In this chapter, I turn to another kind of hybrid form, what I call portrait narratives, works constructed on principles of narrativity and of portraiture in which the narrative principles ultimately serve those of portraiture. My specific examples are short stories of the 1980s by women writers about women protagonists: Alice Munro’s “Prue” (1982) and Ann Beattie’s “Janus” (1986), both of which are reprinted in the Appendix. Munro’s story attempts to capture and convey what it means to be Prue, a woman in her late forties whom everyone likes but no one takes seriously. Beattie’s story attempts to capture and convey what it means to be Andrea, a married, childless real estate agent obsessed with a cream-colored bowl. Although this description of the stories emphasizes what they have in common, the stories themselves represent two very different ways of using narrative in the service of portraiture: in “Prue” Munro uses two distinct mini-narratives within her overarching frame that reveal essential features of her protagonist’s character, whereas in “Janus” Beattie uses a global tension to drive the progression of the narrative and then uses the resolution of that tension via backstory not to signal a change in her protagonist but rather to complete the portrait. The two stories also work with different kinds of initiation and interaction, and these elements of the progression have consequences for our ethical judgments both of the protagonist and of the implied author.

Before I turn to a detailed look at the roles of judgment and progression in each story, I want to offer four more general points about the dynamics of portrait narratives.

1. Just as lyric narratives typically involve some degree of portraiture, portrait narratives typically involve some degree of
lyricality. (Indeed, standard narratives can have degrees of lyricality and portraiture but their subordination to principles of narrativity is typically clear.) Since portrait narratives are primarily concerned with the revelation of character, they, like many lyrics, focus not on change but on stability, on character in a fixed situation. But unlike those lyric narratives that may ask the audience to participate, at least for a time, in the protagonist’s emotions and situation, portrait narratives ask the authorial audience to remain in the twin roles of observer and judge. As a result, the readerly dynamics of portrait narratives are markedly different from those of lyric narratives.

2. The emphasis on portraiture naturally gives special prominence to the mimetic component of the protagonist’s character and of the narrative as a whole. But the emphasis on portraiture also invites careful attention to the thematic component of character and its role in what we might call the particular shading of the portrait. In analyzing portrait narratives, we need to attend, first, to ways in which the author invites us to thematize the character, and, second, the consequences of that thematizing for our ethical and aesthetic judgments.

3. Progressions in portrait narratives often depend upon the introduction of a global tension that must be resolved before completeness can be achieved. Instabilities may be introduced but they are more commonly local, connected with the movement of subordinate mini-narratives rather than with the larger trajectory of the hybrid work. In “Prue,” the global tension arises primarily from the narrator’s initial descriptions of Prue’s character. In “Janus” the global tension involves the mystery of Andrea’s strong attachment to the bowl.

4. Just as lyric narratives can synthesize principles of narrativity and lyricality in different ways so too can portrait narratives. I have already noted some large differences between the progressions of “Prue” and “Janus,” so here I will mention four specific strategies that are frequently but not necessarily employed in portraiture along with brief comments on their use by Munro and Beattie:

   a. Straightforward descriptions of the protagonist by the narrator. Munro uses these, but Beattie does not, choosing instead to represent Andrea through her thoughts or her actions.
b. The use of the present tense for the present-time of the story. Munro uses the present both for her straightforward descriptions in the beginning, shifts to the past for the mini-narrative in the middle, and then shifts first to historical and then to genuine present in the conclusion. Beat- tie, however, never uses the present tense, shifting instead from past to past perfect when she tells the backstory that resolves the tension about Andrea’s attachment to the bowl.

c. Iterative accounts of the protagonist’s behavior. Both authors use this device.

d. Mini-narratives that illustrate key traits or other information crucial to our understanding of the relation between character and situation. Again both authors use this device.

The descriptions and iterative accounts may also invite ethical judgments, and the narratives inevitably do. These judgments are crucial to the completion of the portraiture because they are integral to our comprehension of the character.

To illustrate this last general point, I will offer some brief comments here on the ethical judgments accompanying the mini-narratives of “Prue” and “Janus,” holding off more extended commentary until the detailed analysis of the progression. “Prue” concludes with a mini-narrative about Prue’s theft of a cufflink from her lover’s house, and “Janus” concludes with a mini-narrative that, among other things, reveals that Andrea has been guilty of adultery. In the authorial audience we’re invited to judge both characters, though the precise nature and function of our judgments are different in each case. In “Prue” we are not invited to make the kind of strongly negative ethical judgment that we are in “Janus,” but in each case the judgment is connected with the way the revelation serves to resolve tensions in the portrait, and, in that way, connected to the unfolding sequence of judgments. In other words, in each case our judgments are not simply based on our recognition that the protagonist is guilty of an ethical transgression. Instead, we recognize that both the story of the theft and the story of the adultery serve to resolve some tensions in the portrait, and we then make rather complex ethical judgments about the character as now revealed. In that way, the theft and adultery play crucial roles in the completion of the portraits both because they resolve the tensions and move us toward our overall judgments of the characters.
Progression and Judgment in “Prue”

The progression of “Prue” divides very neatly into beginning, middle, and ending. The beginning goes from the title to the end of the fifth paragraph, and it both introduces an instability and gives us extensive exposition about Prue’s character. The middle consists of a mini-narrative that I’ll call “Dinner at Gordon’s,” and while this mini-narrative gets its own movement from a pattern of instability-complication-partial resolution, its function is to expand upon the instability and the exposition of the beginning. The ending consists of another mini-narrative, which I’ll call “Prue’s Taking Ways.” This mini-narrative gets its movement from a pattern of instability-tension-partial resolution, but it also stands in for similar narratives that are suggested but not fully told, and its function is to complete the portrait of Prue. This description of the progression is overly schematic on the textual side, and it is incomplete because it does not attend to readerly dynamics, so I turn now to a more thorough analysis of that progression.

The first paragraph introduces the global instability about Prue’s relationship with the other significant character, Gordon, even as it offers exposition:

Prue used to live with Gordon. This was after Gordon left his wife and before he went back to her—a year and four months in all. Some time later, he and his wife were divorced. After that came a period of indecision, of living together off and on; then the wife went away to New Zealand, most likely for good. (227)

The move from the title to this paragraph calls attention to the facts that Prue herself plays a very minor role in this opening and that she has almost no agency. Instead, the agency belongs to Gordon and his wife: he left her, then went back; they divorced; she went away. Though the narrator is focused on Gordon’s agency, both the title and the initial narrative discourse make it clear that the protagonist of the story is Prue. Although Prue is not the focalizer, the narrator is aligned with her rather than with Gordon or his wife, who never gets a name and who is just “the wife” in the final sentence. The gap between the title and the focus on Gordon’s agency invites us to infer something about him: though Prue “used to live with Gordon,” his decisions about his life are relatively unaffected by her presence. Consequently, even as the paragraph opens up the possibility that Prue can resume her relationship with Gordon, it invites us to make an
initially negative ethical judgment about him, and, thus, about that pos-
sibility. It also invites us to make an interpretive judgment that, for Prue, 
resuming a relationship in which her presence matters so little cannot be a 
good thing. At this stage, however, Munro does not invite us to make any 
specific ethical judgment about Prue herself.

Rather than complicating this initial instability, as she would do if 
“Prue” were governed by principles of narrativity, Munro takes the pro-
gression in a different direction. First, she presents several paragraphs of 
what look like straight exposition, as they describe Prue and her situation: 
“Prue did not go back to Vancouver . . . She got a job in Toronto, work-
ing in a plant shop” (227). But these paragraphs also introduce significant 
tensions about the portrait the exposition is beginning to sketch, and they 
also invite our initial ethical judgments of Prue. In moving from the initial 
instability to the expository descriptions of Prue, Munro also shifts from 
the past tense to the present: “She is very likable. She has what eastern 
Canadians call an English accent. . . .” (227). This shift in tense signals 
Munro’s interest in portraiture: rather than recounting that something 
happened, the narrator is telling us that someone is.

The present-tense description of Prue’s way of telling stories is one of 
the first significant strokes in the portrait:

[Her] accent helps her to say the most cynical things in a win-
nning and light-hearted way. She presents her life in anecdotes, 
and though it is the point of most of her anecdotes that hopes are 
dashed, dreams ridiculed, things never turn out as expected, every-
thing is altered in a bizarre way and there is no explanation ever, 
people always feel cheered up after listening to her; they say of her 
that it is a relief to meet somebody who doesn’t take herself too 
seriously, who is so unintense, and civilized, and never makes any 
real demands or complaints. (227)

Though the passage does not introduce any narrative movement, it does 
reinforce the inferences invited by the initial instability. If the point of 
Prue’s storytelling is that “hopes are dashed,” the point of Munro’s descrip-
tion of that storytelling is that Prue is likable because she is so nonde-
manding and nonassertive—qualities that make it easy for Gordon not to 
take her into account as he makes decisions about his life. At the same 
time, the paradox in the description—the way Prue’s cheerful manner of 
telling her anecdotes belies their pessimistic substance—establishes a ten-
sion in the developing portrait. We read on, in part, to find out whether
the paradox will be resolved, or at least explained. Though we have no doubt about the dominant qualities of Prue’s character, we also need to find out how the pessimistic substance of her narratives fits with those dominant qualities.

Munro reinforces and rounds out these initial strokes of Prue’s portrait in four different ways before turning to the mini-narrative of the middle. First, Munro uses Prue’s reflections on her name to introduce another tension: “The only thing she complains about readily is her name. Prue is a schoolgirl, she says, and Prudence is an old virgin; the parents who gave her that name must have been too shortsighted even to take account of puberty” (227). Munro’s authorial audience would know that “Prudence” comes from “plaisance” which means “pleasant.” That pleasant Prue is dissatisfied with her name raises the possibility that she is also in some way dissatisfied with herself. That she identifies the dissatisfaction as having a name that is not appropriate for a sexually mature woman once again highlights the instability of her relationship with Gordon.

Second, Munro uses her narrator’s comment on Prue’s reflections to show that others do not take her seriously, the way they take other adults seriously: “In her late forties now, slight and fair, attending to customers with a dutiful vivacity, giving pleasure to dinner guests, she might not be far from what those parents had in mind: bright and thoughtful, a cheerful spectator. It is hard to grant her maturity, maternity, real troubles” (227–28). Once again the narrative discourse here invites us to look not only at the strong colors of the portrait but also at the more subtle shadings. The strong colors also underline another meaning of her name: a spectator is out of the game or the play, and in that respect, more cautious and prudent than those who are directly involved. And of course being always a spectator and never a player or an actor is to live an overly cautious, overly prudent life. The more subtle shadings of Munro’s portraiture suggest that we do not yet have all the signs needed to finalize our portrait. Prue “might be” what her parents had in mind; “it is hard to grant her . . . real troubles” (228), but she might also be something other than a “cheerful spectator,” and she might very well have “maternity, maturity, and real troubles.”

Munro’s third move to fill out the initial portrait adds to the tension because the narrator reveals that Prue does, in fact, have maternity: she has grown children from an early, long-dissolved marriage that she calls a “cosmic disaster” (228). Although Munro does not say more about the marriage, this description in Prue’s voice is a nice example of her storytelling: the hyperbole puts a light tone on the situation, but for Munro’s audience
it does not hide the fact that at one time at least she had “real troubles.” Nevertheless, the rest of the information about Prue in her maternal role builds on the initial, dominant strokes of the portrait, as it reveals that the parent-child roles are, for all practical purposes, reversed. The children do not ask her for money or other things but instead give her gifts and see that her life is in order. Prue, for her part, “is delighted with their presents, listens to their advice, and, like a flighty daughter, neglects to answer their letters” (228).

Munro’s fourth move to elaborate the initial portrait is the narrator’s report on Prue’s active social life. Prue “would laugh at the idea” (228) that she stays in Toronto because of Gordon, since she goes to and gives parties, and she goes out with other men. In addition, “her attitude toward sex is very comforting to those of her friends who get into terrible states of passion and jealousy, and feel cut loose from their moorings. She seems to regard sex as a wholesome, slightly silly indulgence, like dancing and nice dinners—something that shouldn’t interfere with people’s being kind and cheerful to each other” (228). Again Munro reinforces the dominant strokes of the portrait: Prue’s attitude toward sex, however comforting to others, is possible because she does not take its connections, physical or emotional, seriously—and thus does not ask the men she sleeps with to take its connections seriously. And again Munro keeps some tension alive through subtle shading, since the narrator never unequivocally confirms that Prue’s staying on in Toronto is independent of Gordon’s separation from his wife.

With this description of Prue’s attitudes toward sex, the beginning of the story is complete, and we can recognize that we are entering a world built on principles of both narrativity and portraiture. We interpret Prue as a likable woman in her forties, someone whom others find amusing and easy to be with precisely because she lacks the gravity, the self-confidence, and self-assertiveness to be taken seriously. Furthermore, her attitude toward her name and the gap between her cynicism and her manner of expressing it suggests that she is more uneasy about who she is and what she is doing with her life than she shows. At the same time, we are aware that we do not yet have the full portrait of her character and expect the progression to return to both the global instability of her relation with Gordon and to the global tensions in the portrait. The initial narrative discourse has taught us to look for both the broad strokes and the shadings in the narrator’s reports about Prue.

At this stage, our sympathy for Prue exists alongside a partially negative ethical judgment of her, as Munro invites us to register a problem with
Prue's putting the approval of other people so high on her own scale of values that she does not ask them to take her seriously. But Munro's attention to how Prue is perceived by others—and how Prue herself likes to be likeable—also invites us to thematize her character in ways that complicate this ethical judgment. Prue represents a certain type of woman, one who obeys many of the demands of 1980s North American culture on women, demands that can be seen as a response to the feminist movement of the 1970s: to be likable by being self-effacing—above all, to avoid seeming to be pushy or otherwise susceptible to being labeled a “bitch”—to be tolerant and understanding of others, especially of men. The thematizing also includes a recognition that this type of woman is likely to pay a price for obeying these cultural demands. The price Prue pays is her role as “cheerful spectator” rather than “effective agent” in her own life, and this price in turn is the source of her uneasiness with herself. At the same time, Munro invites us to infer that the “cosmic disaster” of Prue's first marriage plays some role in how and who she now is. Though we do not get any mini-narrative about the marriage or other revelations of how Prue was at that period in her life, it seems reasonable to conclude that her painful experience in the marriage influences her willingness to pay the price of her cheerful spectatorship.

Recognizing these thematic and mimetic components of the portrait mitigates our ethical judgment of Prue by deflecting some of the responsibility for her condition to a culture that sets up these expectations for women and by suggesting why she would be especially responsive to these expectations. Recognizing these components also enhances our sympathy for her. But again, our judgment here is provisional, since the tensions Munro has introduced have not yet been resolved.

Munro's next move in the progression is to set up the mini-narrative of the middle by means of an iterative report that picks up from the end of the first paragraph's statement that Gordon's wife had gone to New Zealand, “most likely for good.” “Now that his wife is gone for good, Gordon comes to see Prue occasionally and sometimes asks her out for dinner” (228). By framing the mini-narrative with this iterative report in the present tense, Munro indicates that the ensuing past tense narrative is not going to recount significant change in the present but rather one that is going to illustrate the kinds of interactions that Prue and Gordon now have.

Part of the mini-narrative entails some exposition about Gordon that underlines some significant differences between them, differences connected in part to their gender. She works in a plant shop, a low-prestige, low-paying job that does not require specialized knowledge or skill (she
had previously been a hostess at a resort hotel), though it does involve the
nurture of living things that in turn typically enhance the environments of
other people. Gordon works as a neurologist—a high-prestige, high-paying
job (the narrator tells us that he is rich “by Prue’s—and most people’s—
standards” [228]) that involves specialized knowledge and expertise and
that focuses less on nurturing than on correcting aberrations. Gordon
himself, rather than being accommodating to the feelings of others, takes
charge and speaks his mind. Once he lives by himself he “put his mind”
to learning how to cook and now “says truthfully” that he is a better cook
than either Prue or his wife. This exposition about Gordon in combination
with what we have already seen of Prue helps explain why he has the
power to dictate their relationship.

A little later in the mini-narrative we get additional exposition about
Gordon’s character: the narrator tells us that the expression in his often
bloodshot blue eyes “indicates that there is a helpless, baffled soul squirm-
ing around inside” (228) his large body. This information, besides showing
another layer to his character, helps explain some of his behavior, espe-
cially his lack of decisiveness about his relationship with Prue. In addition,
it also suggests that Prue may be staying with Gordon because she senses
this side of his character and wants to help him—even though every other
aspect of his character and hers makes that impossible. More generally,
Munro uses this portrait of Gordon as a way to heighten our understand-
ing of Prue and her situation.

During dinner, Prue and Gordon are twice interrupted by an unnamed
woman (first instability and its complication). The first time, Prue hears
her angry voice at the door but not her words, and Gordon sends her away.
The second time the woman rings the doorbell until Gordon opens the
door, at which point she flings her overnight bag at him, slams the door
shut, and leaves. In the interval between the two interruptions, Prue, in
an effort to take his mind off the first one, asks him questions about his
plants. Munro then reports the following conversation:

“I don’t know a thing about them,” he said. “You know that.”
“I thought you might have picked it up. Like the cooking.”
“She takes care of them.”
“Mrs. Carr?” said Prue, naming his housekeeper.
“Who did you think?”
Prue blushed. She hated to be thought suspicious. (229)

The conversation effectively dramatizes the relationship. Prue tries to help,
Gordon rebuffs her, Prue keeps trying, and when she asks her question of clarification (which also indicates some reasonable anxiety in light of Gordon’s caller), he treats her roughly and she feels bad.

Then, however, the mini-narrative takes a turn as Gordon tells Prue that he has a problem (second instability): “The problem is that I think I would like to marry you” (229). Prue responds with characteristic lightness—“What a problem,” though the narrator’s additional comment shows that she takes it seriously: “she knew Gordon well enough to know that it was” (229). Before the conversation can continue, the second interruption occurs.

After that interruption, Gordon and Prue have the following conversation, which brings the two instabilities together and leads to an odd, partial resolution:

“I think I’m in love with this person,” he [Gordon] said.
“Who is she?”
“You don’t know her. She’s quite young.”
“Oh.”
“But I do think I want to marry you, in a few years’ time.”
“After you get over being in love?”
“Yes.”
“Well. I guess nobody knows what can happen in a few years time.” (229–30)

What stands out most in this mini-narrative, so much so that Munro does not need her narrator to comment on it, is the apparent equanimity of both characters: on Gordon’s part when he tells Prue, first, that his problem is that he would like to marry her and, second, that he has to get over being in love with the younger woman, and, on Prue’s part, as she seems to take these statements in stride. Gordon’s equanimity dramatically reveals that Gordon sees her as someone “who never makes any real demands or complaints.” Prue’s equanimity reveals that he is right to see her this way. Indeed, this mini-narrative recapitulates in miniature the previous history between Gordon and Prue that we learn about in the story’s first paragraph: after living together for sixteen months, he left her to go back to his wife, only to return to the relationship when his wife went off to New Zealand.

We judge Gordon here as ethically deficient for treating Prue so cavalierly, but we also judge her as deficient for accepting the treatment so readily. Munro reinforces this judgment in a coda to the mini-narrative
that completes the middle. The narrator reports that when Prue tells the story, she makes excuses for Gordon: “And it’s quite reasonable to think of marrying me [and] telling me to sort of put my mind at rest” (230). In sum, “Dinner at Gordon’s” does not move us any closer to a resolution of the initial instability but rather reveals more about its nature and, in so doing, reinforces the dominant strokes of the portrait of Prue. However, because the tensions in the portrait have not yet been resolved, the narrative cannot properly end with this coda to the mini-narrative.

Munro, in fact, brilliantly resolves the tensions and, in so doing, alters our judgments of Prue by completing the story with her second mini-narrative, “Prue’s Taking Ways.” Again, it is easily summarized: the morning after the dinner, Prue, alone in Gordon’s house, steals an expensive cufflink he had purchased in Russia while on a trip with his wife (instability). Upon returning home, she puts the cufflink in an old tobacco tin, a gift from her children, where it takes its place alongside a set of other mildly expensive keepsakes she has pilfered from Gordon’s house (no complication but further revelation). Munro concludes both the mini-narrative and the story as a whole with the indirect discourse commenting on Prue’s thefts:

These are not sentimental keepsakes. She never looks at them, and often forgets what she has there. They are not booty, they don’t have ritualistic significance. She does not take something every time she goes to Gordon’s house, or every time she stays over, or to mark what she might call memorable visits. She doesn’t do it in a daze and she doesn’t seem to be under a compulsion. She just takes something, every now and then, and puts it away in the dark of the old tobacco tin, and more or less forgets about it. (230–31)

(No further complication and no resolution, just further revelation.)

“Prue’s Taking Ways” neither complicates nor resolves the instability between Prue and Gordon, and it does not signal the likelihood that some change will occur. Indeed, Munro’s return to the true present tense and the iterative mode for the final passage, after using the historical present to recount the singulative events of “Prue’s Taking Ways,” reinforces this point. But the mini-narrative does alter the portrait of Prue because it gives us new information that alters both our interpretive and ethical judgments of her character. “Prue’s Taking Ways” resolves the tensions in the earlier portrayal by showing that Prue is a woman with “real troubles,” who has stayed in Toronto because of Gordon, and who, at some level of
consciousness, very much feels the pessimism she hides behind the cheerful manner of her storytelling. Above all, the mini-narrative strongly confirms her uneasy relationship to herself and her position in life as it reveals her to be an adult woman with deep, unsatisfied desires, albeit ones that she is not fully capable of expressing or acting on. Despite her apparent equanimity and what she says both to Gordon and to others, she is deeply hurt by Gordon’s cavalier treatment of her, his taking advantage of her good nature. Her thefts are not really a way of striking back: they are ultimately inconsequential for both of them, and Prue herself is too invested in wanting to be liked to retaliate or in any way confront Gordon and his refusal to commit to her. Instead, the thefts are a way for Prue to express her hurt feelings, to have some outlet for them. What she takes does have some symbolic value for her: on this occasion, after the accelerated replay of waiting for Gordon to resolve his relationship with his wife, she takes something closely linked to her. But this theft, like all the others, in remaining invisible from Gordon, will do nothing to alter her situation. She will go on being likable, being dissatisfied with herself, getting hurt by Gordon, and making petty thefts: that is just Prue being Prue.

This point helps us identify the distinctive function of “Prue’s Taking Ways” for Munro’s audience. It does nothing for the progression of Prue’s unstable situation, but it does everything for the authorial audience’s understanding of Prue’s situation and her character. In other words, the resolution here is experienced not by Prue and Gordon but by Munro’s readers, and, because that resolution eliminates the tensions and rounds out the portrait, it produces a sense of completion.

As part of that completion, our ethical judgments of Prue become more complex. First, we do not condemn Prue for her thefts but place them in the larger context in which they occur. Though we continue to be aware of Prue’s deficiencies, our sympathy for her deepens because we see more clearly now the price she pays for being such a thoroughly agreeable and likeable woman and her ineffectual response to that price: stealing things from Gordon that she has no use for. Indeed, as we attend to the price Prue pays and return to the thematic component of her character, we direct our judgments about ethical deficiencies less to her and more to the culture that imposes the standards of likeability for women and to Gordon and the men he represents who assume that it is not just acceptable but perfectly fine to treat women as he treats Prue. (And who knows how he treated the woman who throws her overnight bag at him.)

Having judged Prue and her situation in this way, we are now in a position to assess the ethics of Munro’s storytelling, particularly her
relation to her protagonist and to her audience. Given the gap between Munro’s authority and agency as a female writer, on the one hand, and Prue’s passive spectatorship on the other, Munro could very easily have developed a condescending attitude toward her protagonist, despite her genuine sympathy. But such condescension never appears because of the way she constructs the progression as a whole. First, Munro’s adroit introduction of the tensions in the beginning and her skillful resolution of them in “Prue’s Taking Ways” emphasizes throughout that Prue is more than she initially appears to be. Second, “Prue’s Taking Ways” not only adds significant depth but also considerable sympathy to that portrait. As a result, Munro treats her character with both respect and a clear-eyed lack of sentimentality.

Munro’s handling of the progression indicates that she treats her own audience with a similar respect. She confidently relies on her audience to recognize the unusual movement from beginning to end, to pick up on the tensions in the initial descriptions of Prue, and to make the appropriate interpretive and ethical judgments of the characters during “Dinner at Gordon’s” and “Prue’s Taking Ways.” Indeed, it is striking that after using the narrator to offer the explicit interpretive commentary in the beginning of the story, Munro limits the narrator for the rest of the story largely to the reporting function: the narrator describes Gordon’s behavior, Prue’s behavior, and many of her thoughts, but the narrator does not evaluate these descriptions. Indeed, there is no direct farewell to the audience but rather only a final report in the indirect discourse that characterizes the whole last paragraph: “She just takes something, every now and then, and puts it away in the dark of the old tobacco tin, and more or less forgets about it” (231). In other words, after providing the frame of the beginning, Munro invites the audience to follow her unobtrusive guidance toward her implicit evaluations of Gordon and Prue and toward a recognition of their importance in the overall portrait of Prue.

Our interpretive and ethical judgments throughout the progression lead to our very positive second-order aesthetic judgment. Munro has fashioned her materials—which, abstracted from the story itself, may seem extremely unpromising (overly accommodating fortysomething woman in an unhappy relationship with man who doesn’t get it; no change possible)—into an emotionally compelling and ethically rewarding reading experience. Furthermore, Munro demonstrates the potential for such effective experiences that lies within the hybrid form of portrait narrative. When we add that the story participates in a broader effort by short story writers of the 1970s and 1980s to break away from the dominant modernist mode of
the short story, a movement toward epiphany, we deepen our appreciation of Munro’s aesthetic achievement in “Prue.”

**Progression and Judgment in “Janus”**

Beattie’s story focuses on Andrea, a married real estate agent who becomes inordinately attached to a cream-colored bowl that she uses to decorate homes she is trying to sell. Beattie generates the progression largely through the tension of unequal knowledge surrounding Andrea’s relationship with the bowl, but she also traces some small developments in Andrea’s relation to the bowl—she becomes more attached to it over time. Rather than building to any substantial change in Andrea’s situation, however, these developments contribute to the progression by tension: the more attached she becomes the more we want to know the how and why of that attachment. Consequently, when Beattie resolves the tension by recounting the story of how Andrea acquired the bowl, she all but completes “Janus” because that story all but completes her portrait of Andrea. In other words, although there is a slight difference from “Prue” in that over the course of the progression the protagonist’s situation does change a little—Andrea is more deeply attached to the bowl than she was at the beginning—“Janus” too is a short story in which narrativity is subordinate to portraiture. Andrea’s deeper attachment functions not as a sign of a significant change in her situation but rather as part and parcel of Beattie’s gradual unfolding of her character.

The beginning of the story runs from the title to the report that “in time,” Andrea “dreamed of the bowl” (234). Although Beattie focuses on the bowl from the very first sentence (“The bowl was perfect” [232]), she only gradually reveals the instability of Andrea’s relationship to it. At first she emphasizes the bowl’s role in Andrea’s real estate sales; she strategically places it in houses that she is showing. Like letting her dog play in a house that she wanted to sell to dog lovers, placing the bowl in the right light is one of “the tricks used to convince a buyer that the house is special” (232). Beattie slowly moves the bowl from real estate agent’s helper to object of obsession by depicting Andrea’s detailed thoughts about it, beginning with her contemplation of its aesthetics:

> the wonderful thing about the bowl . . . was that it was both subtle and noticeable—a paradox of a bowl. Its glaze was the color of cream and seemed to glow no matter what light it was placed in.
There were a few bits of color in it—tiny geometric flashes—and some of these were tinged with flecks of silver. They were as mysterious as cells seen under a microscope; it was difficult not to study them, because they shimmered, flashing for a split second, and then resumed their shape. (232–33)

By this point, if not before, the authorial audience recognizes that Beattie is setting up an intertextual relation between her story and Henry James’s *The Golden Bowl*, and the chief effect of that intertextuality as we read is to add another dimension to the global tension. As we wonder about the reasons for Andrea’s attachment to the bowl, we also wonder whether it, too, despite its appearance of perfection, will turn out to be flawed. Beattie’s ending resolves this tension, but before looking at how it does so, we should follow the other moves of the progression.

The effect of the gradual revelation of Andrea’s obsession is to establish Andrea as a competent professional before solidifying and then slightly complicating the instability of her relationship with the bowl. Indeed, at first blush, the instability itself seems only minor, as if Andrea is simply too taken with one of the tricks of her trade, and, indeed, the description of the bowl’s aesthetics makes that response understandable. But as the beginning continues, Andrea’s behavior toward the bowl becomes increasingly weird—she lies to a customer interested in purchasing one like it; she displays it in her own home; she becomes convinced that the “bowl brought her luck” (233); once when she leaves it behind, she races back to get it; finally, she dreams of it. At this point, we are not only aware of the instability of her excessive attachment but hooked on the tension about its cause.

Beattie also uses the gradual revelation of Andrea’s attachment as a way to introduce a second instability, this one about Andrea’s relation to her husband, without making that instability central to the progression.

When her husband first noticed the bowl, he had peered into it and smiled briefly. He always urged her to buy things she liked. In recent years, both of them had acquired many things to make up for all the lean years when they were graduate students, but now that they had been comfortable for quite a while, the pleasure of new possessions dwindled. Her husband had pronounced the bowl “pretty,” and he had turned away without picking it up to examine it. He had no more interest in the bowl than she had in his new Leica. (233)
This paragraph shows a significant communication gap between Andrea and her husband, one that indicates some emotional distance as well. He has no idea of the bowl’s importance to her, and she doesn’t try to inform him about it. She, for her part, has no interest in his new possessions. But like Munro in her depiction of Prue’s relationship with Gordon, Beattie does not take this initial unstable situation and complicate it, and, like Munro, as we shall see, she never resolves it. Furthermore, while the passage invites us to judge the communication gap and the emotional distance as a problem in their relationship, our interpretive judgments about what is missing are firmer than our ethical judgments, because we have only limited knowledge of each one’s behavior in the marriage. Similarly, at this point in the story, Andrea’s mimetic portrait is slowly beginning to take shape, but we do not yet have clear signals about the thematic component of her character.

As this commentary suggests, Beattie initiates us into the story by using the narrator to report and occasionally interpret but almost never to pass an explicit ethical judgment—even as the reporting and the interpreting guide us to several judgments about Andrea and her situation. The narration fluctuates between the narrator’s vision and voice and Andrea’s, but when we have the narrator’s perspective, it is always a cool, detached one. Andrea is out there, someone whom the narrator dutifully reports on but not someone she views with sympathy. Consequently, the authorial audience finds Andrea more of an interesting case study than a character to whom we develop a strong emotional attachment.

Beattie frames the story’s middle with a statement about the temporal progression and Andrea’s business success: “She had a very profitable year selling real estate. Word spread, and she had more clients than she felt comfortable with” (234). But soon the narrative returns its focus to the instability and tension involving the bowl: “She had the foolish thought that if only the bowl were an animate object she could thank it” (234). Throughout the rest of the middle, Beattie increases the tension about the bowl’s significance for Andrea in two ways. First, as noted above, she complicates the instability about Andrea’s relation to the bowl by showing that over time Andrea’s attachment increases at the expense of her relationship with her husband. It is as if the bowl is a rival lover. The narrator notes that Andrea “was often tempted to come right out and say [to her husband] that she thought that the bowl in the living room, the cream-colored bowl, was responsible for her success. But she didn’t say it. She couldn’t begin to explain it. Sometimes in the morning, she would look at him and feel guilty that she had such a constant secret” (234). Again,
however, the story does not progress by complicating the instability about the marriage to the point that the marriage seems in jeopardy. Beattie’s concerns are different; rather than giving us a voyage that traces the progress of this marriage, she explores Andrea’s character and situation within it. Thus, Andrea’s guilt is important not because of how it moves the action forward but because of what it contributes to Beattie’s unfolding portrait of her.

Beattie’s second strategy in the middle is to show that Andrea herself is confused about the reasons for her increasing attachment to the bowl. In a sense, Beattie matches the tension the authorial audience experiences with Andrea’s own tension.

Could it be that she had some deeper connection with the bowl—a relationship of some kind? She corrected her thinking: how could she imagine such a thing, when she was a human being and it was a bowl? It was ridiculous. Just think of how people lived together and loved each other. . . . But was that always so clear, always a relationship? She was confused by these thoughts, but they remained within her mind. (235)

Nevertheless, the interaction also leads us to see the situation more clearly than Andrea herself does and to move us toward further interpretive and ethical judgments. Andrea’s inability to distinguish between her relationship to the bowl and relationships between people who lived together and loved each other is a clear sign of her severely limited understanding as well as an important marker of her unhealthy emotional attachment to the bowl. Nevertheless, because we remain in the dark about the reasons for her attachment, our negative ethical judgments continue to remain tentative.

Beattie continues tracing Andrea’s thoughts along these lines until she herself articulates her understanding of her feelings toward the bowl. “The bowl was just a bowl. She did not believe that for one second. What she believed was that it was something she loved” (235). And she acts toward it—and toward her husband—as if the bowl is in fact her lover, ceasing to talk to her husband about her real estate sales “for all her strategies involved the bowl,” and becoming “more deliberate with the bowl and more possessive” (235).

Having reached this point in the development of the instability and the tension, Beattie nevertheless delays the resolution still further—and she does so in a way that re-emphasizes the story’s indifference to standard
narrative progression by instability. “She wondered how the situation would end. As with a lover, there was no exact scenario of how matters would come to a close. Anxiety became the operative force” (235). What’s striking is that Andrea’s anxiety is not something that leads to a change in her character or condition, and it is not something that gets altered by the end of the story. Instead, it is part of who she is—and of course another sign of her very unhealthy attachment.

The interaction in the middle continues the pattern of the initiation with some modification. The narrator retains the cool and distant attitude, but a greater proportion of the narration is through Andrea’s focalization and her voice mixes with the narrator’s more frequently. As a result, we become more knowledgeable about Andrea without becoming sympathetic to her the way we are with Prue. The most significant consequence of this effect comes in the ending.

Beattie completes the story in the last three paragraphs. The first two of these finally resolve the tension through an analepsis telling the story of how Andrea acquired the bowl. The key revelation of this mini-narrative is that Andrea received the bowl “several years earlier” (236) as a gift from her then lover, who bought it for her at a crafts fair they’d attended several years earlier. Almost as important is the specific sequence of events that led to the purchase because it provides several key strokes in Beattie’s portrait of Andrea. Initially, she’d admired it but passed on buying it; her lover went back to the booth and bought it for her, and over time it became the gift from him she liked best. This revelation that, left to her own devices, she’d have admired the bowl but not taken action to possess it becomes especially salient in the conclusion to the mini-narrative, narrated in Beattie’s penultimate paragraph.

Her lover said that she was always too slow to know what she really loved. Why continue with her life the way it was? Why be two-faced, he asked her. He had made the first move toward her. When she would not decide in his favor, would not change her life and come to him, he asked her what made her think she could have it both ways. And then he made the last move and left. It was a decision meant to break her will, to shatter her intransigent ideas about honoring previous commitments. (236)

This paragraph resolves the tension because it enables us to recognize that her attachment to the bowl is a kind of substitution by metonymy. She has replaced her lover with the bowl, the gift of his that she liked best. In
effect, her relationship with the bowl is the one she has entered into on the rebound after her lover left her. This relationship is of course much safer than any relationship with a man would be—the bowl can’t leave her as the lover did—but it also keeps Andrea distant from her husband. And the fact that it can’t leave does not prevent her from feeling anxiety about the future, because it can easily break. Just as her lover left her, so might his replacement.

Beattie loads considerable irony into the ethical language rendered in indirect discourse about Andrea’s “intransigent ideas about honoring previous commitments.” The first layer of irony is that the affair itself suggests that her idea of what it means to honor “previous commitments” is not at all intransigent but extremely flexible. The second layer of irony is that the lover’s decision to leave has not resulted in her acting, on an emotional and psychological level, to honor those commitments any better. The third layer is that in practical terms this otherwise ill-fitting language does capture something about Andrea’s position. Just as she was unable to decide to purchase the bowl she is unable to decide to choose between her lover or her husband. And now she has replicated the situation via the substitution by metonymy.

With the resolution of the tension about the origin of Andrea’s attachment to the bowl, we also understand the meaning of the story’s title, and we have some firmer grounds upon which to thematize Andrea’s character. Andrea is Janus, looking in two directions but moving toward neither. She looks at her husband and at another object of desire—indeed, she has been looking in these two directions for “several years”; the only change has been her substituting the bowl for her lover. Furthermore, although the evidence suggests that she more strongly desires the extramarital object, she is unable to choose it. To be Andrea is to decide by not deciding, to be stuck—and filled with anxiety at being stuck—between two possible directions.

Beattie completes the revelation of Andrea’s character and condition, both mimetically and thematically, in the iterative description of the final paragraph:

Time passed. Alone in the living room at night, she often looked at the bowl sitting on the table, still and safe, unilluminated. In its way, it was perfect: the world cut in half, deep and smoothly empty. Near the rim, even in dim light, the eye moved toward one small flash of blue, a vanishing point on the horizon. (236)

The iterative mode underlines the point that Andrea has occupied this
position for some time, even as it reinforces the audience’s arrival at the completion of her portrait. The farewell brilliantly moves between the narrator’s and Andrea’s vision and voice as Beattie subtly guides our inferences. She starts with the narrator’s vision and voice, moves at “looked at” to Andrea’s vision and voice and then moves back out to the narrator’s vision and voice as she gives an external description of how “the eye moved.” Beattie communicates her judgments to us largely through her choice of adjectives, several of which cluster together because of their semantic family resemblance: “alone,” “still,” “safe,” “empty,” and “vanishing.” This cluster of adjectives then puts pressure on Andrea’s aesthetic judgment of the bowl, repeated from the first line of the story, as “perfect.” Those adjectives illuminate the aesthetic judgment as a sign of her ethical deficiency, because they apply so well to Andrea herself. To be Andrea is to be alone, still, safe, and empty; it is to spend one’s nights staring at an empty bowl that constitutes half of her world. The eye may move toward the flash of blue, but Andrea herself is incapable of movement.

At this point, we can also see how Beattie uses the intertextual connection to James’s *The Golden Bowl*. James uses his gilded crystal bowl whose beautiful surface hides fundamental flaws as a way to comment on Maggie Verver’s flawed perception of her marriage to Prince Amerigo and the marriage between her father and Charlotte Stant that she had been so eager to promote. Beattie, on the other hand, never reveals any flaw in Andrea’s bowl itself; the flaw rather is in Andrea’s relation to it. Furthermore, where James’s commitment to narrative allows him to trace Maggie’s impressive progress after she learns of the flaws both in the bowl and in the two marriages, Beattie’s commitment to portraiture leads her to place Andrea in an essentially static position.

Beattie’s final paragraph indicates that she, unlike Munro, does not ask us to sympathize with her protagonist as we observe and judge her. Instead, Beattie presents and analyzes Andrea with a kind of clinical detachment as she guides us to our negative ethical judgments. If both portrait narratives represent dangerous possibilities for women and both outcomes are chilling and poignant, Munro’s presentation of that danger puts greater emphasis on the poignant side of the scale, while Beattie’s puts greater emphasis on what’s chilling.

Consequently, individual readers are more likely to diverge in their estimations of Beattie’s ethical relation to them than they are in their estimations of Munro’s. Some readers will find Beattie’s clinical analysis of Andrea and her condition to be a sign of coldness, of a lack of compassion on Beattie’s part. They may even find her to be arrogant in her presentation.
Needless to say, such decisions about Beattie’s ethics will negatively influence their second-order aesthetic judgments of the story as a whole. However technically skillful these readers will find the story to be, they will find that her attitudes (that is, what they interpret those attitudes to be) mar her overall achievement. Other readers, however—and I put myself in this camp—will be more impressed by Beattie’s careful construction of the narrative, a care that extends to her audience and the subtle guidance she provides us in our efforts to comprehend Andrea. In other words, the clinical detachment that Beattie exhibits in her presentation of Andrea is not at all evident in her relation to her audience. Consequently, in this view the ethics of the telling are markedly different from the ethics of the told, and these ethics create a bond of trust between implied author and authorial audiences. Readers who feel that bond will also make positive second-order aesthetic judgments of Beattie’s achievement.