine is a variation of section one, as Cisneros gives us Cleófilas’s thoughts as she plays with her child beside the creek; section eleven is a variation of section five, as Cisneros recounts Juan Pedro’s abuse of Cleófilas. In section one, we acquire only a general knowledge of Cleófilas’s situation; by section nine, with its apparent resolution of the tension, we know all that is entailed by her thoughts of how her love has “soured.” Returning home to her father’s house is attractive only by comparison with staying in Seguín with Juan Pedro. Indeed, by section nine, most of the lyric revelation is complete; all that is needed is the fuller revelation of the circle of male hostility that Cisneros provides in the description of Maximiliano at the ice house in section ten.

Section eleven, the other scene of repetition, represents Juan Pedro hitting Cleófilas with a book, but it does not explicitly contain any new revelations about Cleófilas’s situation. The difference in the repetition here is that the book Juan Pedro throws at Cleófilas is a love story that she is
reading as a substitute for the *telenovelas* she is now unable to watch because she has no television. The incident becomes the occasion for Cleófilas to make a significant interpretive judgment about the difference between the romantic narratives of the *telenovelas* and her own life, and this judgment provides the basis for the shift to the narrative movement of section twelve:

Cleófilas thought her life would have to be like that, like a *tele-novela*, only now the episodes got sadder and sadder. And there were no commercials in between for comic relief. And no happy ending in sight. . . . Everything happened to women with names like jewels. But what happened to a Cleófilas? Nothing. But a crack in the face. (52–53)

I will return to the significance of Cleófilas’s interpretive judgment after considering how Cisneros uses the interplay of voices as part of the interaction that further contributes to the lyric revelation of the beginning and the middle.

Cisneros marks a significant difference between the voice of Cleófilas’s father, on the one side, and those of her husband and the men at the ice house in Seguín on the other. Her father speaks only once, but, as we’ve seen, he speaks with a voice of parental love that Cleófilas can later recall despite her failure to pay attention on her wedding day. “I am your father, I will never abandon you” (43).

Juan Pedro’s voice is also not prominent in the story; indeed, his longest unmediated speech occurs about halfway through in a passage that moves from indirect to direct discourse. Like the voice of Cleófilas’s father, the voice of Juan Pedro is heard within one of her meditations. The indirect discourse works to allow Cisneros both to represent the different qualities of the two men’s voices and to show how Cleófilas has, if not internalized both voices, at least kept them playing inside her head. Cleófilas has to wonder why she loves her husband, the narrator tells us, when he says he hates this shitty house and is going out where he won’t be bothered with the baby’s howling and her suspicious questions, and her requests to fix this and this because if she had any brains in her head she’d realize he’s been up before the rooster earning his living to pay for the food in her belly and the roof over her head and would have to wake up again early the next day, so why can’t you just leave me in peace, woman? (49)
We easily infer both the contrast between Juan Pedro’s harsh, complaining voice and Don Serafin’s loving one and Cisneros’s privileging of the father’s voice. Again the ethical judgments are clear and straightforward: while Cleófilas “has to . . . wonder a little” (49) why she loves her husband, we recognize that he does not deserve her love.

Cisneros gives other evidence of the values associated with Juan Pedro’s voice by associating him with the men at the ice house, whose voices are weakened by drink, whose words are often replaced by belches. Yet before the alcohol takes over, they are the leading gossips of the town: “the whispering begins at sunset at the ice house” (50). When Cisneros shows the direct speech of Maximiliano, she reveals a voice of crude misogyny: “Maximiliano who was said to have killed his wife in an ice-house brawl when she came at him with a mop. I had to shoot, he had said—she was armed” (51). All the others laugh. Again, the interpretive and ethical judgments are clear: the physical abuse Cleófilas endures is part of a larger atmosphere of male hostility in which she lives. The effect is to add another layer to our sense of the misery of her situation.

The women’s voices Cisneros presents in the middle of the story also represent a limited range, though they express far different concerns from the men’s voices. The women in Cleófilas’s hometown who watch the *telemovelas* speak the language of romantic fantasy, a language whose values Cleófilas adopts. By not identifying the speaker of the following passage from section two, Cisneros invites us to read it as the voice of any young woman in Cleófilas’s home town:

Because you didn’t watch last night’s episode when Lucia confessed she loved him more than anyone in her life. In her life! And she sings the song “You or No One” in the beginning and end of the show. *Tú o Nadie.* Somehow one ought to live one’s life like that, don’t you think? You or no one. Because to suffer for love is good. (45)

Other, older women in her hometown also come under the sway of the *telemovelas*, though they give voice to more conventional gossip:

She’s always been so clever, that girl. Poor thing. And without even a mama to advise her on things like her wedding night. Well, may God help her. What with a father with a head like a burro, and those six clumsy brothers. Well, what do you think? Yes, I’m going to the wedding. Of course! The dress I want to wear just needs to be altered a teensy bit to bring it up to date. See, I saw a new style last night [on the *telenovela*] that I thought would suit me. (45–46)
Again our interpretive and ethical judgments of these voices are clear: they show a startling ignorance, one linked to their attachment to the *telenovelas*, about the reality that Cleófilas will face once married. The first voice articulates the fantasy that suffering for love makes pain sweet, when—as Cleófilas comes to discover—suffering at the hands of a lover makes the pain cut more deeply. The second voice comes closer to real problems in Cleófilas’s situation but can only talk about them in conventional terms before moving on to the more serious business of discussing her *telenovela*-inspired dress.

Trini, the Laundromat attendant in Seguin, has a different kind of female voice but it, too, is no model for Cleófilas. “What do you want to know for?” is Trini’s reply to Cleófilas’s question about the name for the creek. Trini’s reply is delivered in “the same gruff Spanish she always used whenever she gave Cleófilas change or yelled at her for something” (46). While Trini’s voice offers a useful counter to the *telenovela*-inspired voices, it is too full of impatient imperatives, and Cisneros wants us to recognize that her yelling has its roots in different sources than the ones Cleófilas imagines for the hollering of the woman for whom the creek was named: “anger or pain” (46). Trini’s hollering is motivated by her concern for the practical business of fitting in in Seguin, as she yells at Cleófilas for “putting too much soap in the machines” or “sitting on the washer,” or “for not understanding that in this country you cannot let your baby walk around with no diaper and his pee-pee hanging out” (46). We endorse Cleófilas’s interpretive judgment that she could not explain to Trini “why the name ‘Woman Hollering’ fascinated her” (46).

In sum, Cisneros uses the interactions by means of voice in the beginning and the middle as a way to contextualize Cleófilas’s situation, to locate her among belief systems that have either led her into her plight or that emphasize its difficulty. But as the story moves, in section twelve, from its lyric revelation to a narrative resolution, Cisneros does something new with voice as well.

**The Ending:**

**Sections Twelve, Thirteen, and Fourteen**

Cleófilas’s interpretive judgment at the end of section eleven spurs her to action in section twelve, as she persuades Juan Pedro to take her to the doctor. The interaction is significant here: Cisneros presents Cleófilas speaking aloud in her own voice for the first time, and that voice assumes an equality with her husband’s. She has stopped imagining herself the
heroine of a *telenovela*, has stopped waiting for things to happen to her, and begins to take some responsibility for her own unromantically painful life. She explains to Juan Pedro that she wants to see the doctor “Because she is going to make sure the baby is not turned around backward this time to split her down the center” (53). It is this same desire to take responsibility for her life that allows her to go along with Graciela’s plan for escape that we learn about in section thirteen and that gives her the courage to stand by the Cash N’ Carry and wait for Felice, despite her fear that she will be discovered by Juan Pedro.

Section twelve is just the second time we hear Juan Pedro’s voice directly, and he has just two lines in his own voice: “Please don’t anymore. Please don’t [write to your father and ask for money]” and one in indirect discourse, “Why is she so anxious?” about her pregnancy that she must ask her father for money to pay for her visit to the doctor (53). Cisneros here marks Juan Pedro’s speech as having shifted from complaining to requesting, from dominating to wondering. The shift in his voice and the shift back to indirect discourse signal a shift in the balance of power between them, a shift that makes possible not only Cleófilas’s visit to the doctor but also her eventual escape.

Section thirteen is given over entirely to Graciela’s voice as Cisneros presents her side of the telephone conversation with Felice in which they arrange for Felice to drive Cleófilas to the bus station in San Antonio. Graciela has a voice comfortable with both American English and Spanish; American idioms flow off her tongue and her voice combines pragmatism with compassion and with irony. “She needs a ride. . . . If we don’t help her, who will? I’d drive her myself but she needs to be on that bus before her husband gets home from work. . . . Yeah, you got it, a regular soap opera sometimes” (54–55). Graciela’s voice is something new for both Cleófilas and the authorial audience, a woman’s voice that is independent of men’s values and power and opposed to the values of the *telenovelas*. But Graciela cannot herself realize the depth of the irony in her remark about soap operas, which Cisneros uses to call attention once again to the contrast between the *telenovelas* and “Woman Hollering Creek.”

Section fourteen not only represents Cleófilas’s escape and thus the lyric narrative’s arrival but it also continues Cleófilas’s exposure to a new kind of woman’s voice, indeed, a new kind of woman: “Felice was like no woman she’d ever met” (56). She drives her own pickup truck; she doesn’t have a husband; she uses men’s phrases such as “pussy car” (to refer to the Pontiac Sunbird she drove before the pickup); and, when they drive across the creek, she “open[s] her mouth and let[s] out a yell as loud as any mariachi”
(55). Felice explains, “Every time I cross that bridge I do that. Because of the
name, you know. Woman Hollering. Pues, I holler. . . . Did you ever notice . . . how nothing around here is named after a woman? Really. Unless she’s the Virgin. I guess you’re only famous if you’re a virgin. She was laughing again” (55). This is the independence of Graciela’s voice combined with a deeper irreverence and sense of humor. Cisneros leaves open the possibility that Felice’s voice marks her as a Chicana lesbian, perhaps the partner of Graciela, perhaps not. In any case, she is certainly a woman who is comfortable with her identity and her independence. That Cleófilas responds so positively to her and her hollering is, thus, all the more telling.

After listening to Felice, Cleófilas recognizes for the first time that her categories for thinking about the source of the creek’s name—pain or rage—are inadequate and that thought provides the opening to the arrival, farewell, and completion. “Then Felice was laughing again, but it wasn’t Felice laughing, it was gurgling out of her own throat, a long ribbon of laughter, like water” (56).

This arrival and farewell constitute a brilliant completion, one whose various components lead us to a very positive second-order aesthetic judgment of the story as a whole. First, Cleófilas’s spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling has been well-prepared for by both the lyric revelation and the play and progression of voices, culminating in those of Graciela and Felice. Second, the final metaphors comparing Cleófilas’s “ribbon of laughter” to “water” unites Cleófilas’s voice not only with Felice’s but also with the sound of the creek itself. Third, the arrival presents a direct contrast with section five’s representation of the relation among the voice, the body, and oppression. Overpowered not only physically but emotionally and psychologically by Juan Pedro’s violence inflicted on her body, Cleófilas can neither act nor speak:

She had always said she would strike back if a man, any man, were to strike her.

But when the moment came, and he slapped her once, and then again, and again; until the lip split and bled an orchid of blood, she didn’t fight back, didn’t break into tears, she didn’t run away as she imagined she might when she saw such things in the telenovelas. . . .

She could think of nothing to say, said nothing. (47)

The story’s final sentences invert the situation of section five, as Cleófilas’s body responds almost involuntarily to the psychological and emotional release she feels in exchanging the presence of her abusive husband for the
company of Felice and the new possibility for female responsibility—and perhaps female sexuality—she represents in Cleófilas’s eyes. The involuntary quality of Cleófilas’s response is beautifully captured in the narrator’s sentences, even as the onomatopoeic “gurgling” and the metaphorical “long ribbon of laughter” convey something of the sound of Cleófilas’s voice. In a sense, Cisneros uses Cleófilas’s own moment of lyric intensity, her instinctive participation in Felice’s hollering, as the moment of the story’s arrival, farewell, and completion.

Fourth, this ending allows Cisneros to re-write or at least add to the narrative surrounding the figure of “La Llorona” in Chicano/a culture. There is a long tradition in Chicano storytelling of the mythical figures being reinterpreted to fit new cultural situations. The myth of “La Malinche,” the Aztec woman who became the interpreter for and sexual partner of Hernando Cortéz, is perhaps the most notable example. Originally thought to be a traitor to her people, La Malinche has been reinterpreted as a figure of resistance, one who managed to maintain her identity as an Aztec and used her influence to preserve the lives of many native Americans. In one version of the story, she drowned a son rather than have Cortéz take him back to Spain. In this version, she and “La Llorona” get conflated, as La Malinche weeps continually about what she has done to her son (see Novas’s *Everything You Need to Know about Latino History* 60–62). When Cisneros introduces the question of whether “La Gritona” is weeping from pain or rage, the myths of both La Malinche and La Llorona become relevant to the story. The ending then suggests that “La Malinche” and “La Llorona” need not be hollering only from pain or from rage, because there are other more appealing possibilities to consider: women can holler like Tarzan, they can give a hoot as Felice does, they can yell “as loud as any mariachi band” (55), they can laugh in a way that their voices sound just “like water,” just like the high, silvery voice of the creek itself. Thus, in crossing the physical border marked by the creek, Cleófilas also crosses a psychic border and Cisneros crosses a mythic border, adding the story of “La Felice” to the narratives surrounding “La Malinche” and “La Llorona.”

The fifth important effect of the ending involves Cisneros’s use of a break in the temporal progression. Just before the final sentences, the narrator flashes forward in time to Cleófilas’s report of Felice’s hollering to her father and brothers: “Can you imagine, when we crossed the arroyo she just started yelling like crazy, she would say later to her father and brothers. Just like that? Who would have thought?” (56). This proleptic move not only signals that Cleófilas did succeed in her escape but also reminds us that the escape is to “chores that never ended, six good-for-nothing
brothers and one old man’s complaints” (43)—and in that way tempers the euphoria of the final sentences. One moment of laughter will not change the material conditions of Cleófilas’s life. Cisneros is not offering us a tele-

ovela plot but something much more realistic. Nevertheless, by ending not with the return itself but with Cleófilas’s hollering, Cisneros underlines the point that Cleófilas is returning home as a very different woman, one with a new sense of herself. Indeed, Cleófilas’s telling the story about Felice to her audience of seven men is itself a sign of that change, one that shows her using her voice among them to celebrate the extraordinary woman.