In this last chapter of Part Two, I return to lyric narrative but consider a considerably different experiment with the hybrid form in Robert Frost’s “Home Burial.” The difference is evident in the verse form itself as well as in Frost’s choice of technique. Although Frost employs a narrator early in the poem, he primarily communicates to his audience through the dialogue between husband and wife. But, as I shall argue, Frost also uses the lyric narrative form to construct a different kind of ethical dimension in the authorial audience’s reading experience than we have seen in any of the texts we have examined, and that ethical dimension naturally has significant consequences for our aesthetic judgments. Finally, Frost’s experiment provides additional grounds for a re-examination of narrativity within rhetorical poetics that I will take up at the end of this chapter.

In “Home Burial” Frost packs into his dramatic presentation of a husband’s and a wife’s very different responses to the death of their child an extremely powerful mixture of emotions: grief, fear, love, and anger. The poem’s dramatic mode is crucial to its affective power because it allows Frost to confront the audience with the very rawness of those emotions. As Seamus Heaney says, “the entrapment of the couple, their feral involvement with each other as each other’s quarry and companion is not held at a safe narrative distance but erupts into the space between the reader and the text. . . . The top of the reader’s head is lifted like the latch of the protagonist’s tormented home” (76). More specifically, the dialogue highlights the conflict between the unnamed husband and his wife, Amy, as it represents their miscommunication, their recriminations, Amy’s desire to flee, and the husband’s threats of violence, themselves borne out of his now desperate love. At the same time, the poem indicates that their
dialogue is suffused with their pain over their beloved child’s death and that their interaction (or lack of interaction) between his burial and this dialogue has only compounded their pain.

Judgments and Progression in “Home Burial”

HOME BURIAL

He saw her from the bottom of the stairs
Before she saw him. She was starting down,
Looking back over her shoulder at some fear.
She took a doubtful step and then undid it
To raise herself and look again. He spoke
Advancing toward her: “What is it you see
From up there always?—for I want to know.”
She turned and sank upon her skirts at that,
And her face changed from terrified to dull.
He said to gain time: “What is it you see?”
Mounting until she cowered under him.
“I will find out now—you must tell me, dear.”
She, in her place, refused him any help,
With the least stiffening of her neck and silence.
She let him look, sure that he wouldn’t see,
Blind creature; and awhile he didn’t see.
But at last he murmured, “Oh,” and again, “Oh.”
“What is it—what?” she said.

“Just that I see.”

“You don’t,” she challenged. “Tell me what it is.”

“The wonder is I didn’t see at once.
I never noticed it from here before.
I must be wonted to it—that’s the reason.
The little graveyard where my people are!
So small the window frames the whole of it.
Not so much larger than a bedroom, is it?

There are three stones of slate and one of marble,
Broad-shouldered little slabs there in the sunlight
On the sidehill. We haven't to mind those.
But I understand: it is not the stones,
But the child's mound—"

"Don't, don't, don't,
don't," she cried.

She withdrew, shrinking from beneath his arm
That rested on the banister, and slid downstairs;
And turned on him with such a daunting look,
He said twice over before he knew himself:
"Can't a man speak of his own child he's lost?"

"Not you!—Oh, where's my hat? Oh, I don't need it!
I must get out of here. I must get air.—
I don't know rightly whether any man can."

"Amy! Don't go to someone else this time.
Listen to me. I won't come down the stairs."
He sat and fixed his chin between his fists.
"There's something I should like to ask you, dear."

"You don't know how to ask it."

"Help me, then."

Her fingers moved the latch for all reply.

"My words are nearly always an offense.
I don't know how to speak of anything
So as to please you. But I might be taught,
I should suppose. I can't say I see how.
A man must partly give up being a man
With womenfolk. We could have some arrangement
By which I'd bind myself to keep hands off
Anything special you're a-mind to name.
Though I don't like such things 'twixt those that love.
Two that don't love can't live together without them.
But two that do can't live together with them."
She moved the latch a little. “Don’t—don’t go. Don’t carry it to someone else this time. Tell me about it if it’s something human. Let me into your grief. I’m not so much Unlike other folks as your standing there Apart would make me out. Give me my chance. I do think, though, you overdo it a little. What was it brought you up to think it the thing To take your mother-loss of a first child So inconsolably—in the face of love. You’d think his memory might be satisfied—”

“There you go sneering now!”

“I’m not, I’m not! You make me angry. I’ll come down to you. God, what a woman! And it’s come to this, A man can’t speak of his own child that’s dead.”

“You can’t because you don’t know how to speak. If you had any feelings, you that dug With your own hand—how could you?—his little grave; I saw you from that very window there, Making the gravel leap and leap in air, Leap up, like that, like that, and land so lightly And roll back down the mound beside the hole. I thought, Who is that man? I didn’t know you. And I crept down the stairs and up the stairs To look again, and still your spade kept lifting. Then you came in. I heard your rumbling voice Out in the kitchen, and I don’t know why, But I went near to see with my own eyes. You could sit there with the stains on your shoes Of the fresh earth from your own baby’s grave And talk about your everyday concerns. You had stood the spade up against the wall Outside there in the entry, for I saw it.”

“I shall laugh the worst laugh I ever laughed. I’m cursed. God, if I don’t believe I’m cursed.”
"I can repeat the very words you were saying:  
'Three foggy mornings and one rainy day  
Will rot the best birch fence a man can build.'  
Think of it, talk like that at such a time!  
What had how long it takes a birch to rot  
To do with what was in the darkened parlor?  
You couldn't care! The nearest friends can go  
With anyone to death, comes so far short  
They might as well not try to go at all.  
No, from the time when one is sick to death,  
One is alone, and he dies more alone.  
Friends make pretense of following to the grave,  
But before one is in it, their minds are turned  
And making the best of their way back to life  
And living people, and things they understand.  
But the world's evil. I won't have grief so  
If I can change it. Oh, I won't, I won't!"

"There, you have said it all and you feel better.  
You won't go now. You're crying. Close the door.  
The heart's gone out of it: why keep it up?  
Amy! There's someone coming down the road!"

"You—oh, you think the talk is all. I must go—  
Somewhere out of this house. How can I make you—"

"If—you—do!" She was opening the door wider.  
"Where do you mean to go? First tell me that.  
I'll follow and bring you back by force. I will!—"

Frost’s poem has received excellent commentary from some first-rate poet-critics, including Randall Jarrell, Joseph Brodsky, and Seamus Heaney, and from highly accomplished Frost scholars and critics, including Frank Lentricchia, Richard Poirier, Katherine Kearns, and Walter Jost, and their analyses have deepened my own understanding of the poem. In my view, Brodsky’s analysis is the most trenchant, and I shall draw upon it here both because of its insight and because I have one significant disagreement

2. Jost is also very insightful as he analyses the way Frost explores and exposes the powers and the limits of talk in this dramatic dialogue.
with it that also underlines how attention to progression yields different results from Brodsky’s widely practiced method of analysis. Brodsky’s method, like that of most other commentators on the poem, analyzes its developing drama through careful attention to Frost’s linguistic choices. The approach through progression, while also attending to Frost’s language and the developing drama, seeks to identify the underlying logic of the poem’s sequence of interpretive and ethical judgments from beginning through middle to ending and the relationship among its elements of narrativity, portraiture, and lyricality. This analysis then provides the basis for our second-order aesthetic judgments.

“Home Burial” has some significant markers of narrativity: a narrator telling us that something happened, specifically a narrator telling us about the linked sequence of actions and speeches of Amy and her husband; the sequence begins with the husband’s vision of Amy at the top of the stairs and ends with her leaving the house while he shouts after her. “Home Burial” progresses, in part, through a dynamics of instability as the husband seeks unsuccessfully to connect with Amy, and she, in reaction to him, moves from resisting his efforts, to granting him a chance, to criticizing him and, finally, leaving the scene. The poem also progresses through a dynamics of tension: the poem in its first half only hints at Amy’s response to her child’s death and then in its second half gives a full revelation of her attitude. Amy’s leaving the house as the poem ends does provide closure (this conversation is over), but her act complicates rather than resolves the instabilities between the couple. Indeed, Frost heightens that lack of resolution by ending the poem with a dash after the husband’s threat: “I’ll follow you and bring you back by force. I will!” (120).

If the poem were constructed only on the principle of achieving a high degree of narrativity, this lack of resolution of the instabilities would be a flaw because the poem would take us in the direction of a clear change but would stop short of disclosing that change. But the widely acknowledged effectiveness of the ending suggests that narrativity is not the only principle behind Frost’s construction of the poem. And, indeed, the marks of narrativity co-exist with marks of portraiture and especially of lyricality. (I will come back to these points in my discussion of narrativity later in this chapter.)

The marks of portraiture arise from the link between the characters’ speeches and the revelation of each character’s identity: Amy with her fierce allegiance to fixed ideas about death and grief is sharply distinct from her husband, who sees death more as part of life and whose fierceness is directed at Amy’s withdrawal from him. Furthermore, the poem progresses not only according to the logic of instability and tension but
also through the double logic typical of the dramatic dialogue: as each character’s speech is motivated by the specific situation, Frost uses that speech to sketch a larger picture. In other words, as Frost shows Amy and her husband responding to each other in their moments of painful conflict, he also uses those responses to reveal something beyond the particulars of the drama: their different attitudes toward grief and the consequences of those attitudes. As these descriptions suggest, the signs of portraiture are subordinated to the poem’s narrativity and lyricality. More important than the revelation of the characters of Amy and her husband are the revelation of their attitudes and the representation of the ongoing, unresolved conflict between them. The ending of the poem is effective, despite its failure to resolve the instabilities, because it does complete Frost’s representation of the way the couple’s opposed attitudes have brought them to their situation of perilous stalemate.

There are other features of the poem that point to its lyric narrative hybridity. First is Frost’s use of the interior of the house as the setting, a lyric space in which the characters’ differences get articulated but not resolved. As these differences are revealed, Frost shows the characters’ movement: Amy is initially upstairs and her husband down, and in the course of their dialogue they change places. However, once Amy leaves that house, the lyric frame is broken; any answer to the question of “and then what?” would almost inevitably make the narrative component of the hybrid dominant.

Second, Frost gives his audience various signals to lead us to the interpretive judgment that the present conflict is part of an ongoing unstable situation, an impasse that began when the child died. These signals include not only Amy’s report of her offense at her husband’s seemingly matter-of-fact speech the day he dug the child’s grave but also the husband’s references to the recent past: “don’t go to someone else this time” (41); “Let me into your grief” (62). To be sure, Frost does not represent this current conversation as a repetition of previous ones, but rather highlights its potential to be different: the husband for the first time sees what Amy “see[s]/ From up there always” (6–7)—the child’s grave; Amy for the first time explains how he has offended her and how she views what she owes to the dead child. But the failure of the new conversation to bring about any break in their impasse only serves to highlight its intractability. Something happens, but nothing substantial changes: that’s the nature of the lyric narrative hybridity of “Home Burial.”

Third, as the progression develops, the narrator intervenes less, with the result that the past tense narrative comes to resemble a present-tense dialogue. Fourth, Frost typically restricts the narrator’s function primarily
to reporting the characters’ actions (e.g., “He saw her from the bottom of the stairs / Before she saw him” [1–2]; “She was opening the door wider” [118]), though he occasionally uses the narrator to interpret some of the actions: (“She took a doubtful step and then undid it” [4; my emphasis]). But Frost never uses the narrator to evaluate either character, leaving those ethical judgments to his own communications to the audience through the characters’ speech.

At the same time, Frost shows that the characters frequently judge each other, something that often invites our ethical judgments of them. And in fact, the history of criticism on the poem shows that many readers have made such judgments. But that history also shows that there is no consensus about which character should be judged negatively and which positively. Indeed, a closer look at the attitudes and techniques in the poem indicates that, though Frost does judge the characters’ behavior toward each other during this interaction, he does not ultimately take sides on the question of whose response to the child’s death is more adequate. Frost’s treatment creates an unusual but very powerful relation among the ethical positions in the poem, including his position in relation to his audience, a point that I will return to after further analysis of the poem’s progression.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the progression—one that certainly deserves to be accounted for—is that Frost saves the main revelation of both characters’ attitudes for Amy’s two long speeches in the second half of the poem. In the first half, he does give us some signals about each one’s attitudes—clearer ones about the husband’s than Amy’s—but he focuses primarily on the unstable situation between the two characters. The husband directs his efforts—uncertain and sometimes clumsy—to connecting with Amy (“let me into your grief” [59]), and Amy is torn between responding to those efforts and escaping from the scene altogether. Consequently, she fluctuates among three responses: resisting and rebuking him, remaining open to his next effort, and walking out. Her own emotions, we recognize, are themselves conflicted: she still has enough residual feeling for her husband to stay and listen as long as she does, but she feels very distant from and distrustful of him because he is grieving so differently—indeed, from her perspective, not really grieving. For the same reason, she is well on her way to despairing that he will ever understand what she is going through.

3. Amy, as the character who takes the more extreme position, often becomes the focal point of judgment. For negative views, see especially Poirier (1977) and Lentricchia (1975). For positive ones, see especially Oehlschlager (1981) and Carroll (1990). Brodsky is among those who contend, as I do, that Frost does not side with one character over the other.
Amy’s conflict and her varied responses cause our emotions to fluctuate as we see the two characters, in this atmosphere suffused with their separate pain and mutual suspicion, teeter on the brink of either moving back toward each other or breaking further apart. Frost shades his treatment of the two characters in the first half so that we are more sympathetic to the husband, though he introduces tensions about Amy’s attitudes and invites us to make only mild negative judgments of each.

Because Frost starts with the husband as the focalizing character (“He saw her from the bottom of the stairs” [1]), we enter the poem oriented toward his perspective. In addition, because Frost soon uses a shift to Amy’s perspective to reveal that her view of her husband’s perceptions is both harsh (“blind creature”) and erroneous, our initial alignment with the husband increases:

She let him look, sure that he wouldn’t see,
Blind creature; and awhile he didn’t see.
But at last he murmured, “Oh,” and again, “Oh.” (15–17)

His “Oh,” we learn, signifies that he does “see” that Amy has been looking out the window at the child’s grave. We should also note, however, that Amy’s misjudgment (both interpretive and ethical) is not egregious—he sees only “at last”—a sign that Amy’s harshness, though primarily a product of her grief and estrangement, is not entirely without foundation and that, consequently, mitigates our ethical judgment of her.

Frost continues to align us more closely with the husband throughout the first part of the poem even as Frost gives us signals not to rush to judgment about Amy. After Amy cuts off the husband’s description of the child’s grave by saying “Don’t, don’t, don’t, don’t” (30), as if his words themselves will hurt her physically, he twice asks, “Can’t a man speak of his own child he’s lost?” (35). Although this utterance has the surface form of a rhetorical question, it is, in effect, a complaint about her being unreasonable, and it appears to deserve at least a “Yes, but” answer. Such, however, is the painful distance between them that Amy’s initial response is a harsh rebuke: “Not you!—Oh, where’s my hat?” (36). Her quick softening of this response, “I don’t know that any man can” (38), points to her torn feelings in the situation and again kindles some hope in us that they will move back toward each other, even as the line itself does not express any real hope that he can understand her grief. This softening indicates that she cares enough for her husband to take some of the sting out of her answer and to stay and talk for now—or at least listen further.
the content of the line complicates the tension about just what her attitudes are.

Frost’s focus on the husband’s efforts to connect with Amy reveals not only that the husband genuinely cares about her and their marriage but also that he is far less overcome with grief than she. He acts, she reacts, and as the poem progresses we recognize that both his actions and her reactions are tied as much to their different attitudes toward their loss as to what either of them says on this occasion. This dimension of the poem’s dynamics begins to move into the foreground at the end of the husband’s appeal to “Give me my chance” (62) to be let into Amy’s grief. Rather than stopping with that appeal, the husband moves on to judge her:

I do think, though, that you overdo it a little.  
What was it brought you up to think it the thing  
To take your mother-loss of a first child  
So inconsolably—in the face of love. (63–66)

The poem pivots because, prior to this point, the husband has seemed willing to do whatever was necessary to re-connect, even offering to agree to

some arrangement
By which I’d bind myself to keep hands off
Anything special you’re a-mind to name. (50–52)

In lines 63–66, the husband’s negative judgment is so obviously premature and so counterproductive to what he claims to want that it complicates our understanding of him and, thus, of the whole interaction—and, indeed, of Frost’s purposes. We recognize that underneath this judgment are several complex emotions. These lines have the quality of a preemptive strike, a warning about what he is able to sympathize with. He is clearly fearful that she will tell him something that he will not be able to handle. Furthermore, line 66 suggests that there’s a tinge of jealousy in his judgment, a worry that her being inconsolable means that she loves the child more than she loves him, even as it registers his concern that she has found no solace for her grief in their love. The suggestion of jealousy is reinforced when the next line reveals for the first time that the baby was a boy: “You’d think his memory might be satisfied—” (66; my emphasis).

At this juncture, we see that it is not just Amy who is torn about how to respond; her husband, even as he is trying his best to connect, fluctuates
among loving kindness, fearful defensiveness, and threats. Frost has chosen to present the characters at the moment when their emotions are most conflicted, and their interaction most charged; consequently, each of them is very ready to give and to take offense. If the couple’s relationship were still dominated by love, they could progress back toward each other, and if they had already moved further apart, they could not hurt each other so much. As it is, Frost challenges his audience to attend to the gut-wrenching dynamics of their current interaction.

The husband’s reference to Amy’s being satisfied, with its presumption to know how she should feel, brings out Amy’s fierce defensiveness: “There you go sneering now!” (67). His immediate and not unreasonable denial soon leads to her articulation of their respective attitudes toward their son’s death. Brodsky says that in this conflict of attitudes the husband stands for “reason” (49), a designation that is fair enough, if we add that reason recognizes that death entails loss and pain even as it sees death as part of life. Amy’s first speech castigates the husband for being unfeeling, for digging the child’s grave and being able to talk of how a birch fence rots, for bringing the spade that dug the grave into the house. Frost captures the husband’s pain—rooted in his comprehension not of her pain but of her incomprehension of him—by quoting his brief interruption: “I shall laugh the worst laugh I ever laughed. / I’m cursed. God, if I don’t believe I’m cursed” (89–90).

At the end of her second speech Amy herself comes close to capturing the gap between her husband’s attitude and her own in lines that link up with her earlier “I don’t know rightly whether any man can” (38):

Friends make pretense of following to the grave,
But before one is in it, their minds are turned
And making the best of their way back to life
And living people and things they understand.
But the world’s evil. I won’t have grief so
If I can change it. Oh, I won’t, I won’t! (102–108)

Amy’s husband, in her view, is among this company of “friends,” and Frost has given us considerable evidence that her view is only slightly overstated. The husband’s previous failure to recognize the grave from the upstairs window; his comments on the day that he dug the grave—“Three foggy mornings and one rainy day / Will rot the best birch fence a man can build” (92–93)—that she objects to so strenuously; his belief that Amy’s giving expression to her thoughts will make her feel better; and
especially his general effort throughout the poem to make his “way back to” the living person who is the mother of his child: all this behavior indicates that his focus is less on his son than on his ongoing life.

Amy, for her part, finds this view not just intolerable but a sign that the world is “evil” and that this view of grief must not only be resisted but changed. Brodsky describes Amy as now “rambling on in an increasingly incoherent fashion about death, the world being evil, uncaring friends, and being alone,” and he describes the speech as “a hysterical monologue, whose only function, in terms of the story line, is to struggle toward a release for what has been pent up in her mind” (46). If Brodsky is right, then Frost, in effect, has chosen to end Amy’s second long speech with a distinct anticlimax, one in which the exact details of what she says matter little. I see the content of Amy’s speech as much more significant than that, and this disagreement highlights the difference between Brodsky’s approach and the rhetorical one.

As noted above, Brodsky, like most commentators, is primarily concerned with the developing drama between Amy and her husband, and focuses on the language of the poem as the key to that drama. Brodsky sees Amy’s speech about grief as anticlimactic because he (quite rightly) sees her expression of outrage over her husband’s behavior on the day he dug the grave as the point in the dialogue that most dramatically shows the distance between them. By contrast, the rhetorical perspective focuses on what I have called the double logic of the poem’s progression: as the drama plays out, Frost also reveals the underlying attitudes of both Amy and her husband, attitudes that are essential to the lyric side of “Home Burial”’s lyric narrative hybridity. Before Amy’s speech about grief, Frost has essentially completed his revelation of the husband’s attitudes but has not yet fully revealed Amy’s. The revelation of this attitude, because it is more unconventional, needs to be direct and it needs to be in Amy’s own words. Those words indicate that Amy is neither rambling nor hysterical; instead she uses them to offer a clear, coherent, and fiercely passionate expression of the difference between her view of grief and that of her husband—indeed, of almost everyone else. For her, the death of her child is not just part of life but the end of his life, and so it changes everything about her life. Those who, like her husband, act as if life goes on must be ignorant and insensitive, because life can’t go on in the same way now that this life no longer goes on. Her view is stark, implacable—and absolutely incompatible with her husband’s.

Strikingly, Frost does nothing to undercut Amy’s view just as he did nothing to undercut the husband’s view—except to juxtapose them and
to show that, in each case, the view leads to some interpretive and ethical misjudgment or some mistreatment of the other. But those misjudgments are the product not of the views themselves but of the difference between them.

Alas, her husband does not understand Amy’s view—indeed, cannot allow himself to understand it because it is too threatening to his own attitudes. Consequently, he responds by focusing not on the content of her speech but on her having spoken from the heart: “There, you have said it all and you feel better” (108). Having explained herself and been so misunderstood, Amy reaches her breaking point: “You—Oh, you think the talk is all. I must go—/ Somewhere out of this house” (112–13). Her resolve arouses his fear, and so he resorts to threats: “If—you—do!” (114), and, when she leaves anyway, “I’ll follow you and bring you back by force. I will!—” (116). In reading these concluding lines, we watch with horror as they now seem about to fall from the precipice upon which they have been so precariously swaying into a very uncertain future. Our understanding of their ways of dealing with their child’s death now makes that fall appear inevitable, but that sense of inevitability does not make it any less painful to witness.

Ethical Purpose and Second-Order Aesthetic Judgments

From the ethical perspective, the most significant choice Frost makes is not to judge either response to the child’s death as interpretively or ethically superior: more discerning, more appropriate, more human, or otherwise of greater insight or value. This choice is simultaneously crucial to our second-order aesthetic judgment of the poem. I believe that the analysis of the progression already shows that Frost’s skill in managing the technical aspects of his dramatic dialogue is well above the threshold of competence. Thus, if we find that the choice of not privileging Amy’s view or husband’s leads to a valuable ethical dimension of our experience, then we will judge the aesthetic quality of that experience as similarly valuable. If, on the other hand, we find that the choice leads to a muddled or otherwise unsatisfying ethical experience, then we will judge the overall aesthetic quality of the experience as disappointing despite Frost’s technical skill.

Frost’s choice not to take sides matters for the ethical relation between the two characters because, as I noted above, we make the interpretive judgment that, although they do mistreat and misjudge each other, those
actions are a result not of their fundamental ethical deficiencies but of the sharp differences in their response. To put this point another way, there is no necessary connection between either attitude and the mistreatments and misjudgments represented in the poem. Instead, the mistreatments are a consequence of the gap between the two views and each character’s deep conviction that his or her view is right. Frost’s choice not to privilege one attitude over the other also matters for the narrator’s ethical position in relation to the characters because it leads to the narrator’s even-handed treatment of them.

Above all, the choice matters for Frost’s ethical purpose and his relation to us, though it is of course not the only thing that matters. Because the progression requires us to see the situation from each character’s perspective and because that progression also underlines the merit of each view, Frost, in effect, asks us to dwell inside each character’s perspective. The result is an ethical and aesthetic challenge: to participate in each character’s attitude while recognizing the fundamental incompatibility of those attitudes and the way in which that incompatibility, now more powerful than the prior bond between the characters, is driving them apart. Frost’s intertwined ethical and aesthetic purpose, in other words, is to make us feel validity, incompatibility, and consequence without seeking to resolve the conflict among these responses. He takes us deep inside the complexity of the relation between death and mourning, on the one hand, and life and love, on the other, without providing us with any clear way out, any particular answer to the question of what are the true and the good here. His ethical challenge to us is to see whether—and perhaps how long—we can stay inside that complexity.

In this respect, “Home Burial” invites us to consider the ethical consequences of a reading experience that I have elsewhere (Phelan 1996) called “the stubborn,” by which I mean an experience that proves ultimately recalcitrant to our efforts to develop a single, coherent understanding of it even as that recalcitrance adds to rather than detracts from the power of the experience. In Morrison’s Beloved, for example, we cannot offer a single, coherent account of Beloved’s character but Beloved’s fundamental incoherence contributes significantly to the range and force of Morrison’s historical fiction. In “Home Burial,” the stubbornness resides in Frost’s insistence on the equal validity of the fundamentally incompatible attitudes—and his decision not to provide a third alternative from which these two could be judged.

The first ethical consequence of the stubbornness is that it challenges us not only as authorial readers to stay inside Frost’s vision of the simultane-
ous validity and incompatibility of the two attitudes but also as flesh-and-blood readers to re-examine our own attitudes toward death and grief. The stubbornness challenges us to re-examine those attitudes precisely because it insists that there is no one superior attitude. Furthermore, because the poem also shows how their incompatible beliefs lead Amy and her husband ineluctably to torment rather than comfort each other, we must question both our individual beliefs and the depth of commitment to any belief.

The second ethical consequence of the stubbornness involves the relation between Frost and both the authorial and flesh-and-blood audiences. In challenging his audiences this way, Frost is also complimenting us through the respect implicit in that challenge and implicitly requesting a similar respect from us. Frost’s construction of the poem indicates not only his belief in the efficacy of the dramatic dialogue for accomplishing his multiple purposes but also his confidence that we can unpack that dialogue and its implications. By demanding that we be worthy of the poem, he shows that he has a high regard for our cognitive, emotive, and ethical capacities. That demand also includes his implicit request that we do what we need to in order to be worthy of the poem. As a result of our efforts, then, we are likely to find that Frost’s window on death, grief, mourning, love, and life, changes us, that we cannot simply get on with life as we knew it before we dwelt within the poem because we no longer know life in the same way. That is, we now have a new and deeper awareness of the significance of death and the need to come to terms with it, even as we may be less confident of any one way of coming to terms. Individual readers, then, will come to terms in their own ways, even as the poem will resist any easy coming to terms.

As these last few paragraphs indicate, I see Frost’s choice not to take sides as leading to a rich, if difficult, ethical experience and consequently to a significant aesthetic achievement. But the specifics of the argument also underline a more general point about the rhetorical poetics of narrative, namely, the importance of the connection between reading within the authorial audience and reading as flesh-and-blood readers. If we had opted, for example, to bypass the authorial audience and say that flesh-and-blood readers inevitably resolve the stubbornness of the poem by giving greater weight to the attitude that most closely resembles their own, we would have effectively set aside Frost’s careful management of his ethical purpose and thereby diminished his aesthetic achievement. Similarly, if we had opted to leave the flesh-and-blood reader out of the analysis of the rhetorical communication, ending it with the recognition of the poem’s stubbornness, we would have short-circuited our consideration of the
ethical and aesthetic consequences of Frost's communication. By insisting on the connection between the two kinds of reading, rhetorical poetics provides a space for productive exchange between authorial communication and readerly response, and, indeed, among different readers.

Narrativity Redux

After the extended analyses of the four narratives of Part One and the five hybrid forms of Part Two, we are ready to return to the issue of degrees of narrativity that I touched on early in the Introduction. At that juncture, I argued that the degree of narrativity is a function both of the textual dynamics (the introduction of a substantial or insubstantial instability and whether the complications and resolution increase or decrease what's at stake in it) and of readerly dynamics (our multiple and layered judgments of the characters and events as well as their telling and the consequences of those judgments for our experience of the progression). In the discussions of the hybrid forms I have referred to several more specific features of textual dynamics that lead to a weaker degree of narrativity in these works:

1. in “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” the false starts (initial instabilities that never get complicated) and the very late launch of a pre-existing and unresolvable instability;
2. in “Woman Hollering Creek” the substitution during the story’s middle of further revelation about the global instability for complication of that instability;
3. in “Prue” and “Janus” the subordination of mini-narratives to the revelation of character;
4. in “Home Burial” cutting off the dialogue at a point that highlights the unresolved nature of the global instability without producing an effect of incompleteness.

As far as readerly dynamics go, the shift to participation rather than judgment in “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” and in “Home Burial” also contributes to the weaker degree of narrativity. The issue, then, is how the findings about degree of narrativity in the hybrid forms intersect with the two general points about it I offered in the Introduction. More particularly, given the findings about “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” and “Home Burial,” is the degree of narrativity also tied to the degree of resolution or what we might call satisfactory arrival?
The short answer is no. Narrativity is the independent variable and resolution the dependent variable. In other words, the degree of narrativity influences the kind of resolution that is satisfactory but not vice versa. One can have works with botched or no arrivals—think of unfinished narratives—that nevertheless have strong narrativity. And of course works can have strong resolutions and weak narrativity. The longer answer requires (a) a reminder that, as the two general points indicate, within the rhetorical approach narrativity is a concept with multiple variables; and more importantly (b) a distinction between completion in general and narrative completion in particular. Because narrativity is a double-layered phenomenon, the degree of narrativity within any one work is a consequence of both the extent to which its movement is generated by the instability-complication-resolution pattern and the extent to which it engages our interpretive and ethical judgments of the characters and the tellers involved in that sequence. Very strong narrativity depends on the work’s commitment to both sets of variables (textual and readerly). Weak narrativity arises from the work’s lack of interest in one or both sets of variables. Works that follow the instability-complication-resolution pattern but invite participation rather than judgment on the readerly side (e.g., Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”) have relatively weak narrativity. Works that focus on characters and invite judgment but do not follow the instability-complication-resolution pattern also have relatively weak narrativity.

Again within the rhetorical framework, completion in general refers to the way in which a text rounds out both the patterns generating its movement and the developing responses of its audience, while narrative completion refers to the rounding off of narrative patterns both textual (instability-complication-resolution) and readerly (the sequence of judgments and their affective, ethical, and aesthetic consequences). In “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” and “Home Burial,” Hemingway and Frost each face the challenge of finding the most effective ending for his specific experiment in lyric narrative hybridity. I have tried to show why and how each one succeeds so well.