Chapter 5

Varieties of Multiple Narration (I)

Parallel Narrators in William Faulkner’s 
*The Sound and the Fury* and David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive*

When thinking about narration, people commonly imagine a single narrator. But many works have multiple narrators. Indeed, multiple narration in some form is found in almost every narrative of any length. This chapter begins by distinguishing three forms of multiple narration—embedded, collective, and parallel. It then explores parallel narration in greater detail, leaving embedded multiple narration for chapter 6.

**Multiple Narration**

The most common way of having multiple narrators is through embedding. As William Nelles explains, embedding is “the structure by which a character in a narrative text becomes the narrator of a second text framed by the first one.” He goes on to comment that “While this might seem a rather specialised topic . . . embedded narrative is ubiquitous in the literature of all cultures and periods” (“Embedding” 134; on some mechanisms of embedding, see, for example, Bal 43–75). Most often, the main embedding involves the insertion of a personified narration into a nonpersonified narration. For example, this is typically the case with trial narratives, where the individual testimonies are included in a larger narrative of the trial that has a nonpersonified narrator. In addi-
tion, personified narration itself may embed narratives by other characters. In cases of this sort, the embedding story operates as a frame for the embedded story. The most obvious use of this device is in works such as *The Canterbury Tales*, where the frame presents a context in which multiple speakers tell their tales.

As the preceding examples already suggest, a narrative may have multiple narrators that are not embedded in one another. In some cases, such narrators tell the story *collectively*. (We will consider this case in chapter 6.) More commonly, such narrators are *parallel*. Indeed, the cases mentioned above—testimonies in a trial narrative and the various tales of the Canterbury pilgrims—are themselves parallel to one another, even if embedded in an encompassing narrative. If these parallel narrators are treating the same storyworld—as in a trial narrative—this parallelism may be called *conjunctive*.¹ The different stories are conjunctive in that readers are required to integrate them in inferring the story, thematic concerns, and normative emotions. If these narrators are treating different storyworlds—as in *The Canterbury Tales*—they are *disjunctive*. (The following analysis focuses entirely on conjunctive parallelism. For simplicity of exposition, then, “parallel narration” will be used to refer to specifically conjunctive parallelism, unless otherwise noted.)

The distinction between personified and nonpersonified narrators is important for parallel narration as well as for embedded narration. By far the most common form of parallel narration involves two or more personified narrators. A straightforward, albeit complex, case of parallel personified narration may be found in *The Sound and the Fury*.

The case of nonpersonified narrators is, of course, more complex. Though they are rare, it is possible to discern cases of parallel nonpersonified narration. The most striking instances of this come when a work divides into sections that apparently give different versions of the same events, thus the same storyworld, but these versions have nonpersonified narration. There is a case of this sort in David Lynch’s film *Mulholland Drive*. (For a partial, schematic overview of types of multiple narration, see Fig. 5.1.)

**Parallel Narration**

Again, (conjunctive) parallel narration occurs when there are two or more narrators telling versions of the same story or treating the same storyworld. Such multiple narrations are, in general, of interest to the
Figure 5.1. The two forms of multiple narration. Embedding is marked by arrows.
degree that they diverge from one another—through contradiction, differences in emphasis, filling in or leaving out different details, and so on. When evaluating diverse narratives of the same story events, readers do what they always do in inferring the story, particularly when faced with an unreliable narrator. The default assumption is that all the narratives have some relation to the facts of the storyworld—through experience, memory, inference, hearsay. However, this relation may be distorted by self-interest or error. In other words, one or more of the narratives may be affected by motivational or epistemic unreliability. When faced with an emotionally consequential tension between two versions—thus, a gap—people first rely on heuristics. When unconnected narrators give the same details, readers tend to assume they are true; when narrators give divergent details, readers tend to accept the ones that do not serve the self-interests of the narrator who reports them. When heuristics fail, readers undertake more effortful explications, trying to formulate the best explanatory account of the narratives.

Even when there are not direct representational contradictions or tensions, readers may see the mere joining of the parallel narratives as constituting a gap that requires interpretive engagement. For example, if there is a series of parallel narrators who treat different aspects of the storyworld (for example, different time periods), the issue arises as to why the parallelism is organized in precisely this way. Thus even in cases where the different parallel narratives create compatible versions of the storyworld, their parallelism alone will probably lead one to think of them together, to look for similarities or contrasts, particularly with an eye on emotional or thematic purposes. Indeed, the same point holds for disjunctive parallelism.

In short, all works with (conjunctive or disjunctive) parallel narrators potentially invite the reader or viewer to relate the individual narratives to one another. This is perhaps the major difference between works of parallel narration and collections (e.g., Selected Stories by William Faulkner). Simply put, collections do not presuppose that a reader will read all the works or do so in the order provided. They allow for selective reading. In contrast, works of parallel narration commonly assume complete and directional reading. More technically, the implied reader of a work understands and responds to a work—including works with parallel narration—as both a particular sequence and as a whole. There is no implied reader for a collection; there are only the implied readers of the individual works. Parallel to this, there is no textual implied author for
a collection; there are only the textual implied authors for the individual works and the various levels of cross-textual implied author. There are also no initial and retrospective implicated authors across works in a collection, while these often figure importantly across parallel narrations (e.g., the implied reader’s understanding of the first testimony in a trial narrative may alter after the second testimony).

In the case of parallel narration with personified narrators, one may assume a nonpersonified narrator who is constant across the voices of the parallel narrators. This nonpersonified narrator commonly provides hints about the reliability or unreliability of the personified narrators. Obvious cases of this include what the camera reveals about a crime or about suspects in a criminal investigation, separate from embedded testimonies. In addition, all the usual heuristics for personified narrators apply to the embedded, parallel narrators.

In contrast, when a narrative has parallel nonpersonified narrators, many of the usual clues about story correctness are missing. In other words, if the nonpersonified narrators disagree, it is difficult for a reader to discern just what is correct in the storyworld. Here, readers follow the same sequence of experiencing task conflict (a gap), shifting to heuristics and then engaging in effortful explication. However, many heuristics are simply unavailable—for example, that concerning a (personified) narrator’s self-interest and that concerning a (personified) narrator’s expertise. On the other hand, some heuristics remain in place. For example, the heuristic of overlap would seem to hold. Presumably, whatever is common to the different versions is true in the storyworld. Moreover, the “mimetic” heuristic holds. As discussed in the preceding chapter, fiction may be understood as a specification of difference from the real world. Thus the real world always stands as a default case for the story. When there is no other disambiguating information, readers are likely to choose the version of story events that requires less deviation from the real world. Finally, readers are still able to apply general inferential and evidential processes.

Of course, here as elsewhere, when inferences fail, when one cannot determine the storyworld at one or another point, readers may turn to a functional explanation; readers may consider what emotional or thematic implications this indeterminacy has. Indeed, that is true even for cases where one feels that disambiguation is finally possible. Then too readers may be concerned with the emotional and thematic implications of narrational and other gaps—thus why there is a gap in the first place.
Mentalistic Narration

William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* is one of the most important works employing parallel, personified narration. The novel is divided into four sections, each of which has a different narrator. The first section is narrated by Benjamin “Benjy”—also called “Maury”—Compson, a mentally challenged man of thirty-three. The second is narrated by Benjy’s brother, Quentin, a suicidal Harvard student. The third is narrated by another of the Compson siblings, Jason. The final section has a nonpersonified narrator, partially focalized on Jason and the Compson domestic servant, Dilsey. Each section concerns a particular day (given in the chapter title), though many of the events recounted are memories. The first section is April 7, 1928; the second occurs eighteen years earlier; the third occurs on April 6, 1928; and the final section takes place on Easter Sunday, April 8, 1928.

The events recounted by the different narrators are by no means identical. However, they do overlap to some extent. In terms of establishing the story, a reader has several interpretive tasks. He or she needs to establish which events reported by one narrator correspond with which events reported by another narrator. In connection with this, he or she needs to infer what actually happened in the storyworld and what is uncertain or ambiguous. He or she also needs to place various events in temporal and causal relation with one another.

Again, the processes used by a reader in inferring the story are basically the same as those used in works with a single narrator. But there are some partial exceptions. An important and consequential case concerns initial trust of a narrator. Again, the default for judging the particular facts of the storyworld appears to be that the assertions of the narrator are trustworthy unless there is reason to believe otherwise. The point holds to some extent for multiple personified narrations. However, the existence of different points of view on the storyworld tends to foreground the biases, thus unreliabilities, of individual narrators. At the very least, the prospect of multiple versions of the same events makes the possibility of contradiction much more salient. Readers are almost necessarily more aware of that possibility in works of parallel narration. This may not provoke out-and-out skepticism. However, it seems likely to sensitize readers to the cognitive and affective biases of the different narrators, even before conflicts appear.

Indeed, in some cases, multiply narrated works so foreground divergent points of view that they can shift attention away from the events
themselves to the psychology of the narrators. In these cases, the events of the storyworld may remain highly ambiguous as readers use the different narratives to draw inferences about and respond emotionally to the narrators themselves. This is particularly likely in works that set out to represent the ongoing mental experience of these narrators.

These points are perhaps particularly clear in a work such as *The Sound and the Fury*. To understand the interpretive complexity of this work, it is useful to begin with some distinctions in what might be called “mentalistic narration.” “Mentalistic narration” is any sort of narration that seeks to represent the mental processes of the narrator as he or she represents the storyworld. Of course, this is a relative distinction. All forms of personified narration could be thought of as doing this in some degree. However, some narratives do this much more extensively than others.

The basic and minimal form of mentalistic narration is first-person narration; perhaps the most prototypical form is interior monologue. First-person narration is self-conscious narration in which the personified narrator explicitly formulates his or her representation of events in relation to his or her self-conscious perception, inference, memory, and so on. It may seem that this simply involves the use of the word “I.” However, a narration may not be first person and yet may use the first-person singular pronoun. This occurs in interior monologue, which is typically not a form of self-conscious narration. Leopold Bloom (in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*) is certainly conscious of himself. But he is not a self-conscious narrator.

So, a first important distinction is that between self-conscious and un-self-conscious or implicit narration. First-person narration is self-conscious. Interior monologue is un-self-conscious. This distinction is related to a division between retrospective and ongoing narration. This is not necessarily a distinction in the use of tense. Retrospective narration in particular may use present tense. However, it gives a sense that the events narrated are complete already and thus understood as a whole by the narrator. In contrast, in ongoing narration, the narrator does not know the outcome of events until those outcomes occur. First-person narration is often retrospective. Interior monologue is ongoing in that it isolates the moment-by-moment thoughts of the narrator.

Another way of putting this is to say that first-person narration always tacitly presupposes a narrating situation. There is always some implied narratee. There is always some context, even if it is wholly implicit. The (often implicit) narratee and context provide principles for
selecting and shaping what is told in a first-person narration. Narratees and narrating situations may be embedded in interior monologue (e.g., if a character explicitly reflects on how he or she will recount an event to someone else). But the interior monologue itself is, in principle, removed from such contextual and addressee-oriented selection. In principle, interior monologue gives the character’s thoughts as they occur, without choosing those that fit a particular narrative purpose. (Of course, by the account given in chapter 1, interior monologues are shaped by a nonpersonified narrator with the usual implicit, nonpersonified narratee.)

Interior monologue is considerably more significant for representing the mental processes of the narrator than is ordinary first-person narration. Moreover, there are different forms of narration related to interior monologue, with somewhat different properties, highlighting somewhat different cognitive and affective processes. Though not all of them are found in *The Sound and the Fury*, it is important to have a sense of this variety in understanding mentalistic narration.

Interior monologue is a representation of the ongoing sequence of verbal thoughts in a character’s mind. These thoughts presumably represent events in the storyworld—events that the character perceives, remembers, infers, desires, fears, or whatever. But they also, and often more importantly, manifest the mental processes of the character/narrator—hence the status of interior monologue as prototypical for mentalistic narration.

Given this definition, interior monologue may seem to be relatively straightforward. However, there are several levels at which interior monologue may be, so to speak, “transcribed.” The simplest is a direct reporting of subvocalization. People think in sequences of sentences during their ordinary, waking lives. These sentences are referred to as “subvocalizations” because people mentally articulate them without actually opening their mouths and saying them out loud. Joycean interior monologue is, generally, a form of transcribed subvocalization.

But there are other ways in which verbal thought may be represented. A slightly extended manner of representing interior monologue involves filling in perceptions, experiences, and so on, that are, so to speak, verbally formulated without being subvocalized. For example, if I see my department head, I recognize him and say hello. That does not mean that I think “There is Wayne” or even “Wayne.” But I still in some sense identify him by name and by title. In cognitive terms, one may say that the complex of verbal associations is primed (or partially activated), even if they are not fully activated and brought into subvocalized
sentences. Thus one form of interior monologue may represent one or more of the words that are part of a linguistic network associated with experience, even though they are not subvocalized. This may be called associative reformulation. In associative reformulation, the nonpersonified narrator supplies words that are part of the character’s/narrator’s thought, but are not specifically part of subvocalization.

We find associative reformulation in some of Virginia Woolf’s work. For example, Septimus Smith is suffering from trauma from the First World War, along with hallucinations. He is out with his wife and hears a sound. Woolf writes, “It is a motor horn, he muttered; but up here it cannoned from rock to rock, divided, met in shocks of sound which rose in smooth columns” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 103). Evidently, “It is a motor horn” is actually vocalized. What follows may be subvocalized. However, the military terms are probably best thought of as primed associations. Septimus experiences the echoing sound and links that to his ongoing preoccupation with the war. This leads to the partial activation of words such as “cannoned,” “columns” (which has a military as well as an architectural usage), and “shock” (linked with the unmentioned but clearly primed “shell,” as in “shell shock”). It seems that the discourse only returns to something close to strict interior monologue (with minor, third-person rephrasing) in the immediately following parenthetical insertion, “that music should be visible was a discovery” (103).

Stream of consciousness involves a still more inclusive representation of the ongoing experiences of a narrator/character. This potentially includes all such experiences—verbal, perceptual, imaginative, and emotional.\(^3\) Note that there is a, so to speak, “pure” case of interior monologue—the transcription of subvocalization. But there is no pure case for stream of consciousness. First, the representation of ongoing experience is necessarily partial. Second, in literature, that representation is necessarily limited to language, “the unalterable fact . . . that literature uses words,” as Dorrit Cohn puts it (109). Thus there is always some degree of reformulation—specifically, verbal encoding—of nonverbal aspects of stream of consciousness.\(^4\)

This limitation is partially lifted in film, where some aspects of visual and aural stream of consciousness may be represented directly. However, there are complications here. For example, it is very difficult to film point-of-view shots with realistic movement. In this way, there is always some degree of “reformulation” in the cinematic representation of even visual stream of consciousness. The somewhat unnatural quality of attempts at representing visual experience directly may be one reason
why extended stream of consciousness is relatively rare in film (as, for example, Chatman has noted [Story 194]).

Typically, the implied author chooses a fully idealized verbalization in stream-of-consciousness writing. In other words, stream-of-consciousness narration is not typically confined to what the character might have said had he or she articulated the entire stream of consciousness himself or herself. Rather, in stream of consciousness, the implied author—or, rather, the nonpersonified narrator—commonly makes use of all his or her verbal resources to articulate the ongoing mental experience of the character/narrator in its various perceptual, imaginative, and emotional facets.

Consider, for example, Bernard’s thoughts about Susan in Woolf’s The Waves. He follows her across a field, unobserved. She “begins to run with her fists clenched in front of her. Her nails meet in the ball of her pocket-handkerchief. She is making for the beech woods out of the light. She spreads her arms as she comes to them and takes to the shade like a swimmer. But she is blind after the light and trips and flings herself down on the roots under the trees, where the light seems to pant in and out” (14). It seems unlikely that Bernard has explicitly formulated much of this to himself or that the phrasing closely tracks his verbal associations. Rather, he has perceived Susan running and implicitly imagined the trajectory (“making for the beech woods”). Emphasizing the “shade” stresses just what Bernard sees, but also reveals his general sense that Susan is seeking to hide. The choice of words here manifests his emotional and causal understanding rather than his specific, subvocal formulation or his primed verbal associations. The detail of the nails and handkerchief is almost certainly something he cannot see, but something he, perhaps, implicitly experiences by imaginatively mirroring her actions—a spontaneous response (as recent research shows [see, for example, Iacoboni]). Likewise, the image of the light panting in and out may reflect a mirroring response to Susan’s labored breath as Bernard tacitly imagines it after her run. The verbalization is, then, idealized in the sense that it reflects Bernard’s stream of consciousness in a way that Bernard presumably could not.

The Sound and the Fury

Faulkner’s 1929 novel is a paradigmatic case of mentalistic narration. As such, it particularly invites the reader to examine the psychology of its
three personified narrators—Benjy, Quentin, and Jason. Put differently, the psychology of those narrators is more important than the story itself for understanding and explaining their various narrations.\textsuperscript{6}

Benjy is often spoken of vaguely as mentally challenged. He does not seem to have generalized cognitive disorders. His perception is intact, as is his linguistic capacity. His physical inability to articulate speech sounds does not appear to affect his general capacity for understanding language or thinking linguistically.\textsuperscript{7} However, he does have some severe cognitive limitations. These limitations are principally a matter of causal inference.\textsuperscript{8}

First, it seems that Benjy is able to attribute causality only very short term and only in perceptually continuous contexts such that the sequence may be understood as a single complex event. The duration of that event is perhaps roughly what would now be characterized as the duration of working memory. Thus he can recognize that Dilsey “lifted me down” and “wiped my face and hands with a warm cloth” (19). But causal connections of any greater extent seem to be beyond him. Even such continuous, but extended, actions as feeding break down into fragmentary moments, separate and apparently unrelated. Thus he reports that “The bowl steamed up to my face, and Versh’s hand dipped the spoon in it and the steam tickled into my mouth” (19).

In this particular case, the continuity of the events is complicated by the fact that it involves (unperceived) mental causes—Versh’s judgment that the food is hot enough but not too hot, his intention to transport a suitable quantity of food to Benjy’s mouth, and so on. Another case of this sort occurs when Dilsey calls to Versh, “Bring his bowl here.” Benjy hears and reports this. But he fails to connect it with his next experience, “The bowl went away” (19). All hidden causes are difficult for Benjy. This may be seen, for example, in his understanding of disease as a perceptible object—“I could smell the sickness. It was a cloth folded on Mother’s head” (47). But Benjy seems particularly inhibited in his ability to infer other people’s mental states. On the other hand, even this is not an absolute inhibition.

Cognitive scientists commonly distinguish between two means by which people understand other minds. That understanding is called “theory of mind.” One account of theory of mind, called the “theory theory,” asserts that a person makes theorylike inferences about other people’s mental states. The other account says that a person simulates other people’s experiences and then attributes his or her reactions to them. It is increasingly recognized that people do both (see, for example, Doherty
Suppose I hear that a colleague has been denied tenure, despite receiving the unanimous support of his department. I have to draw some inferences about his state of knowledge—for example, that he does not know yet and is anticipating a positive decision. I am then likely to rely on my own feelings about receiving tenure and my own sense of disappointed expectations in other areas to judge how he will respond when he does hear. There may also be extenuating circumstances (perhaps he has another career) that would lead me, inferentially, to qualify my own emotional response—though, here too, I understand his response to those extenuating circumstances in part by reference to my own feelings. Thus I begin with some theorylike inferences, engage in some simulation based in part on the theorylike inferences, then further qualify the simulations by reference to further theorylike inferences, which themselves lead to another set of simulations.

Despite the usual integration of inference and simulation, one may distinguish two extreme forms of theory of mind response. One extreme is emotion contagion. This is pure simulation without any theoretical inference. As a result, the person experiencing emotion contagion does not even attribute the emotion to the target, but simply feels it himself or herself. For example, suppose little Sally breaks her toy and starts to cry. Little Betty hears Sally and begins to cry. Betty has not inferred anything about Sally’s state and has not attributed anything to Sally. Rather, she has simply begun to feel the distress herself. The other extreme theory of mind response is pure inference without empathic simulation. Someone who is successfully cruel (e.g., a torturer) may be able to infer just what will cause pain to a victim. At the same time, he or she may avoid any sort of simulation, which might lead to empathic sharing of that pain.

Benjy seems to be particularly lacking with respect to theoretical inferences in theory of mind. However, he seems to have a greater capacity for nontheoretical simulation. Of course, his simulations are very limited, since they cannot be initiated or guided by theoretical inferences (except perhaps of a very short-term variety). On the other hand, he is very prone to emotion contagion. Indeed, this tendency toward emotion contagion is enhanced by the fact that he largely lacks the inhibitory operation of theoretical inference. In the hypothetical example given above, I was able to modulate my sympathetic simulation of a colleague’s distress by a theoretical inference that he had other career opportunities. In many cases this modulation is quite reasonable. In other cases, it is merely a rationalization, a way of avoiding an unpleasant emotional
response. In the case of Benjy, the lack of inferential capacity means that he is generally more prone to spontaneous and unmodulated emotion contagion.

As a narrator, this proneness to emotion contagion makes Benjy more reliable than others in certain respects, though of course less reliable in other respects. Specifically, he is more trustworthy in cases where other characters’ simulative responses are distorted by rationalization. An instance of this occurs in his response to the events surrounding Damuddy’s death. He hears a sound that he apparently does not self-consciously categorize. Nonetheless, he begins to cry (18). Others debate whether it was Mrs. Compson crying or singing. But Benjy’s response clearly indicates the emotional valence of his mother’s expression—it manifests grief, not joy. This is why other characters attribute a sort of prophetic quality to his responses, as when Quentin thinks, “Benjy knew it when Damuddy died. He cried” (70).

By the same token, however, his responses are less reliable to the degree that spontaneous impulses should be modulated by inferential and elaborative processes. This extends even to simple cases of putting oneself in another person’s place when simulating their point of view—their knowledge, inferences, expectations, and so forth. Benjy shows a striking inability of this sort when he grabs the schoolgirl. She screams and he may sense her fear. But he seems unable to recognize what the cause of her fear must be, what terrifying inferences she must be drawing about this enormous, drooling man who has grabbed her.

Benjy’s inferential limitations lead to other affective propensities as well. Specifically, some emotions rely on more extensive imagination and inference than others. Some require greater causal elaboration. An emotion such as attachment and the related separation anxiety are quite direct. Separation anxiety requires only the activation of attachment feelings along with the perceptual absence of the attachment object and the correlated inability to engage in any action to end that absence (e.g., by walking into the next room). Benjy’s inferential inhibitions make such corrective action almost impossible. Thus he tends simply to moan and weep when separated from his one key attachment figure, Caddy.

The most striking contrast with Benjy is Jason. While Benjy is unable to project intentional causes, Jason overgenerates such inferences. When he fails at the stock market, he infers that he has been cheated by “a bunch of damn eastern jews,” who “sit up there in New York and trim the sucker gamblers” (149). Indeed, he conjectures that Western Union telegraph has actually joined in a conspiracy with the New York Jews to
sucker country folk out of their money (176, 182). In inferring causes, Jason simply does not accept chance (not to mention bad judgment). In effect, everything is planned, the product of foresight and design.

This comes out clearly when he meets a man from the traveling show and assumes that this man is sheltering his niece, Quentin, and her lover with the red tie. He asks “Where are they?” as if the man would have any idea what he was talking about. Even if the man did know anything about Quentin and her companion, what would allow him to understand that “they” refers to those particular people? The man asks, “Where’s who?” (240) and Jason accuses him of lying. The passage is striking for two reasons. First, again, it manifests Jason’s tendency to overextend intentional causal explanation. Here, since he has not found Quentin, he infers that this man must be hiding her. Second, it shows that, despite his propensity to generate such inferences, he has some severe theory of mind limitations himself. His theory of mind inferences are often bizarre. In this way, those inferences are highly unreliable.

As the reference to Jews suggests, Jason has a strong propensity toward out-grouping as well. Indeed, he is the most insistently and vehemently racist character in the book, and the most misogynist. Out-grouping tends to severely inhibit empathy. In keeping with this, Jason’s empathic responses are limited to nonexistent. Indeed, the inhibitions on Jason’s emotional responsiveness are not confined to in-group/out-group relations. He shows an astonishing incapacity to feel any empathy with his sister, Caddy, and his niece, Quentin. He steals their money with no evident qualms, his only worries being a practical matter of whether he will be caught. Of course, both Caddy and Quentin are part of a gender out-group. Jason is very concerned about his status as a man, and he seems particularly humiliated that “the whole world would know that he, Jason Compson, had been robbed by Quentin, his niece, a bitch” (240). Later, he is ashamed “that he had been outwitted by a woman, a girl” (239). Thus perhaps this too can be understood in terms of in-group/out-group divisions. However, his empathic inhibitions are so extensive that in the end it seems as if he forms an in-group of one. Indeed, he is virtually pathological in his absence of empathic response. In other words, while Benjy lacks inferential capacities in theory of mind, Jason seems to lack spontaneous emotion simulation—or, at least, his limited capacities for emotion simulation have been disabled by inhibitory processes. These inhibitory processes include generalized out-grouping.

It seems that Jason’s primary emotion is a form of humiliation-based
anger. This may be seen most clearly when he responds to Quentin and the man with the red tie. He does not appear particularly worried about Quentin’s feelings, future, or safety. Rather, he is angry that she is “letting [her] own uncle be laughed at” by a man who would “come into town and call us all a bunch of hicks” (188).

Jason feels profound shame for his family’s actions and his association with them. This results from his inferences regarding what other people might think. For example, when he goes out “without any hat,” he worries that other people will infer that “I was crazy too.” After all, “a man would naturally think, one of them is crazy and another one drowned himself and the other one was turned out into the street by her husband, what’s the reason the rest of them are not crazy too” (180–81).

He is equally ashamed over his related decline in social status. He suffers from the thought that his family is disdained by “town jellybeans.” In fact, it seems very likely that he has merely imagined this disdain. In any case, he insists, in his angry and humiliated response, that “my people owned slaves here when you all were running little shirt tail country stores and farming land no nigger would look at on shares” (185).

Jason is perhaps most profoundly affected by his sense of his own failure. He blames that failure on other people, particularly on their moral faults. He is filled with a “sense of injury and impotence feeding on its own sound” leading to a “violent cumulation of . . . self justification and . . . outrage” (235). (These points hold not only in the specific context of the quotation—when he reports being robbed—but generally.) Thus, for Jason, Caddy’s promiscuity led to the divorce that cost him a job opportunity through Herbert. Rather than having any sense of his sister’s pain, her humiliation, her sorrow at separation from her daughter, he construes her only as a cause of his failure—and as a source of money that may partially compensate for that failure. He characterizes her as “The bitch that cost me a job, the one chance I ever had to get ahead” (236).

He also envisions other people’s response to his failure and decline in status as derisive. Indeed, he has a strong inclination to view other people’s judgments as mocking and to respond to that supposed mockery with anger. Anger generally tends to inhibit empathic responses. Indeed, a sense of humiliation tends to promote a complementary rather than a parallel response to other people’s emotions, thus a response of countering rather than sharing their emotions. (For example, a parallel response to someone else’s happiness would be happiness. Complementary responses would include envy, resentment, or indignation.) Thus
one would expect an intensified inhibition of empathy in someone who feels mocked by the “town jellybeans.”

In short, Jason clearly does not suffer from the same cognitive impairments as Benjy. As such, some of his narration is more reliable than Benjy’s because it manifests a more complex ability to infer causes, particularly intentions. But those causal inferences are severely distorted in cases where they bear on his generalized out-grouping or his emotional pathology—particularly his extreme proneness to anger based on shame—which lead to a nearly complete absence of simulative emotion sharing or empathy.

Finally, Quentin provides the most opaque case of the three. In one sense, Quentin’s narration is quite straightforward. He records the events of his day and his memories with the usual sorts of causal and intentional inferences. He feels empathy and is able to modulate his emotions—or at least to recognize what modulating those emotions would involve. But there is one striking peculiarity about Quentin’s narration. It almost entirely leaves out the central motivating force. His entire day is oriented toward his suicide. But that suicide turns up, for the most part, only indirectly or opaquely in his thoughts. Moreover, there is little in his ongoing narration to suggest depression, anxiety, or another emotion that would underlie and explain that suicide.

The contrast with Jason in particular is striking. Jason fills in the detailed causes of his behavior—for instance, his anger over the lost job and the resulting failure. In contrast, Quentin seems to skirt those causes, hinting at them without naming them. This contrast is presumably related to the cognitive and emotive tendencies that characterize Quentin. These both overlap with Jason’s tendencies and contrast with them. Quentin shares with Jason an inclination to overgenerate causal attributions. However, whereas Jason overestimates the causal importance of other people’s intentions, Quentin seems to overestimate the causal importance of his own actions. The peculiarity here is that he makes causal attributions in ways that he knows are false. Despite this, he seems to take those causal attributions seriously. The most noteworthy case of this is his insistence that he has committed incest with Caddy, as when he told Mr. Compson, “Father it was I it was not Dalton Ames” (62).

In keeping with this tendency to overvalue his own causal role in events, Quentin parallels Jason in his overstatement of blame. In contrast with Jason, however, the most important form of this blame is self-blame or, more properly, guilt. Quentin seems to feel a terrible sense of guilt. This is what allows him to hold to such a false causal attribution.
He, of course, knows that he did not commit incest with Caddy. But he is able to attribute the violation to himself because he feels guilt over Caddy’s condition.

Finally, whatever feelings of attachment Jason might have had appear to be undermined by his anger and humiliation, as well as in-group/out-group divisions. In contrast, Quentin shares Benjy’s deep attachment bond with Caddy. However, since he understands the nature of Caddy’s disappearance and is able to fill in the (not terribly complicated) causal sequence, his emotional response is not so much a matter of mere separation anxiety. It is a rage provoked by jealousy. Of course, jealous rage typically involves three people—the rival, the beloved, and the lover. In keeping with this, Quentin does initially threaten to kill Dalton Ames. He also urges Caddy to agree that he kill her, then kill himself. But this hardly explains the suicide. After all, he does not kill the rival; he does not kill the (betraying) beloved. He only kills himself.

There are at least three possible explanations for Quentin’s feeling of guilt here. The first is the simplest. He should have protected his sister from sexual shame and the subsequent public humiliation of rejection by her husband. This is bound up with the standard reading of Quentin in terms of a Southern honor system (see, for example, Singal). But this does not seem very plausible. He proposes claiming that they have committed incest, which would hardly protect his sister from shame or the family from dishonor. As to humiliation, he envisions the benefits of the incest story as including their joint exclusion from society—“we’ll have to go away amid the pointing and the horror” (115).

A second possibility is that Quentin feels he is somehow responsible for her having sex with other men. There is perhaps a hint of this in the anecdote about Quentin and Natalie. After being chastised for “kissing . . . some darn town squirt,” Caddy replies “I didn’t kiss a dirty girl like Natalie anyway” (104). Caddy is in this way justifying her relations with boys by reference to Quentin’s prior relations with girls. But this is peculiar also. It is the sort of argument one might expect from a couple who owe each other sexual fidelity, not from a brother and sister.

This leads to the third, related possibility. It is the least apparently plausible, but it may be closest to the truth. Though it runs contrary to usual moral principles, Quentin’s feeling of guilt may have resulted precisely from not being the one who impregnated Caddy. In this way, his claim to have impregnated her is not a claim of guilt; it is a denial of guilt. After all, what he wants is a complete unity with her, the two of them fused in a single flame13 (“if people could only change one another
forever that way merge like a flame swirling up for an instant then blown cleanly out along the cool eternal dark” [137]; “Only you and me then amid the pointing and the horror walled by the clean flame” [91]), finally away from all society (“Nobody else there but her and me” [62]), if only in the lowest circle of Hell (62). In that fantasy, the ultimate Inferno is a sort of heaven, an ideal of bliss. It is Hell only, it seems, because it violates standard moral principles. In keeping with this, Quentin reflects, “if it were just to hell. . . . Nobody else there but her and me. If we could just have done something so dreadful that they would have fled hell except us. I have committed incest I said Father it was I it was not Dalton Ames. . . . If we could have just done something so dreadful and Father said That’s sad too, people cannot do anything that dreadful” (62–63).

In any case, it seems clear that Quentin’s cognition is strongly oriented toward overgenerating intentional causal attribution, specifically self-blame. In connection with this, his greatest emotional propensity is toward guilt, perhaps particularly guilt based on attachment insecurity. But his inferences are elliptical, his feelings to some extent concealed or misrepresented. As a result, he sometimes seems to blame himself in ways that he knows to be false, but which suggest other forms of self-blame that he presumably takes to be true. In each respect, Quentin is in part resembles and in part differs from his brothers.

Thus Faulkner presents a highly complex set of complementary unreliabilities. The bias of one parallel narrator is matched and perhaps compensated for by the biases of other narrators. This contributes to a nuanced sense of the storyworld. But it does not necessarily resolve ambiguities of that storyworld. Indeed, the different narrations, with their various unreliabilities, often complicate the reader’s sense of the storyworld. Even more significantly, this narrational complexity serves to place the cognitive and affective psychodynamics of narration at the center of at least many readers’ interpretive and responsive interest. In some ways, Faulkner’s novel is more about the ways the parallel, personified narrators perceive, understand, and suppress their experiences than about the facts corresponding to those experiences. In a sense, the “real story” of The Sound and the Fury is to be found less in the storyworld than in the discourse.

**Mulholland Drive**

Of course, parallel, personified narration does not necessarily complicate our understanding of the storyworld or turn our attention to the
psychology of the narrators. In many cases, the different perspectives complement one another and help to disambiguate the storyworld. Moreover, it is often the case that one can reconcile different narratorial perspectives in an overall interpretation even when the individual narrations contradict one another (as in many trial narratives). In both cases, when inferring the storyworld, readers commonly rely on their comprehension of the narrators as individuals with interests, biases, perceptual and inferential limitations, and so on. However, these standard inferential techniques are unavailable when the narrators are nonpersonified—which leads to David Lynch.

In treating David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive*, it is particularly valuable to focus on the (apparently) discrete ambiguity of the work. In a discretely ambiguous work, there are two or more peaks in the profile of ambiguity. These peaks represent interpretations that are mutually exclusive but also plausible within implied authorial intent. Examples would include works that are ambiguous between straight and ironic readings. Works with parallel, nonpersonified narrators may readily involve discrete ambiguity as well, since the alternative interpretations may be paired with the parallel narrations. The presence of discrete ambiguity does not preclude the possibility of arguing for a single, encompassing interpretation. Such an argument remains possible because implied authorial intent can involve both discrete ambiguity and a preference, even a strong preference, for one of the interpretations. For example, the implied author may find the work complete and satisfactory precisely because it points toward a particular interpretation, but discourages one from being fully confident about that interpretation. Alternatively, the implied author may be satisfied with the work because its ambiguities contribute to the overall emotional impact, even if the reader does, ultimately, feel confident about a particular interpretation.

Importantly for present purposes, disambiguating critical explication may have a significant narrational component in these cases. Specifically, when faced with a work that appears to have parallel, nonpersonified narration, readers or viewers often try to explicate—and disambiguate—the work by making its narrators personified and even nonparallel. In other words, attempts to provide a single, encompassing interpretation of such a work frequently rely on an attempt to identify one or more narrators with a personal perspective and to hierarchize the narrators. Such an interpretive procedure involves eliminating the nonpersonified parallelism. This occurs in criticism on *Mulholland Drive*.

Lynch’s film has two main parts. The first tells the story of the cheery and successful actress Betty (Naomi Watts), and her amnesiac lover Rita
(Laura Elena Harring). The second tells the story of the struggling and embittered actress Diane (Watts) and her ex-lover, the enormously successful actress Camilla (Harring). One might refer to these as the “optimistic” and “pessimistic” narratives. There are numerous repetitions and overlaps between the two narratives, suggesting that perhaps there is a single storyworld of which these are two versions. The most obvious ways of relating these two narratives, however, are apparently undermined by the nature of these overlaps (e.g., some of them appear to point in different directions as to which story is real). In any case, the two sections at least seem to have two distinct, nonpersonified, perceptual narrators. This is the case most obviously due to the contradictions between the two stories. Such contradiction is a standard feature of parallel narration, familiar, for example, from conflicting testimonies in trial narratives. In addition, and perhaps more significantly, there are systematic differences in the discourse of the two narratives, as we will see.

More exactly, the film begins with a scene of young couples doing the jitterbug. One obvious way of interpreting this sequence is as nondiegetic. Films often begin with a sequence that is not strictly part of the narrative. For example, a Pink Panther detective comedy might begin with cartoons about a pink panther. In this case, the real dancing figures appear against a background that includes silhouettes of dancing figures which themselves include real dancing figures (see Fig. 5.2). The inclusion of reality, shadows, and reality within shadows does seem to have thematic relevance. But it is difficult to say just what that is. The sequence ends with Watts appearing brightly lit and smiling (Fig. 5.3), ultimately along with an older couple, also smiling. It has the feel of an award or celebration.

In the pessimistic narrative, the viewer learns that Diane had won a jitterbug contest back in Deep River, Ontario, and that this sparked her interest in show business. In retrospect, this opening sequence suggests that contest and the subsequent award. The point has been noted by critics. On the other hand, here as elsewhere, the film is not lacking in ambiguity. The bright enthusiasm portrayed by Watts is more in keeping with the Betty character than with Diane. This is compatible with (at least) three interpretations: 1) There are two distinct storyworlds and this scene occurs in the optimistic story (presumably with a less ideal parallel scene in the pessimistic story); 2) The optimistic story is true and fundamental, and this (optimistic) opening scene indicates that it is (i.e., the reference in the pessimistic narrative serves to confirm the validity of the optimistic story); 3) The pessimistic story is true and fun-
damental, and this scene shows Diane’s naïve and fantasy-bound evaluation of events at the time of the contest (or her distorted, nostalgic memory).

But, again, this segment is part of the opening of the film, a part of the film that is often extradiegetic. The film proper seems to begin with a shot of rose-colored sheets and a tan blanket. The camera moves slowly toward the pillow; the viewer hears breathing. There is a dissolve to black as the camera seems to enter the pillow.

As critics have recognized, this sequence rather strongly suggests that what follows is a dream. In keeping with this, the standard way of interpreting the optimistic part of the film is as a dream, with the pessimistic part being reality (see, for example, McDowell, Shostak, and Ridgway). Thus McDowell refers to “the dream that occupies the first half of the film” (1037). If one follows this interpretation, one collapses the two parallel nonpersonified narrators into a single nonpersonified narrator. In addition, for the first half of the film, one embeds a personified, stream of consciousness (Betty as dreamer) in that nonpersonified narrator.

After the sequence described above, followed by the title, the camera follows a car driving at night. A cut to the inside of the car shows Rita. She says to the driver, “What are you doing? We don’t stop here.” This scene is intercut with two cars racing along the road, side by side. Back in the first car, the driver points a pistol at Rita and tells her “Get out of the car.” Before the men can undertake their obviously nefarious business, one of the racing cars crashes head-on into them. This evidently kills both the men (as well as the people in the other car). A dazed Rita stumbles out of the car and walks down the side of a hill. She ends up
outside an apartment complex. The viewer eventually learns that she has amnesia.\textsuperscript{16}

Before continuing with this story, it is important to switch to the other narrative. In the pessimistic version (which is, again, presented late in the film), Diane is unhappy, cynical, and unsuccessful. She once had a romantic relationship with Camilla. But Camilla has evidently ended that in favor of a film director. At one point, Camilla has invited Diane to a dinner party and has sent a car for her. The camera follows the car—precisely as in the opening of the optimistic version (as just described). There is a cut to Diane inside the car, and she says, “What are you doing? We don’t stop here.” In this case, however, Diane leaves the car to meet Camilla, who leads her up a hill to the house of the film director, who is having the party.

The connections between the two scenes are not only clear, but obtrusive. The question is, just what do the connections imply? Again, the viewer may simply understand there to be two storyworlds. Alternatively, he or she may take one storyworld to be real and the other to be derived from that reality. Most obviously, he or she may take one to be a dream and the other to be the experience that becomes a dream. The usual way of interpreting this would be to say that Diane’s experience is the real one while Rita’s is the dream version. There are difficulties with this, however. The suspicion in Diane’s question seems unfounded, whereas Rita’s worry is clearly justified. Moreover, the scenario fits a robbery better than a (dreamlike) walk up an unpaved path to the backyard of a home. Both points push the cause/effect (reality/dream) sequence in the opposite direction, suggesting that the optimistic version is reality and the pessimistic version is its derivative dream.

Further complications arise with subsequent events in the optimistic story when Rita falls asleep outside the apartment complex. Indeed, in the first parts of the film, Rita repeatedly sleeps. This calls to mind the opening pillow and reminds the viewer that one possible interpretation of the optimistic story is that of a dream. But here the suggestion is that Rita (or Camilla) is the dreamer, rather than Diane.\textsuperscript{17}

In the morning, a woman is leaving her apartment for a trip. The viewer subsequently learns that this woman is Betty’s aunt. As she is going back and forth between the apartment and the car, Rita sneaks in and hides.

Subsequently, Betty arrives at the airport, beaming with joy. She is accompanied by the old couple that the viewer may recognize from the jitterbug sequence. She has just met this couple on the flight, but they
have become great friends. If one interprets the jitterbug sequence as
the contest ending with Diane’s receipt of the award, then this sequence
seems incompatible with the “real” storyworld. This, in turn, lends sup-
port to the idea that the optimistic story is part of a dream. Indeed, the
comments made by the old couple seem, in some ways, more appropriate
to someone saying goodbye to Diane in her hometown as she leaves for
Los Angeles. In other words, the events in this part of the narrative could
be understood as actual memories reappropriated for use in a dream. On
the other hand, this couple turns up again in the pessimistic story, and
they do so in a way that prevents the viewer from seeing that story as a
simple perceptual representation of the real storyworld. Specifically, in
the pessimistic version, they are tiny, Tom Thumb–like creatures who
walk out of a paper bag, then slip under Diane’s door to frighten her and
drive her to suicide. Again, when faced with conflicting storyworld pos-
sibilities, there is a general heuristic preference for the storyworld that
is more fully continuous with the real world. The miniaturized versions
of the couple in the pessimistic version then would count against accept-
ing that as the storyworld.

Betty eventually arrives at her aunt’s apartment. She meets the man-
ger (played by Ann Miller), who says, “Just call me Coco. Everybody
else does.” In the pessimistic story, at the party of Camilla’s film direc-
tor, Diane meets the director’s mother (played by Ann Miller), who says,
“Well, just call me Coco. Everybody does.” Again, the parallel is obtru-
sive and suggests a connection between the two events. One option is
simply some sort of possible-worlds-type counterpart relation. But, here
as elsewhere, the more obvious possibility is that one is reality and the
other is a dream based on that reality. In this case, however, the dream/
reality derivation could go in either direction. Indeed, the Coco of the
optimistic story seems to be more fully developed and to have a more
natural place there. Moreover, there is something dreamlike about the
director’s party—which not only is approached in a strange way (walking
up a hill through brush) but includes a somewhat incongruous group of
characters.

In the optimistic story, Betty goes into the bedroom in her aunt’s
apartment and sees a woman’s clothes on the floor outside the bath-
room. She nonetheless walks into the bathroom, then, hearing someone
in the shower, opens the shower door. She is apparently very embar-
rassed and apologetic on finding Rita there, naked. But the sequence
of events is peculiar. Having seen clothing outside the bathroom door,
she might have expected someone to be in the bathroom. Having heard
someone in the shower, she might have expected the person to be naked. Here there is a point in the optimistic story that seems to suggest that it is a dream and that it presupposes some events of the pessimistic story. Specifically, the confidence with which Betty goes to the shower may suggest the prior sexual relationship between Diane (here, Betty) and Camilla (here, Rita).

The viewer is soon teased by the more overt possibility that the optimistic story is a dream. Specifically, Betty explains to Rita that she is from a small town in Ontario, but “now I’m in this dream place.” Of course, “dream place” refers to Los Angeles, as both a place of one’s dreams and a place where dreams are made as movies (as in the case of Mulholland Drive). But here the nature of the connection with the story-world is not entirely clear. One could take this to be a definitive clue. But one could also take it to be part of implied authorial misdirection.

Moreover, if it is a dream, there is the peculiar fact, already mentioned, that Rita is the one who keeps falling asleep, not Betty, and one might suspect that all this is Rita’s dream. Indeed, before the introduction of Betty, there are two events that initially may seem to be dreams of Rita. First two men meet in Winkie’s. One of them, Dan, explains that he had two dreams that were “both the same.” In retrospect, this comment clearly points toward the two narratives viewers are seeing. The connection would seem to suggest that both narratives are dreams. At the same time, it seems odd for the dream to signal not only that it is a dream, but that something else is a dream also. In any event, Dan’s two dreams presented a dangerous figure behind the restaurant. After breakfast, Dan walks to the back of Winkie’s. A dark figure lurches out and the man collapses, perhaps from a heart attack.

This sequence is followed immediately by Rita sleeping (see Fig. 5.4). This suggests that it is her dream as well (cf. Thomas 86). That shot of her sleeping is followed by another sequence that the viewer may take to be her dream. On the other hand, it is equally possible to take one or both episodes as real. Indeed, even if one takes some episodes to be part of Rita’s dreaming, one cannot take the entire sequence to be part of her dreaming, because the viewer is shown Rita falling asleep and this presumably is not part of her dreaming.

In any case, the second sequence begins with a man in a wheelchair informing someone that “The girl is still missing.” The obvious interpretation of this is that he is referring to Rita. Thus one might infer that he has something to do with the threat posed to her by the driver of the car before he was killed in the crash. The man’s message is passed on
to unseen figures with shots of two telephones. The second telephone (which rings unanswered) sits beside an ashtray and below a red-shaded lamp on a side table.

Despite the suggestion that these episodes are Rita’s dreams, both have connections with the pessimistic story. First, Diane goes to that Winkie’s. She sees the man who had the two dreams about someone behind the restaurant. More significantly, in this scene, Diane is meeting with a man whom the viewer knows is a murderer. She offers this murderer money, apparently to kill her estranged lover, Camilla. Indeed, at this point in the pessimistic story, Camilla seems to have just announced her engagement to the director, Adam Kesher. Moreover, the pessimistic narrative identifies the second telephone in the episode concerning the “missing” girl. It is Diane’s telephone. This suggests that the threat to Camilla was actually Diane’s payment of the hired killer. Diane is, therefore, a person who would have an interest in hearing whether “the girl” had been found or not. Indeed, when she meets with the murderer, Diane hands him a photograph of Camilla and says “This is the girl.”

Another sequence of events in the optimistic narrative concerns Adam Kesher. He is making a film and is under considerable pressure from some goons to cast “Camilla Rhodes” in the role. The goons keep saying “This is the girl.” Moreover, when he sees this actress, he is forced to say, precisely, “This is the girl.” The sequence is rather peculiar, with its insistence on the exact phrase. Here, too, there is a connection between the two narratives, given what Camilla says to the hired assassin. But what is that connection? It seems the simplest interpretation is to take Diane’s “This is the girl” (from the pessimistic story)
as real. Then the repetitions of the phrase in the optimistic story are derived from the pessimistic story, as dream images from life.

But there are still problems. Most obviously, the picture of Camilla in the optimistic story is another woman (i.e., not Harring). Of course, this too has parallels. During the director’s party, Camilla (i.e., the Harring character) provocatively kisses another young woman right in front of Diane (see Fig. 5.5). That other young woman is the Camilla Rhodes of the optimistic story. Here, too, one can imagine a unifying interpretation in which the pessimistic story provides a face for a psychoanalytic “displacement” (or shift) in the dream—in this case, a displacement from the real Camilla to this rival. But the staginess of the kiss at the director’s party and its gratuitously mean orientation toward Diane (see Fig. 5.6 and Fig. 5.7) are so obtrusive that it is hard to take seriously as a real event. It seems more like Diane’s somewhat paranoid fantasy or interpretation. This raises the question of whether either perceptual narrator directly displays the real storyworld. Perhaps both are unreliable, or are representing something other than the real storyworld (e.g., inferences, fantasies, or, again, dreams).

Eventually, in the optimistic narrative, Betty learns that Rita has amnesia. They decide to look in her purse for clues. In the purse, they discover bundles of money and a blue key. The next scene presents the assassin character. The conjunction is important and suggests an association in the narrator’s mind. This is fitting, as the entire sequence is apparently explained in the pessimistic narrative when Diane meets with the assassin. In the pessimistic version, after Diane shows the assassin a picture of Camilla, she explains that she has the money to pay for the job, revealing a bundle of bills in her purse. The assassin shows Diane a blue key and tells her “When it’s finished, you’ll find this where I told you.” This seems to add weight to the interpretation that locates the optimistic story in Diane’s dream world.

There are, however, still difficulties. Most important, there is a somewhat dreamlike quality to the signal here. We are shown the key on Diane’s coffee table, perhaps concealed from Diane’s usual line of sight (from her couch) by a large ashtray. We are not given any information as to how or when the key got there. In a later scene, after a neighbor has removed the ashtray, Diane stares at the key almost as if she was not aware of it earlier, thus as if the assassin has had to enter her apartment when she was not there to place it on the table. (We learn that she has been away prior to the scene where the key is revealed.) Moreover, she has a brief imagination of Camilla’s return before we see her looking at the key. This does not fit well with the idea that she is aware
Figure 5.5. Camilla kisses another woman before Diane.

Figure 5.6. But before the kiss, they check to make sure Diane is watching.

Figure 5.7. Diane meets their eyes before the kiss.
of the murder at that time. Finally, her intense reaction of guilt after staring at the key seems to suggest that she has only now learned about the murder. On the other hand, detectives have been looking for Diane already, which suggests that that murder took place much earlier—and Diane knows this. In these respects, the putatively real signal and the surrounding events in the pessimistic narrative appear at least to some degree oneiric as well.

Continuing with the optimistic narrative, the viewer finds Betty and Rita trying to figure out a scheme to uncover Rita’s identity. Betty explains, “It’s just like in the movies. We’ll pretend to be someone else.” Like references to dreams and the representation of sleep, this seems to suggest that this optimistic story involves a systematic alteration from the real storyworld, with Diane and Camilla pretending to be someone else—Betty and Rita. But, on reflection, one realizes that the idea is equally consistent with Betty being her real name and “Diane” being the pretense.

Subsequently, a strange woman appears at Betty’s door. Recalling a mad prophet figure, she insists that someone is in trouble. The ever-friendly Betty introduces herself, saying, “My name’s Betty.” The woman replies, “No, it’s not.” This is less equivocal than the previous case. But it still retains a degree of ambiguity, if only because the viewer is uncertain of the extent to which this madwoman is a reliable informant (rather than a means of fostering misdirection). Moreover, to say that this woman is not Betty is not necessarily to say that she is Diane.

Before Betty and Rita can pursue their investigation of Rita’s identity, however, Betty must pursue her acting career. She practices a scene with Rita. It begins with Betty asking, “You’re still here?” and Rita responding, “I came back. I thought that’s what you wanted.” The scene ends with Betty threatening to kill Rita—or, rather, Betty’s character in the audition dialogue threatening to kill the character read by Rita. Subsequently, Betty reads the same part in an audition. The audition is noteworthy in several respects. First, everyone is extremely nice to her. Second, she acts the part brilliantly, far outshining her own performance in the practice with Rita and, indeed, greatly excelling anything viewers are likely to imagine possible with this vapid script (for an illuminating discussion of this scene, see Toles). She is virtually guaranteed the part. Moreover, a casting agent spies her and takes her to the auditions for Adam’s new film. Adam’s and Betty’s eyes meet and there is immediate interest and chemistry. As already noted, Adam has no choice but to give the role to Camilla. But he is clearly drawn to Betty.
From the perspective of the pessimistic story, the sequence is poignant for several reasons. First, in the optimistic episode, Adam is entranced by Betty (thus Diane), rather than Camilla. Given Betty’s/Diane’s sexual preferences, it seems clear that this would never come to anything. However, it would help to prevent the loss of Camilla to Adam. Second, Betty’s enormous success at the audition contrasts sharply with Diane’s admission that directors have not been terribly impressed with her and that she has gotten some roles due primarily to the intervention of Camilla. Third, one of the most pathetic moments of the pessimistic story involves Diane looking across her kitchen at Camilla, who seems to have materialized out of nowhere, and saying “You’ve come back,” recalling the “I came back” from the play script. Finally, the threat of murder written into the scene appears to suggest Diane’s attempt to have Camilla murdered.

Here there seems to be a further reason for believing that the optimistic episode presents a dream. The episode involves wish-fulfillment elements, by which the unsuccessful and cynical Diane can be the successful and cheerful Betty, with her beloved and aloof Camilla transformed into the dependent Rita. Rather than being the one who orders Camilla’s murder, she is the one who saves Rita; rather than giving the money for the murder, she finds Rita with the money, and so on.

The standard interpretation is further reinforced when Rita remembers the name “Diane Selwyn.” Betty and Rita first call Diane’s telephone number and hear the message on her answering machine. This too contributes to the oneiric quality of this narration, since the viewer later discovers that this is the answering machine message of Diane in the pessimistic episode. Of course, here too the causality could go in the opposite direction. Even so, the likelihood of the standard interpretation seems further enhanced in what follows. Betty and Rita go to find Diane Selwyn. When they arrive at her apartment, no one answers the door, so Betty climbs through a window and lets Rita in. They hold their noses, suggesting that there is a strong odor. Soon, the source of the odor is revealed. There is a bed with rose-colored sheets. On the bed, there is a woman, lying on her side with her knees bent. She is dead and her body is in an advanced state of decay (see Fig. 5.8). In the pessimistic story, the viewer learns that Diane’s sheets are rose. Indeed, the transition between the two narratives comes when Diane wakes up on those rose-colored sheets, rising from almost the exact position of the corpse (see Fig. 5.9). One obvious interpretation is that the dreaming Diane has anticipated her own suicide.
That night the sexual feelings of Betty and Rita finally express themselves. It is worth noting, however, that Betty repeatedly says “I’m in love with you,” while Rita does not. In a standard, psychoanalytic dream interpretation, this may be seen as partially restoring the relation of Diane and Camilla, but also as acknowledging its real asymmetry. Thus it combines wish fulfillment on Diane’s part and the disturbing recognition that the wish has not really been fulfilled. Indeed, in the middle of the night, the two go to a strange theater called “Silencio” and listen to a woman lip-sync a Spanish version of Roy Orbison’s “Crying.” The song recounts how the singer cries because her beloved no longer loves her. Both Betty and Rita weep over the song. But it does not seem to have much to do with their story. Rather, it seems to have to do with the story of Diane and Camilla. By this point, the profile of ambiguity seems to strongly favor the standard “optimistic narrative as dream/pessimistic narrative as reality” interpretation—though the early problems still remain.

At the end of this Silencio sequence, Betty finds a blue box in her purse. The box has a lock that clearly recalls the blue key found by Rita in her purse with the money. Here the connection with the putatively real story suddenly becomes opaque. There does not seem to be a realistic source for the blue box in the “real world.” Indeed, the appearance of the blue box in the pessimistic story is far less realistic than its appearance in the optimistic story.

Betty and Rita rush home to find the key. But, when Rita gets the key, Betty is suddenly gone. Rita opens the box on her own. The camera descends into the darkness of the open box as it descended into the pil-
low at the start. Now, there is a transition between the two narrations. The box falls to the carpet. Clearly having heard the box drop, the aunt—once again in her own apartment—enters the bedroom and looks around. Yet now there is nothing on the ground. This is a peculiar scene, as it seems to suggest some sort of reality outside the dream world, a reality that includes the aunt. But it is difficult to say with certainty whether it is reality or not. If it is part of the dream (since it occurs before Diane wakes up), it seems unmotivated. Specifically, its relation to the optimistic narrative is unclear and indeed contradictory (because the aunt is away). If real, it contradicts Diane’s assertion that the aunt is dead, perhaps posing a difficulty for the standard interpretation.

Following this, the viewer sees a woman lying on her side, with her legs bent, like the corpse of a few scenes earlier. Indeed, the viewer briefly sees the corpse (in a shot identical with Fig. 5.8), before a change to a living woman (Fig. 5.9). There is insistent knocking. The woman is Diane (known up to now as “Betty”). The knocking wakes her. She goes to the door and finds the neighbor, who has come to pick up some things. The beginning of the dream was signaled by the descent into the pillow. This waking would seem to give the end of the dream.

Yet, this too is not entirely clear. Among other things, it is difficult to say just what the descent into the blue box might mean. If it is a dream-like aspect of the optimistic narrative, the reappearance of the box in the pessimistic narrative is, if anything, far more dreamlike. Of course, here too the standard interpretation seems to be the most viable. The point is simply that the work’s profile of ambiguity is much more complex than a focus on this standard interpretation would suggest, and that ambiguity is fundamentally a matter of narration (i.e., whether there are parallel, nonpersonified narrators or an implicitly personified, embedded, dreaming narrator along with one, encompassing, nonpersonified narrator).

One of the items taken by the neighbor is her ashtray—a distinctive piece in the shape of a piano. Near the ashtray is the blue key. A close-up draws the viewer’s attention to the key, though the first-time viewer at this point knows only that it may have some relation to the key in Rita’s purse. On a second viewing, however, viewers know that it means Camilla has been killed. In keeping with this—but, as already noted, suggesting that the murder took place some time ago—the neighbor notes that two detectives came by looking for Diane again.

At this point, a series of initially confusing events occurs. Betty looks and sees Camilla (known to the viewer as Rita at this point). She says, “You’ve come back.” The visual narrator cuts from Diane, looking left,
to Camilla, looking right, then back to Diane, who gradually expresses extreme anguish. The next cut from Diane should take the viewer to Camilla again, but it presents Diane looking right, as if observing herself, evidently with disgust (see Figs. 5.10–5.13). The sequence is disorienting. On first viewing, viewers are likely to infer that Camilla ended a relationship with Diane and that Diane is wishfully imagining her return or remembering an earlier, temporary return. After learning about the assassination, the viewer might find the sequence even more baffling (except perhaps under the assumption that Diane has not yet seen the key, as already noted). In any case, the narration here is complex. The viewer is presented with what initially seems to be a simple perceptual narration. But on reflection it seems more likely that this is some sort of fantasy, memory, or even hallucination. The scene seems ambiguous among these possibilities—and the possibility that it is part of a dream, thus reversing the standard interpretation.

This shifting from perceptual reality to some sort of inner state indicates that the narrator in the pessimistic narrative has direct perceptual access to the mind of Diane. Moreover, as becomes clear subsequently, this access leads to the nonchronological presentation of causal sequences of story events. Finally, it is connected with the strict focalization on Diane that characterizes almost the entire pessimistic narrative. In all three respects, the narration of the pessimistic narrative differs from that of the optimistic narrative. The latter appears to be entirely chronological and not to involve shifts between perceptual reality, on the one hand, and fantasy, memory, or hallucination, on the other. Moreover, it is obtrusively nonfocalized, shifting among different characters and scenes without apparent constraint. Indeed, these differences are the main discursive reasons to posit parallel narrators here.

Now Diane crosses back to the sofa with her morning coffee. On the other side of the sofa, Camilla is lying down, half naked. Suddenly, Diane is wearing not her robe and nightclothes, but shorts and no top. She is carrying a glass rather than a cup. Most significantly, the neighbor’s ashtray still sits on the coffee table and there is no blue key. The interaction is peculiar since Camilla begins by expressing her desire for Diane, but then quickly says that they should end their physical relationship. Diane quickly blames “him” for this change in Camilla’s attitude. In terms of realistic plausibility, the scene is odd, hinting at a dream or a combination of memory with fantasy. At least some dream or fantasy element is suggested by the fact that Diane is much prettier in this scene than in the immediately preceding one.
This is followed by another scene in which Adam is introduced and the developing relationship between Adam and Camilla is indicated. Eventually, the film arrives at the point when Diane attends Adam’s party. This is where she has the experience in the car, asks her question (“What are you doing? We don’t stop here”), walks up the hill, meets Coco, and so on. Subsequently, she is at Winkie’s meeting the assassin, saying “This is the girl,” being shown the key, and so forth.

These various events largely fit with the usual dream interpretation. There are, however, some possible problems. The most obvious concerns temporal sequence. The initial narration presumably ends when Diane wakes up. It may at first seem that everything in the second narration occurs after that point. But this is incompatible with the dream interpre-
tation in that the exciting events for the dream (particularly, hiring the assassin) should precede the dream itself, not follow it.

One can largely reconcile this with the standard interpretation once one recognizes the narrational complexity in the second narrative, specifically its integration of perception, memory, and fantasy. At the end of the entire sequence, Diane is sitting alone on her sofa, in the same bathrobe she wore when she woke up. She is staring at the blue key. While the viewer cannot be certain, one possible interpretation is that, after the opening, the entire sequence of events in the pessimistic narrative has been a series of memories and fantasies triggered by Diane’s perception of the key. The viewer is prepared for this by the initial indication that the pessimistic narrative will not give any explicit signal that the film is entering a character’s thoughts.

Of course, as already pointed out, this is far from definitive. The non-chronological order of presentation and the internal access to Diane’s mind (as well as the closely related focalization on Diane) also serve to differentiate the nonpersonified narrator of the pessimistic narrative from that of the optimistic one. In other words, these features also support an analysis of the film in terms of nonpersonified, parallel narration.

Moreover, some further events are more difficult to reconcile with the standard interpretation. First, part of the pessimistic narration includes the monstrous figure behind Winkie’s. He or she has the blue box from the optimistic story. If taken as real, this would provide the obvious explanation for the monstrous figure and the blue box in the optimistic narrative/dream. But it is not clear how Diane could have seen this figure and the box or even that they could exist. Of course, these could be merely imagined by Diane. But why would she imagine them? What would give rise to this imagination? Put differently, the existence of the blue box could serve at least as well to support a reversal of the usual interpretation. Betty sees a blue box in the optimistic story. That could serve to explain the blue box in the pessimistic story, if the optimistic story is real and the pessimistic story is a dream. On the other hand, neither Betty nor Diane appears to see the monstrous figure behind Winkie’s. That would seem to be information available only to a narrator. This would apparently undermine the interpretation of either narrative as the dream deriving from the other narrative as reality.

Subsequent events seem even more anomalous for the “pessimistic story as reality” view. The monstrous figure has the blue box in a paper bag. Once she sets it aside, two tiny figures walk out of the paper bag—miniature versions of the elderly couple Betty met on the plane and who,
in some storyworld, had something to do with her prize in the jitterbug contest. Again, there is knocking at Diane’s door. The tiny old couple enters through the space below the door. They assume normal size and pursue Diane. Diane screams, rushes to her bed, reaches for a gun in the side table and kills herself. The knocking recalls the knocking that (apparently) woke Diane that morning. As such, it may suggest that she is asleep again—or that Betty or Rita or maybe even Camilla is asleep—and dreaming this second narration. Other options would include the possibility that Diane is experiencing a hallucination or that the narrator here is not a simple perceptual narrator, but is giving a metaphorical account of Diane’s sense of guilt, panic, and despair.

Further difficulties arise due to the representation of the suicide. It is not only unrealistic. It is obtrusively theatrical. The smoke behind the bed recalls a theater effect (see Fig. 5.14) and has no obvious realistic counterpart.

The narrative points of view become—if this is possible—more ambiguous with what follows. First, the film returns briefly to the monstrous figure behind Winkie’s, a figure who remains highly obscure. If this is a figure of Diane’s imagination, how could he or she survive Diane’s death? If he or she is “real” in the storyworld, what does that say about the status of that storyworld?

When Betty/Diane was first introduced at the end of the jitterbug sequence, she was initially presented as an unfocused, cloudy patch of whiteness. This is repeated now. But, instead of being joined with the elderly couple, she is joined with Rita/Camilla. The image connects the narrator of this section with that of the jitterbug sequence. But it also
serves to suggest a sort of ghostly presence. It is as if the two characters are now united in spirit. Or, perhaps, it suggests what aspirations for happiness they may have shared, or that Diane (or Betty) may have had for them. The image contributes in a complex way to the profile of ambiguity.

The final shot of the film returns to the Silencio. One woman with strange blue hair sits in the theater and says, simply, “Silencio.” Silence suggests, among other things, death. In this way, this final judgment contributes to the sense that there has really been a death, or perhaps two deaths. The silence, then, would be that of both Diane and Camilla. This may seem to define the second narration as a real storyworld. But this is a figure from the first narration, not the second. Her survival beyond the end of the second narration may be taken as suggesting that the first narration defines a real storyworld and that the second is a nightmare preserving the characters seen by Betty in the first narrative (except, again, the monstrous figure). There is then the further complication that the location of the speaker in a dreamlike theater hardly makes her reality status clear.20

In sum, Mulholland Drive presents a complex profile of ambiguity. Viewers are accustomed to ambiguity at the level of theme or normative emotion, and to some limited ambiguity in the storyworld. But this work presents quite extensive ambiguity at the level of the storyworld. That ambiguity is inseparable from (the ambiguity of) the work’s narration. Specifically, the work may be understood as having two parallel, nonpersonified narrators. There are not many options that allow the viewer to trust both narrators. For example, one might assume that they represent parallel possible worlds in a science-fiction-like sense. Alternatively, one may try to understand them in terms of a single storyworld (thus as conjunctive, rather than disjunctive, parallel narration). Efforts at such interpretation commonly involve establishing some sort of hierarchy and personification of narrators. However, there is apparently contradictory evidence as to what might be “real” and what might be either derived or unreliable. Some of the excitement and effect of this and other postmodern works21 derives from the ways in which they move viewers to the limits of their ability to resolve ambiguities of both storyworld and narrative voice.

In the case of Mulholland Drive, there is a somewhat unequal profile of ambiguity. Specifically, one common interpretation appears more strongly supported than others. This is the interpretation in which a jealous, humiliated Diane has her ex-lover murdered, but feels deeply
guilty for it as well. Her complex emotions and associated memories give rise to the enigmatic dream that constitutes most of the film. The last part of the film brings the viewer into her waking life, where she realizes what she has done, remembers key moments of her relationship with Camilla, then is driven to suicide by her feelings of guilt and shame, as well as terrifying hallucinations. In the end, she seems to have some sort of spiritual connection with the now dead Camilla.

At the same time, this standard account of the film also seems to be undermined by information that supports other interpretations. These other interpretations include reversals of the dream/reality division, as well as pure storyworld parallelism. Perhaps the best way of reconciling these interpretations is to say that both the optimistic and the pessimistic narratives are dreams. That may seem to resolve the contradictions. However, in the end, most of the ambiguities remain. Specifically, in this case the question is not “Is the pessimistic version real, and in what ways does it incorporate fantasy or hallucination?” but “Is the pessimistic version closer to reality, and in what ways does it distort that reality?” Note that, in both cases, we may take parts of the optimistic version as real and parts of the pessimistic version as unreal, though perhaps not precisely the same parts. Moreover, in the two dreams account, we do not know who is dreaming the dreams and if there is one dreamer or there are two. Worse still, there is nothing that prevents the two dreams account from involving parallel nonpersonified narration. To the contrary, all the discourse differences continue suggest this. A final difficulty is that there is no character who is consistently present in the optimistic story, as we would usually expect the dreamer to be present. Indeed, this point counts at least prima facie against the standard interpretation as well.

Whatever interpretation one favors here, it seems clear that even if the profile of ambiguity for the work contains a prominent peak, it does not contain only one peak. Moreover, the possible interpretations and the encompassing pattern of discrete ambiguity are important for viewers’ emotional response to the film and for whatever thematic inferences one may wish to draw. In other words, they are a crucial part of the implied author’s/implied reader’s experience of the work. Finally, the film appears to involve parallel narration for its very different—indeed, contradictory—parts. In its overt presentation, that parallel narration is nonpersonified. In order to overcome the difficulties of parallel nonpersonified narration, critics tend to identify an embedded but implicit narrator who is personified as a character in the story. In other words, they
seek to transform an apparently nonpersonified and parallel narration into a covertly personified and embedded narration (or its functional equivalent in dreaming stream of consciousness).

**Conclusion**

Pre-theoretically, many readers or viewers and critics probably imagine that single narration is the standard case in literature—one story, one narrator. In fact, multiple narration is ubiquitous. Multiple narration can take several forms. The narrators may be embedded in one another, as when Jones tells a story about Smith recounting an incident. Alternatively, narrators may be parallel, as when Jones tells a story and then Smith gives his version of the same events. Finally, some group may be presented as narrating a story.

Typically, parallel narration involves two or more personified narrators who are encompassed by a single nonpersonified narrator. Commonly there are discrepancies between the different narrations, and one main interpretive task for the reader is inferring the facts of the storyworld, the thematic implications, and the normative emotions of the work as a whole. Part of this involves determining just how the different narrators are or are not reliable.

Some narratives are less concerned with exploring the storyworld per se than with examining and clarifying the cognitive and affective principles by which a particular narrator transforms the storyworld into the narrated world. Such narratorial transformation is accessible to a reader primarily via contrasts with alternative representations of the storyworld. For this reason, mentalistic narration (which focuses on the mental processes of narrators or focalizers) fits particularly well with parallel, personified narration. The different, personified narrators may diverge in their representations in ways that reflect their underlying cognitive and affective propensities, thus their characteristic epistemic and motivational unreliabilities.

Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* is an outstanding example of this. The three parallel narrators manifest distinctive cognitive biases, particularly in their theory of mind inclinations and propensities toward types of causal attribution. Moreover, it is no accident that Faulkner’s novel involves interior monologue and related techniques. Mentalistic narration is readily developed in the range of narrational techniques that run from un-self-conscious subvocalization (strict interior monologue),
through modifications that incorporate verbal associations, to various forms of “verbal idealization” in which words of an encompassing narrator express a character’s perceptual, emotional, and other nonverbal experiences in stream of consciousness.

While personified, parallel narration can pose serious interpretive problems and manifest a high degree of ambiguity, nonpersonified parallel narration is typically far more ambiguous and problematic. Indeed, it may initially seem impossible to have a work with two distinct impersonal narrators. But Mulholland Drive suggests that this is possible (as do other works, such as James Joyce’s Ulysses). That is not because the film definitively is a work of parallel nonpersonified narration. Rather, that is one possible—indeed, highly plausible—interpretation of the work. This plausibility results in part from the story contradictions (a common feature of parallel narration) and in part from the distinct narrational styles of the two narratives, specifically with respect to chronological emplotment, access to internal states, and focalization. Indeed, the nonfocalization of the optimistic narrative—thus the frequent absence of the putative dreamer (Betty, or perhaps Rita) from the events—would seem to count somewhat against interpretations that make the optimistic narrative a dream.

Critical analyses of the film do, however, point to a striking feature of the interpretation of such a work. Despite the resulting anomalies, critics have often set out to reduce the film’s apparent nonpersonified narratorial parallelism to a single nonpersonified narrator with an embedded, personified narrator (or functional equivalent). This suggests that viewers are strongly motivated to avoid accepting parallel nonpersonified narration in their interpretations of a work. In the case of Mulholland Drive, this avoidance is possible only if one allows a sort of covert personified narration, since the narration of Lynch’s film is overtly nonpersonified. The point is in itself theoretically consequential, since it suggests the in principle possibility of covert personification, whatever one concludes about Mulholland Drive.