REFLECTING ON MEANING IN LITERATURE:

A WRITER’S EXPLORATION

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ABSTRACT

This project is a personal look at the topic of meaning in literature from my own perspective as a writer. It asks what role I as an author play in the meaning of my work and what attitudes I should hold toward that meaning when writing. With the goal of settling these questions, the project begins by exploring my own views of meaning in reading and in my writing process. This exploration includes the writing of my own fiction work, “Making.” The focus shifts from there to explore the factors involved in meaning in general through an analysis of the various senses listed for “mean” and “meaning” in dictionary definitions. From this general look at meaning, the project moves on to look more closely at what meaning is and what factors determine it. That study concludes a view of meaning based on patterns or structures of experience that is both open and yet tied to reality. Once the project reaches a view of meaning and how it operates, the project moves on to discuss attitudes and approaches to writing that I can adopt in light of this view. The project concludes with the fiction piece “A Walk Through Reflections.”
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And to my God, Who never left me, but carried me through…

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Introduction

My Question

I have a question: how should I, based on the nature of meaning and how it functions within literature, approach the element of meaning in my own writing?

This project has formed out of a dilemma. I have both a passion for reading and a desire to write, and my interests in both revolve around meaning. Yet I have often had trouble relating my thought about these activities to what I perceived as the range of more commonly-held views about them. When analyzed, my sense of conflict centered on two issues regarding a writer’s relationship to meaning.

The first of these is the issue of whether I, as a writer, should be seeking to make a statement or have a message when I write. The idea of such efforts is often given labels of censure such as “preaching” or “propaganda.” I have also been told in the past not to worry about what I want to say, and to simply write instead. Such things seemed to imply that writers should not care about the meaning of the work they ended up producing. I could not, however, reconcile such attitudes with my own sense that whether I intended it or not, my work would end up saying something. If nothing else, it would end up implying a view of reality and some sense of morality. Indeed, I did not see how a literary work could avoid making a statement in at least this way. Because of this view, I felt that anything I wrote would say something through the viewpoint it implied, at least. I also felt that if my work was going to say something, I was responsible for it. To me, this situation seemed to mean that I ought to be carefully intentional concerning what it said. I could not see how to reconcile my view with the
view that literature should not be written with the goal of making a statement. Yet I did not feel able to conclude against either view.

This sense of responsibility for meaning also connected to my second issue of conflict. This was essentially the idea that my intention and meaning in writing might not have any role in determining the final meaning of my work, anyway. I knew somewhat vaguely that a great deal of literary theory, for varying reasons and to varying extents, denies the authority or relevance of authorial claims about meaning in the process of interpretation. An author’s denial that a particular interpretation accurately assessed a work’s meaning would in certain theories carry no weight at all. If this were the case, the issue of whether I should try to say something would not matter, anyway; I would be trying something impossible, or at most something irrelevant.

The above concerns may seem vague and ungrounded or even confused. Where, after all, are the specific statements and theoretical points that explain why these issues even caused me concern? My answer is that this description represents the problem as I experienced it, and the vagueness was a significant portion of the difficulty. I formed senses of these opposing viewpoints, but I could not pin them down. I had general uncertainties, but not specific reasons – other than my own positions, which seemed to conflict with so many others – to act on one thing or another. The solution to this may seem simple: study the problem more. In doing so I would either find thinkers similar to my positions with whom I could ally myself or I would find positions that made more sense than my own and be led to change. I have indeed had some opportunity to explore these ideas in the past. However, I found something that made sense in many of the theories and views of others, even when this sense was present alongside points of
contention both with rival theories and with my own views. Thus I seek, through the current project, to clarify my thought about literary meaning and apply this understanding to my thought about writing.

My Motivation

My interest in literary meaning stems from my own experience with varying types of creative works, especially including books, poetry, and song lyrics. Whatever the form, though, the perception and evaluation of meaning have long formed a crucial part of my experience with literary works. Indeed, love for the meaning of a work – the ability to embrace that meaning and thrill over it as beautiful, wise, or true – has usually been the primary factor in determining my favorites among both works and artists. I would begin by loving what I saw a particular piece saying, and then as I encountered more works by the same artist, I would begin to care for the artist as one who consistently wrote things that amazed me and that I could treasure for their meaning. In this way, C.S. Lewis’ feeling toward myth describes well my feeling toward literary meaning in general, “For my own part I am sure that I do not care for these things because they introduce me to [their authors]: I care for the books, and the men, because they witness to these things, and it is the message not the messenger that has my heart” (The Personal Heresy 103). The message was – and is – the primary point for me in literature. Indeed, my favor for a work or author does not always depend on great excellence in artistry. Lewis (incidentally one of my two favorite authors) once said of George MacDonald’s novels (MacDonald happens to be the other favorite), “Sometimes they diverge into direct and prolonged preachments which would be intolerable if a man were reading for
the story, but which are in fact welcome because the author, though a poor novelist, is a supreme preacher” (George MacDonald xxxiii). So also my reading is usually not done primarily for the story or the art. It is done for the message, the ideas and thoughts, or at times for the distinct but inarticulate emotion I find in the work.

This primacy of meaning in my concerns does not, however, mean that I have no concern for style or artistry. I also love the music, structure, and imagery that can be achieved in a work through language. I have sometimes even written pieces (usually poems) almost solely for the sake of sound or an image. However, these elements do not stand well for me on their own. In my own work, I consider the pieces written solely for sound to be of less worth than the ones that combine sound with meaning. In the work of others, technical merits cannot make me love a piece in the way that meaning can: if the artistry of a piece of literature left me in speechless awe, but I deplored the message it contained, I would likely try to learn from the work, but I do not believe I could ever love it. In contrast, I am often quite ready to bear with some clumsiness of expression where I can also see depth of meaning. I also think that the impact of an idea will not reach its full potential unless it is said well, though, and what thrills me most is when I find I can love the manner of expression as much as I love what’s being expressed.

This is the experience with literature that has shaped my interest in writing. John Gardner has said that a writer “knows full well that one of the things he’s doing when he writes is laboring to achieve an effect at least somewhat similar to effects he has gotten out of other people’s books” (Gardner 124). So it is with my concern over meaning in my own writing. I see the kind of meaning I’ve loved in various artists. More importantly, I’ve seen how much encouragement, comfort, strength, and cause for
thought I have received through the work of those artists. My desire to write is a desire to offer meaning that might similarly encourage, comfort, strengthen, and spur thought in others.

My Goals

This is both how and why I care about the question of meaning in my own work. However, my question – which ultimately branches off into various questions – remains. This project seeks to resolve these questions by formulating an informed and considered attitude toward meaning in my own writing. I begin this process in Chapter 1 by examining and articulating my own methods of handling meaning in both reading and writing. This process includes case analyses of my interpretation process in a literary passage and of my writing process in the story “Making.” Chapter 2 shifts to an exploration of factors involved in meaning in general as indicated by the various senses listed for “mean” and “meaning” in dictionary definitions. Chapter 3 continues exploring the question of what meaning is and also draws conclusions on the extent to which it can be determined and what role an author can play in that process. Chapter 4 considers the attitudes and potential writing strategies available to me in light of the conclusions drawn in Chapter 3. This project concludes with my story, “A Walk Through Reflections.”

My Limitations

I have written of my background with literature and meaning in hopes that the account will clarify both the interest I have in this project and the perspectives and influences I carry with me going into it. My assumptions – at least some of them – will
come glaring through the feelings I expressed concerning meaning: that it can hold the
place of primacy I gave it; that it proceeds, at least in part, from the thought of the author;
that what I perceive of it could be connected to an author’s thought; and what I perceive
as meaning actually is meaning in the first place – which is not to say the meaning,
though I do not usually think about meanings I cannot see. All of these assumptions are,
of course, eminently contestable. Indeed, the conflict that sparked the choice of this topic
is based in the knowledge that they quite often are contested.

From this point of choice, however, I can conceive of two potential strategies for
forming a topic such as this. The first involves an attempt to bracket and set aside all my
initial personal opinions, approaching the entire realm of ideas on the topic from a
perspective as limited in its bias as I could discipline myself to make it. The second
involves an attempt to embrace and use my initial opinions as a focus, while still
maintaining as fair a view of the ideas I encounter as possible.

There is a part of me that considers the first the more rigorous and worthy of the
two. However, even that part knows that the attempt would fail, that the opinions would
not remain bracketed, and that in the end the there would be limits to the limits I would
be able to set. The second is the one I am more likely to accomplish, and the second
opens more opportunity for checks on my thought than the first would allow: embracing
and using my initial views as a starting point forces me to state them, which brings at
least a number of my potential sources for bias into the open. It also allows the elements
that fueled my interest in this topic from the beginning to remain involved, and it allows
me a limiting principle for the ground I will have to cover.
Even the approach I have chosen, however, involves a wide range of ground, and a good deal of it is varied and complicated. It would not be feasible even to hope to cover all the possible issues and positions I could consider. As a more practical approach, I hope to at least cover a range of positions in a number of the relevant topic areas – a range that, if limited, could yet offer perspectives and considerations enough to serve as a testing-ground for the views I have developed through my experiences with fiction and writing to this point. This project is obviously shaped by assumptions and pre-existing perspectives insofar as they helped determine the very choice of the topic and the questions that direct it. My hope is that, keeping this in mind, the project will still test the reasoning underlying the assumptions and understandings I already hold and will serve as an opportunity to correct, refine, or confirm them.

There is admittedly an extent to which both this project and its goals are idiosyncratic. My starting perspective is one formed out of personal experience, and my goal of forming a foundation for my own practices of writing is also specifically personal. It is in some senses a highly individualized project. However, there are levels on which it is more generally relevant. As established above, I must ground both my question and its answer in an exploration of issues - such as the natures of meaning and literature - that I have hitherto left largely unexamined. In seeking to understand the natures of these things – what they are, what possibilities and traits form their identity – I seek to understand what is true about them generally.¹ Thus the attitudes or principles of practice I end up forming may be tailored to idiosyncratic priorities and goals. However, insofar as I seek to determine what possibilities or traits belong, as a result of their

¹ By saying, “I seek to understand what is true about them generally,” I do realize that this also involves the assumption that there is something “true about them generally.” This is the assumption I lean toward when I set out, though I acknowledge the possibility of finding it false.
natures, to literature and meaning, I hope to be addressing matters that could be deemed true or false in general rather than simply in their application to my own ends.
Works Cited:


Chapter 1

One of my hopes for this project is to clarify my understanding of how meaning functions in fiction, and I want to go about this by testing and either developing or correcting the ideas I already hold. However, though I obviously form understandings of the fiction I read and write, I have not up to this point tried to give anything like a full account of how I do so. I can fairly easily identify some of the principles functioning in my experiences with meaning in fiction, but I do not have them formulated into statements or organized into a coherent system. Indeed, there are even times when my attitudes toward literary meaning may be contradictory. This will only be a sketch, and it will likely be incomplete. It will, however, serve a number of purposes.

I have chosen to begin this project with an analysis of my own processes of interpretation and meaning creation. This analysis will be helpful, because these ideas provide a good deal of the background against which ideas I find in others will either “make sense” or “make no sense.” This is not to imply that such sense is an ultimate measure of an idea’s merit. It is a first and fallible indicator – but both are reasons that identifying this background and the varying points of conflict with it will be important. In the places where my thought needs adjustment, that adjustment will oftentimes not be a matter of mere addition. It may also involve a shift or even a deletion, and in such cases it will be important to know what I am changing and what place it holds in the rest of my way of thought. A careful look at where I am coming from will provide the basis for a consistent development of my own thought, and it will also lay out from the
beginning the kind of concerns that would be underlying my later arguments whether they were spelled out or not.

Because I wanted this to be an account of how I think about and understand meaning, I have not necessarily attempted to make use of the terms and theories of others in giving it. I know I will be analyzing material that various theorists have described and formulated terminology for already, and in certain instances I have commented on a divergence between my use of a term and a more common use. However, the purpose of this chapter will be to set out as attentive and coherent an account of my own experience that I can achieve, laying out the terms, analyses, and categories I actually use, regardless of their relation to defined theory.

In seeking to organize and analyze my general experience of relating to meaning in literature, I find myself understanding this experience in terms of a couple of particularly distinct traits. The first has to do with the kind of language involved: I find the categories of symbolic and narrative\(^2\) language to be particularly salient ones in my mapping of meaning. I do not necessarily claim that the two are mutually exclusive, nor that they are the only potential categories. However, they remain the most important elements in my understanding of literature and meaning. The second distinction has to do with my relationship to the literature with which I am dealing. On one hand, I have my experiences relating to the work of others in which I am the reader and interpreter.

\(^2\) In the discussion that follows, I am using both these terms in a highly generalized, and on some levels perhaps a technically incorrect, sense. I have chosen to maintain their use in a qualified sense for the reasons stated in the introduction to this chapter. Thus I use the term “narrative” in a very general sense to refer to the element of story in whatever form it may take. Precedence for this use can be found in Abrams’s and Beckson and Ganz’s uses of the term (Abrams 123, Beckson and Ganz 89). For commentary on the term “symbol,” see footnote 3 on page 12.
On the other hand I have experiences with my own work – that is, my experiences with writing.

In the case of narrative and symbolic language, which operate alongside each other in both my reading and my writing, their similarities and differences will each quickly become apparent. However, I do not often have occasion to set my experience of meaning in the work of others alongside my experience related to my own work and compare the two. Thus this chapter will be divided into two primary portions: a discussion of how I understand meaning when reading and a similar discussion of meaning in my own writing, with each discussions revolving around a given example.

Meaning in the Work of Others

Symbolic Meaning

Much of my understanding of meaning in literature revolves around my understanding of what I will call symbolism or symbolic language. I use the term symbolism here to refer in general to any use of a given image – or possibly concept – to clarify, explain, or describe an unrelated concept through a comparison of the two that emphasizes their similarities. I take this to include the cases of simile, metaphor, analogy, allegory, and perhaps others as well. Indeed, I see each of these cases as functioning in essentially the same way, with the primary difference being a matter of scale or extent of development.

3 For these purposes, I will be using the terms “symbolism” and “symbolic language” interchangeably.

4 My use of the term “symbol” here requires some comment. I use the term for lack of a better one that will cover the range of ideas I am attempting to indicate. There is some precedent for this use in the manner of Abrams discussion of symbol, which addresses simile, metaphor, and allegory, though also bringing out distinctions between them and hinting at a difference between allegory and symbol particularly. (206-208) Though this discussion actually excludes the primary sense of symbol – that of an emblem such as a flag – I use it as an overarching term, under which I group simile, metaphor, analogy and allegory together because, despite recognizing some differences in form, I perceive them (whether rightly or wrongly) as
Each of these kinds of symbolism involve the highlighting and elaboration of certain traits, relationships, and patterns connected to a given, often familiar or easily understandable entity. This entity, with its particular constellation of traits, is compared to a second entity in such a way as to imply that the latter entity possesses a constellation or pattern of traits similar to the one found in the first entity. This other entity can be a concept, a relationship, or a second tangible entity. However, whatever the entities being compared, the meaning of the comparison lies in the increased or changed understanding of the second, oftentimes more complex entity through the pattern of traits highlighted and more directly perceivable in the first entity. There are, of course, variations on this formula. The comparison can be more or less implicit, as can the description or presence of either of the two entities involved. Indeed, a symbolic comparison can potentially be made by means as slight as the description of one entity in terms evocative of the other entity involved. The primary requirement is that the pattern of traits belonging to one of the entities involved be understandable clearly or directly enough to serve as a base for recognizing the indicated pattern in the second entity.

The idea of a constellation can actually serve as an excellent image for the patterns compared in symbolic language, and the image itself can serve as an example for how symbols function. The commonalities between a constellation on the one hand and the patterns involved in symbolism on the other could perhaps be reduced to the concept of a pattern itself, but there is a good deal of understanding to be gained from a closer analysis. The concept of “constellation” used in the comparison here rests largely on the functioning according to the same general set of principles. I include allegory because, again within my own usual modes of thought, I view it as an extended form of metaphor.

5 “Entity” here and elsewhere in this passage will refer generally to concepts or ideas as well as tangible things.
commonest and most obvious sense of the word: it involves the image of a set of stars that can be looked upon as a group in the sky and thought of as forming a specific picture. This familiar, understood image of an arrangement of stars is the first entity in the comparison. When applied to the second concept – that of symbolism – it can be used to suggest the idea of the points or features of entities forming, like stars, specific patterns through their figurative “positioning” in relation to each other.

One could proceed from this point to draw further implications from the comparison, as well. Constellations are made up of specific stars selected out of many possible ones, both because they form and in order to form a given shape – that is, they actually do hold the particular angles and distances from one another that create the shape⁶, but a different set of stars could also have been picked out, and in that case the shape would be different. So with symbolism there are multiple traits that could be highlighted, and thus multiple patterns that could be drawn out. However, while this in some ways leaves the uses of a symbol open-ended, it also sets limits on their uses. One could draw out different traits in an object to make different points, but the object employed must still actually have the traits that are emphasized, and they must still bear the relationship to each other that the emphasized pattern indicates. Furthermore, when two objects are compared, they must have an arrangement of traits similar enough that the pattern from one can be highlighted in the other.

⁶ The fact that the shapes, distances, and positioning of stars as perceived from Earth differs from the actual arrangement of stars (i.e. stars that appear to be near each other may be farther apart than stars that appear to be distant from one another) does not change the point of the analogy. The perceived positioning of stars in relation to one another is still a part of the actual relationships of those stars: given their actual arrangement and a view of them from Earth, the shapes called constellations are still a part of how they would have to appear.
This illustration should not be taken to suggest that the resulting pattern is always, like the patterns of stars, pictorial. While some relationships could be pictured, the usefulness of the term “constellation” is merely in indicating the idea of a particular set of traits that form a certain pattern or set of relationships.

Narrative Meaning

What I here term “narrative meaning” might best be described as the meaning to be found through stories. Such meaning can be found in any form of story, whether long or short, poetry or prose, but it is the type of meaning suggested by the narrative element. My understanding of meaning in narrative can perhaps best be considered with reference to an example. In the following discussion, I will use as an example C.S. Lewis’ book *The Magician’s Nephew.*

When reading narratives, I perceive meaning on three primary levels. The first of these levels could perhaps best be described as that of “story actuality.” The level of story actuality in fiction includes everything that forms a part of the way things simply and actually are according to the story’s premises and progression. It includes facts about the characters, events, and setting of the story. It answers the questions of how a character looks, feels, thinks, speaks, and acts; in what order – and sometimes how and why – things happen; and what principles of reality – including those of physics, and metaphysics – are established by and therefore apply within the story.

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7 The choice of this book as an example for the current discussion was made for the sake of a specific passage to be introduced later. The choice of both book and passage was made in part as an example of the kind of meaning on which I focus most, as will also be explained more fully later.

8 Fictional principles of reality are of course most noticeable in science fiction and fantasy stories, which don’t simply use the rules of this world. However, even more realistic fiction must establish principles of reality. Indeed, it does so precisely by being realistic – that is, by communicating that it is supposed to follow the same rules as reality. What such stories recognize or acknowledge as the rules of reality may be
In *The Magician’s Nephew*, the level of story actuality includes the facts that Digory Kirke comes to live with his Aunt Letty and his Uncle Andrew in London because his father is in India and they are taking care of his mother, who is very ill (2-4, 68). It includes Uncle Andrew tricking Polly – Digory’s friend and neighbor – into taking a ring by means of which she travels out of our world, which then allows him to coerce Digory into following her with rings that will bring them home (12-13, 21-22). It includes the set-up of a reality in which there are magic rings that will take people out of their world into a wood that exists between worlds and contains pools that lead to other worlds (34-35). Quite simply, finding the “meaning” of a work on the level of story actuality involves determining the facts as they hold true within the story. It attends to both literal and figurative language in making this determination, but ultimately story actuality concerns what thing, action, or state of being the language – whether on the level of the phrase, sentence, paragraph, or, story – represents.

Very near the level of story actuality, though not quite equivalent to it, is the second level I find in narrative meaning, which I would call “story tone.” The story tone deals with values as established by and for the story. In some ways, this level of meaning could be seen as a layer or level built on top of story actuality: while story actuality includes the facts about the characters, objects, and events of the story, story tone involves the value or import those facts carry. It can be found in *how* the things on the level of story actuality are represented, and is thus largely established through the value weights of descriptions, narrator commentary, and the consequences of actions.

considered accurate or inaccurate, but its purpose of following what are taken to be the principles of reality remains.
The workings of story tone can be seen in Digory and Polly’s visit to Charn, a
ruined, nearly dead world the two reach from the wood by means of the rings. While
there, they discover an enchanted room that contains a number of statues and a small,
table-like pillar with a golden bell and hammer on top and an inscription on the side (43-
44). Both Digory and Polly look at the inscription to see whether or not they can read it,
and they find that though they don’t know the language, they understand the message
(44). These elements belong, of course, to the level of story actuality. However, then
comes a passage that reads,

If only Digory had remembered what he himself had said a few minutes
ago, that this was an enchanted room, he might have guessed that the
enchantment was beginning to work. But he was too wild with curiosity
to think about that. He was longing more and more to know what was
written on the pillar. (44)

Again, this passage contains information on the level of story actuality: Digory wants
very badly to know what the writing says, and this is strengthened by the magic in the
room, as indicated by the statement “the enchantment was beginning to work.” However,
in addition to this, the passage contains phrases and descriptors that reveal how this
desire is evaluated within the story and by the narrative voice of the story. The very
phrase “if only” implies regret. The statements “he himself had said” and “he might have
guessed” indicate knowledge and a potential but unrealized ability to use it. Again
according to the description, this potential remains unrealized because he is “too wild
with curiosity to think” through the situation, a state that is emphasized by the phrase,
“longing more and more.” The total impact of this description is to convey that Digory is
allowing his judgment to be clouded and taken over by strong desires that he’s not testing
with the understanding available to him; that is, he’s succumbing to temptation without
resisting to the best of his ability. The value-weights set up by the description of Digory’s mood – and especially its status as regrettable – establishes the tone for the actions that lead him to fight with Polly and prevent her from leaving when he strikes the bell. This descriptive evaluation is confirmed more straightforwardly through narrative commentary in the statement, “I can’t excuse what he did next except by saying that he was very sorry for it afterward (and so were a good many other people)” (46). According to this commentary, there is no excuse for the action, and it is a very regrettable one. And indeed, it is this action that awakes Jadis, the evil queen who destroyed her own world and who will eventually become the White Witch in *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* (*The Magician’s Nephew* 54-55, *The Lion* 47).

As illustrated above, the story tone certainly relates to whether a given story element as established by the story is right or wrong, good or evil. However, it also involves a more nuanced range of potential evaluations, such as whether story elements are beautiful or ugly, worthwhile or worthless, interesting or boring, wise or foolish, significant or insignificant, strange or normal. Story tone includes any value judgments both made by the story and applicable to things within the story.

The third and final level of meaning I generally see in narrative is that of real-world implications. This level concerns the values and beliefs about reality outside the story that the levels of story actuality and story tone imply. These implications apply insofar as the objects of the evaluating tones, descriptions, or consequences correspond to objects in life. Accordingly, much like the level of story tone, the level of real-world implications is built in part upon the first two layers of narrative meaning. Indeed, rather

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9 Some might consider the examples of tone cited here to be narrative commentary, as the passage is written in the narrator’s voice. However, it is not commentary as directly as the case cited here, and it still serves as an example of how descriptive wording can contribute to the tone in a passage.
than being seen as independent layers of meaning, one could see these levels as steps of
analysis, with each step focusing on a different aspect of the work while still requiring the
understanding achieved at the prior step in order to reach it.\(^{10}\) Having taken \textit{what} is
portrayed (story actuality) and \textit{how} it’s portrayed (story tone) together, the real-world
implications include what the viewpoint that created the first two levels of meaning
would say about reality. Alternatively, the real-world implications may proceed from
how the situation on the level of story actuality might correspond to a situation in reality,
and how the evaluations of story tone might, by implication, similarly correspond to
appropriate evaluations of the real situation. Such correspondence comes about through a
fictional situation serving as a specific example of a situation that, in more general terms,
often occurs in reality. The meaning lies in the implication that the statements made
about the fictional situation, or the general view established by how its features are
arranged, should also be applied to the corresponding situation in reality.

In this way, my understanding of symbolic language most likely provides the
paradigm for my understanding of the implications of fiction. This is not to say that all
fiction is metaphorical or allegorical. I do see distinctions between symbolic and
narrative meaning. As a general rule, narratives have coherent levels of meaning in
addition to the level of implication by correspondence, while symbols usually exist
primarily for the purpose of the parallels they allow one to draw and would make no
sense without them. More importantly, however, there is a difference between the types
of things held parallel within the two ways of meaning. In symbolism, the things
compared belong to different classes; they are different \textit{kinds} of things, and much of their

\(^{10}\) A sequence depending on order is perhaps too simplified a way of looking at these steps, however.
Oftentimes the layers are built one upon the other in order. However, they are interdependent, so at times
feedback between the layers will refine the understanding one can reach at each layer.
effectiveness derives from this difference, despite the fact that symbols are also based upon similarity. Narrative, in contrast, functions through the arrangements between entities that on some level can be identified as an instance of a more general class. The behavior or function of these entities in the narrative situation represents the general class of which the particular entity is a part, and thus makes suggestions about the relationship of the represented class to other classes represented in the situation. The parallels are those between a particular and its general kind. However, the drawing of parallels or correspondences is still an integral part of my usual way of thinking about meaning.

_The Magician’s Nephew_ affords an excellent passage for analysis to the level of real-world implications.¹¹ It takes place at the beginning of the final story arc in the book. Jadis, who Digory wakes in Charn, follows Digory and Polly from her world into the wood, and from the wood back to Earth (60-61). In an attempt to get her away from Earth, Digory and Polly use the rings again to take her back first to the wood, and then into what turns out to be a new world just being created (84-85, 88-90). The new world becomes Narnia, and they get to watch as the Lion Aslan sings it into existence (92-95, 100-103)). While there, Digory decides to ask Aslan for something that will cure his mother (99). However, when he goes to ask for help, he finds himself being held responsible for Jadis’ presence in Narnia because of his actions in waking her while in Charn. As a result, instead of being free to ask for help for himself, he finds that he must now do something to help correct the situation his actions caused (120-121). The passage

¹¹ I chose _The Magician’s Nephew_ as a focus case for the sake of this passage, and I chose to discuss this passage for a number of reasons. First, it relates a moment and image that can be isolated without losing their clarity or coherence. It requires context, but I have been or will be able to given that context through summary. Second, the passage encapsulates a great deal of meaning for its length. Finally, this passage is one that I find not only meaningful, but powerfully meaningful. It is thus an example, as I will observe later, of the kind of meaning that has helped to establish my love both of given fictional works and of meaning as conveyed through fiction.
begins when Digory answers the question of whether he is ready to do what he has to in order to make things right:

But when he said “Yes,” he thought of his Mother, and he thought of the great hopes he had had, and how they were all dying away, and a lump came in his throat and tears in his eyes, and he blurted out:

“But please, please – won’t you – can’t you give me something that will cure Mother?” Up till then he had been looking at the Lion’s great front feet and the huge claws on them; now in his despair, he looked up at his face. What he saw surprised him as much as anything in his whole life. For the tawny face was bent down near his own and (wonder of wonders) great shining tears stood in the Lion’s eyes. They were such big, bright tears compared with Digory’s own that for a moment he felt as if the Lion must really be sorrier about his Mother than he was himself.

(126-127)

It will be helpful for the analysis that follows to begin by establishing a framework to which the various details will relate. This framework will be made up of the primary situational features that serve as the examples of wider classes that exist in reality. These primary features would be the figures of Aslan and Digory. This is unsurprising; the passage is about an interaction between these two characters, and all the important dynamics of the scene revolve around how they relate to one another. The details of the story will carry implicit meaning on the basis of how they elaborate the situation between Digory and Aslan.

The first point to establish, therefore, is what generalized classes in real life are exemplified by the figures of Digory and Aslan and the relationship between them. In the case of Aslan, his role as applied to this moment could be generalized to that of a judge and enforcer of justice. He is the one who is holding Digory accountable for wrongdoing, and he is the one who will choose the penalty. Furthermore, there is notable
evidence within the series that Aslan corresponds to or parallels the figure of Christ. Thus Aslan corresponds to a judging Christ. Digory’s situation in this scene can also be considered a specific but generalizable case. The situation his case represents is that of one whose deep desire and even need for something on one hand conflicts with a position of guilt and debt on the other. Given this framework, one can read these lines with the understanding that many of the details applicable between Aslan and Digory are also implied to apply between Christ and the general figure of one guilty and in need.

The passage itself begins with a desperate plea. This generalized identity of the action – the plea for help in the face of hopes lost due to guilt – is really the level that shows which points of the situation parallel reality. However, it is based in the first two levels of meaning. On the level of story actuality, Digory is losing his hopes, on the verge of crying, and finally makes the request he’s been wanting to make. On the level of story tone, the desperation comes through in the description of “great hopes” “dying away” and the fact that he “blurted” his request.

This desperate plea marks a turning point in that it accompanies a change in Digory’s behavior. However, before analyzing this change, one must first consider what his behavior changed from. Directly following his request is the statement that “Up till then he had been looking at the Lion’s great front feet and the huge claws on them” (127). The information this contributes to the scene on the level of story actuality is simple: Digory is standing in front of Aslan having been told that he must make up for a

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12 Actually, though the terms of a parallel are sufficient for this discussion, one could argue from other points in the series that Aslan, within the reality of the story, actually is Christ interacting with worlds other than Earth in ways appropriate to those worlds. One of the key scenes in support of this takes place at the end of The Voyage of the Dawn Treader. In situation that strongly resembles John’s account of Jesus appearing to the disciples by the Sea of Galilee after the Resurrection, the children encounter a lamb who turns into the Lion Aslan (207-209). He tells them that he is in their world as well as in Narnia, and says “But there I have another name. You must learn to know me by that name” (208, John 21). The imagery of the passage at very least suggests a connection between Christ and Aslan.
wrong he has done, _and he spends much if not all of this time keeping his eyes on Aslan’s feet and claws_. Even given just this information, one can begin the generalization that will lead to the phrase’s implications. One could reasonably guess that the import of those feet and claws to Digory would have been the potential of what Aslan could do to him with them. Thought about this potential would be especially likely given the fact that Digory is already in the position of a guilty party. This interpretation finds support the descriptors that establish the story tone. The emphasis on size in the adjectives “great” and “huge” would lend force to the idea that if Digory provoked or angered Aslan to the place where Aslan wanted to use his claws, Digory would be able to do little or nothing to stop him. The information on the level of the story does not directly say that anything connected to Aslan’s feet and claws is actually on Digory’s mind while he’s looking at them. However, the act of solely looking at feet and claws is still the act of looking solely at the instruments through which an attack or a punishment and the pain attending it could come. Thus Digory’s specific situation comes to represent the generalized situation of a guilty party with a request standing in front of the authority holding them accountable and spending that time looking solely at those aspects of the authority through which punishment could be administered or anger could be expressed.

When applied to the parallel situation of a guilty individual in relation to Christ, the phrase in question comes to represent how one with a weight of guilt can easily come to see only those aspects of Christ that relate to anger, judgment, and punishment. The next phrase, however, suggests that in both cases, there is more to see.

The next phrase – and the second half of the same sentence – reads, “now in his despair, he looked up at his face” (127). This phrase offers a good point for illustrating
the extent or depth to which this kind of analysis can be taken as well as the limitations attendant on such analysis. For while I think this reasoning process can reveal meanings that do actually belong to the text, it can also come to involve more personal implications.

There are certainly two very important elements in this phrase. One is the despair; the second is the look at the face. As indicated by the word “now,” the despair also relates back to the desperation and loss of hope with which Digory makes his request. The first – and I think main – point of interest in the action of this phrase lies in the fact that Digory does not look at Aslan’s face until he is in despair; the despair is what drives his change of focus. When applied to the parallel case, this would imply that despair and desperate need can often be the triggers that force one to look beyond anger and judgment to finally see other aspects of Christ’s character. I follow this, however, with two more tentative lines of interpretation. As I hear it in my head, the sentence ends on a down-beat that emphasizes the word “face.” Given this emphasis, I begin trying to trace what the importance of a face is generally, and what it would be in this context. The face – especially the eyes – are what one avoids when feeling guilty, which fact fits the initial actions. Yet the face also in some ways stands for the individual to whom it belongs – looking them in the face is a way of acknowledging them. An acknowledgment opens the way for communication, and communication the way for a relationship. Combine these implications connected to the face with Digory’s despair and the representations of judgment that despair leads him to look away from, and the force of the sentence runs something like, “It was Digory’s despair that finally made him take his eyes off the narrow view of his own guilt and expectation of punishment to
acknowledge Aslan. This action in turn opened possibilities for communication – and through communication, relationship – that had not existed before.” This generalized description of Digory’s situation applies in turn to the level of real-world implications if one settles the figure of the guilty individual and of Christ into Digory’s and Aslan’s respective places. Yet, while I think such a reading fits the tone and direction of the sentences and passage – and indeed, I could add more to it – I would observe here the limitations I begin to see with the interpretation of meaning when understood in this way. The fact is that when tracing implications one is in part tracing associations, and associations can occur along an entire range from connections that are pretty clear cut and generally recognizable – like I would argue for the initial point, with the simple application of despair driving a change in focus –to others that verge on being more personal and private – such as, potentially, the line of reasoning concerning word face.13

The above illustrates the reasoning behind how I tend to interpret fiction. However, I do not often dwell on the reasoning for very long or in a great deal of detail. My experience of meaning is usually more immediate. This experience sometimes resembles one of translation, such as saying, “Digory is surprised by what he sees when he finally looks at Aslan’s face. The guilty individual may be surprised at Who they find when they finally look at Christ.” However, the experience is more often like superimposing one case on top of another and seeing certain traits line up and match, revealing a set of important relationships and emotional dynamics common to both. I see Christ in Aslan, the guilty one in Digory, and in both situations at once I feel the hopeless expectation of anger meeting unimagined care and compassion.

13 I consider the line of reasoning concerning the word “face” reasonable and fitting but not mandated by the context.
Clarifications and Further Thoughts

My understandings of symbolism and narrative form the largest part of what I have analyzed of my view of meaning in literature. While, as discussed above, I do see differences between them, the share many similarities as well. One such similarity is that in both cases I consider the ultimate forms of their meaning to be claims. In narrative, the arrangement of a situation as an implied instance of a generalizable reality would constitute a claim. Similarly, in cases of symbolism, the comparison between the two objects is actually a claim that the objects have similarities, and the proposed constellation of traits is a claim about the natures of those objects. This view of literature as making claims is perhaps the element of meaning that I find most important. The claims may often be subtle or implicit, but I almost always see them as being present on one level or another. Indeed, I have a hard time imagining literature without them. Even where they are not intended, I think claims of the nature described above still function. Statements can have unintended consequences, and actions – including the act of describing – can have unintended implications.

In this sense there is an extent to which I see meaning as dependent more than anything on the logic of how the language involved is put together. However, I also usually view meaning as involving views, beliefs, and ideas belonging to and suggested by the author. When reading, I generally want to find what the author is trying to say, and when writing I usually do so with the intention of making specific claims. Though I don’t necessarily think an author must always have intended something for a work to logically imply it, I do generally think of authors as choosing their descriptions and comparisons deliberately and on some level being mindful of the sense these choices give
the resulting work. Indeed, I would almost consider it a fault of carelessness or worse if they did not.

On the other hand, however, one could ask whether the patterns, parallels, exemplifications, and implications I see as claims are actually clearly indicated by the text at all. One could ask what made one set of traits more important than others, or a given narrative figure an example of one class rather than one or more others. But in any case, what determines the limits of whether such figures fit an interpretation? I do see them as being pointed toward, and therefore to some extent specified, by various factors. The patterns and parallels of symbolism would be limited, as already stated, by the traits and relationships an object actually could be described as having (and therefore, as sharing in common). The correspondences and implications of narrative would likewise be limited by the potentials of the traits that actually form a part of the narrative situation. Both would also be limited by the context in which they are found. In addition, knowledge about the author could provide some indication of the points likely being made in a given text, though this would not eliminate the possibility of the text legitimately carrying unintended logical implications. However, it is unclear how much these factors limit the potentials of interpretation. I would consider there to be room for variations in emphasis and application when it comes to the traits and situational details of the types of meaning I have described, which in turn leaves room for readers’ perspectives to influence what they see.

Indeed, one thing my analysis of The Magician’s Nephew does point to beyond my strategies of interpretation is the role my faith as a Christian has played in forming my view of meaning in literature. As I said in the introduction, the meanings I have
found in literature have played a crucial role in forming my love of literature. The work discussed above – most especially the passage between Digory and Aslan – serves as an excellent example both of the kind of content and the manner of expression that characterize my favorite passages and moments of meaning. This kind of passage and this kind of meaning are ones I would try to emulate.

One of the consequences of this central interest is that meanings of a spiritual, moral, or philosophical nature are the ones I register most easily; indeed, more than this, they are the ones I tend to seek out. While I realize there are other subjects for meaning, I can at times have difficulty even seeing them if they range too far from the kind and content of thought I recognize readily. I would, however, tend to argue that the view of meaning and method of interpretation described above are compatible with entity certain subjects and views of meaning beyond those that constitute my usual focus.

**Meaning in My Own Work**

The above accounts for how I usually read. However, a different thought process is, of course, involved in writing. My goal through what follows will be to formulate an account of my writing process with a particular focus on the role that meaning as I perceive it plays in that process. Toward that end, I wrote a story, attempting both reflect on my usual habits as a basis for how to write it and to discover through the writing of it what those habits were.

That is how the story “Making” came to be written. Further descriptions and reflections will follow the story.
Making

Mommy had it out! She had it out; it was time! I jumped and clapped my hands and ran over to the couch where she had set out the fabric for my dress. “You’re making it for me, Mommy? You’re making my big four-year-old dress now?” I grabbed for the fabric and pulled it down so that fell open and over to the floor. All those little purple flowers would be on my dress! As I looked at my fabric flowers hanging down to the floor, I wrapped the part at the top around my hands, because it felt nice and cool when it touched them.

“Now where did my sewing scissors go? What do you think, Melody, did Daddy take them again?” I looked up to see Mommy turning around from her cabinet. “I’ll go see, and then we’ll get started, okay?”

I was feeling bouncy, so I bounced as I nodded.

When Mommy left, I had me and my fabric. I pulled the fabric tighter around my hands, because it was mine, and I was allowed, and I wanted to feel it.

Then I held it up and ducked my head underneath it, and I set it on my shoulders. Pulling it down from there, I wrapped it around and around and down my legs until it reached the floor and sat there. Flowers all around me now. I tried to spin, and the fabric pulled tight so I fell, but it was fun and I laughed as I got back up.

Then I could hear Daddy’s voice in the hall, “You see, Trace – you found them right where you left them.”

“You troublemaker!” came Mommy’s reply in the voice she used when she sometimes talked upset with me, but wasn’t.

“Mommy! Daddy!” I called. “Look! Come see!”
“Coming, sweetie. I’m coming.” Mommy’s voice came first and then she did, with Daddy coming after her.

“See, Mommy? See?” I lifted up my arms to show her my dress.

Mommy smiled big when she saw me. “Ooooh, look at you!”

“Look at you, indeed!” Daddy laughed, and he walked toward me with his hands held out.

“Oh, up!” I started to run toward him, but my dress grabbed my foot so that only the rest of me could go forward. I fell… but then Daddy’s hands were there.

“Goodness! Careful, sweetie!”

Then I went up and up, and I was up high, and Daddy was under me smiling at the end of his arms. “Wheeee!” I squealed. “Spin me! Spin me!” And Daddy spun and the room spun, and I stretched out my arms, and I was flying.

“Mark, honey, could you bring our birdie down so I can start working?” Mommy’s voice came from down below, near the floor.

“No! No! Spin me more!” I didn’t want Daddy to stop; I wanted to keep flying. But Daddy slowed and began to bring his arms, and hands, and me toward him.

“Hold on a minute. We can spin more after we give Mommy the fabric for your dress.”

“No!” It was mine. “I want to spin with my flowers! Again, again!”

“But honey, I can’t make your dress if I don’t have the fabric.”

I frowned a little bit. Not make my dress? But I had my dress, and it was on me. But Mommy was supposed to make it for me…

“Can we give the fabric to Mommy, Melody?” Daddy sounded like he wanted to.
“Ummmm… Yes!” I began kicking and pulling at the fabric, trying to wiggle out of it.

“Hold on, there, Kiddo!” Daddy’s talking mixed with his laughing. “Let me help.”

So Daddy unwrapped my fabric, and I wiggled and pushed it off me, and then we gave it to Mommy.

“Thank you, baby.” She said as she took it. I watched from Daddy’s arms as Mommy spread the fabric out flat over top of her big green plastic mat. She took out papers that made a crinkly sound when she moved them, and Daddy sat down with me on his lap. Mommy and Daddy started talking about my dress and their work and tomorrow being Sunday and something they wanted to do tomorrow after church. I watched Mommy poking the pins I’m not allowed to touch through her papers and my dress. I wondered why she was doing that.

Then she took her scissors and started cutting.

“No! No!” I tried to jump off Daddy’s lap. She was cutting my dress? How could it be my dress if she cut it? “Stop!” Daddy’s arms were keeping me from getting down, and I tried to squirm and get away.

“What, baby?” Mommy asked.

“No! Don’t cut!” I kept trying to squirm, but Daddy held me tighter.

“But I have to in order-”

“No!” I cried louder, frantic. She had promised me my dress!

“Melody.” Daddy’s voice sounded unhappy. “You need to stop yelling. It’ll be okay.”
“No! No!” I pleaded, still fighting to get down and save my dress. I started to cry.

Daddy made a “shhhhh” noise while Mommy said, “It looks like somebody’s tired. Do you need to go down for a nap?”

“No! No nap! Don’t cut!” How could she? It was my dress!

“You need to settle down, Melody, if you want to stay up.”

But by then all I could do was cry and rub my eyes, still squirming, though I really had no hope of saving my dress now.

“Yes, that’s tired if I’ve ever seen it.” Daddy said and stood up with me. He started walking toward the door.

“Don’t cut it! No nap! No!” I cried in despair.

“I’ll go and get the mail on the way back,” Daddy told Mommy as he turned the corner.

I just cried harder as I watched the crinkly paper over top of my purple flowers disappear behind the wall.

Finally, Melody was in bed, and I couldn’t suppress the sigh of relief as I walked outside toward the road where the mailbox stood. Oh, Melody... I love you, but you just don’t live up to your name when you need a nap. I grinned and shook my head. But then, I suppose not too many just-turned-four-year-olds do. I opened the mailbox and pulled out the mass of envelopes and magazines inside, closing it again afterwards. Turning back, I began shuffling through the letters as I walked. Bill… bill… credit card offer – and then I stopped. Clerbourgh City Office of Public Projects. “Hmmmm… I
wonder what the official word is…” I started working at opening the envelope as I continued walking. Some months ago, we’d received notification that within the year the city would be “implementing an emergency road expansion project to resolve acute traffic problems caused by…” a full list of problems and precedents I certainly hadn’t tried to memorize. But the short of it was that they would need to buy an unknown portion of the border of our property. That letter had promised a future letter to “advise you as to the extent of the property required and to specify compensation for the same.” This would be it, then. I was curious to know what they’d need. Entering the house, I tossed the rest of the mail on to the living room table and headed to the family room where I’d left Tracy, reading on my way.

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It seemed to take quite a while after Mark had left the room, but Melody’s cries had finally quieted down. I continued my cutting and shook my head. *You have a will of your own, there, dear, that’s for sure.* I thought, then smiled. “She gets it from you,” I often teased my soft-spoken Mark. And actually, it may have been truer than the joke let on. He was quiet, yes, but he could also stand his ground when he wanted to. He could drive me crazy standing his ground. But he challenged me, and that was one of the things I’d fallen in love with about him.

So yes, I suppose Melody may have gotten some of her will from him. But she certainly got her way of *expressing* that will from me. Blunt. Insistent. Loud. Whatever was at hand, we’d pour ourselves into it. But Heaven help us if we needed to let go.

I could hear Mark in the hallway. “So, did Melody go down okay?” I asked, beginning to cut next piece as he walked into the room. He said nothing, and I looked up.
I frowned at the frown on his face, and I set the scissors aside. “What’s wrong, honey?” He took a step forward and handed me a paper before picking a way around my mess of pattern pieces and fabric to sit beside me on the floor. A little nervous at my husband’s manner, I scanned the page…

Clerbourgh Office of Public Works

RE: Project 10329 – Rillside Road Expansion

Lot: 409

Dear Homeowner:

Pursuant to the plans ordered and approved by the Clerbourgh Council of Public Works… specifications set out by city-approved surveyor and engineer… Rillside Road Expansion Project… report detailing execution requirements… includes properties of Lot 409 in full…

“Wait!” I looked over at Mark and then back to the page. “‘In full?’ As in, the house and everything?” I read the line again, hoping I’d simply misunderstood.

“That’s what it sounds like.”

I shook my head in disbelief. “But… but they said before that they only needed part of the property.”

“I know.” His voice beside me was even and steady.

“The whole thing, though? The house, too? This means… we have to move.”

“I know.”

How, I wondered, could even he be so calm? “But… just like that? They can’t – we can’t – I mean, how are we supposed to just leave?” I reached for my scissors and began to fiddle with them in agitation.
“I don’t know,” Mark’s voice came quietly from beside me once again.

I couldn’t stand it. I let the scissors clatter to the floor. “Mark, aren’t you even upset about this? Don’t you care? This is our home!” I turned toward him, ready to continue… but then my eyes met his, and they stopped me short. “I’m sorry, honey. That was unfair. It’s just that this is so–”

“Unexpected. Yes. I’m… shocked. I never imagined this.”

“Isn’t there something we can do?” But Mark didn’t reply, and he didn’t need to. I tossed the paper from me, wishing I could have been tearing it to pieces. Instead I just sat there, uncertain even of what to feel. Why, Lord?

Mark’s arm slid around my shoulders and pulled me close to him, saying nothing for a moment. Then I heard a whisper in my ear. “You know what, Tracy?”

“What?”

“I love you.” He leaned over and kissed me.

I smiled a little, then kissed him back. “I love you, too.”

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It was lots of days ago that Mommy and Daddy told me about something called moving. It seemed funny how they talked about it. They usually said I was always moving. But then they told me we’d be putting all of our things and all of my toys into boxes and taking them to some place new, and I would have a new room. Moving also meant that Mommy and Daddy were very busy, and when they were home from work, or on days they didn’t have work, we went visiting lots and lots of houses. There was never anybody home at those houses except the same lady, but she was nice and said I could call her “Re-a-ter Beth” because the other name was too hard.
Whenever we went visiting houses, Mommy couldn’t work on my dress. But tonight she got it out again.

She had it all in pieces. It wasn’t big and couldn’t wrap around me anymore. She said she was still working on it, though, and now she was sitting by her sewing machine and sticking pins through some of the pieces. She would put two of the pieces right next to each other and make their edges look the same. Then she’d push one of her pins back and forth through them both until it stuck them together. There was something wrong, though.

“Mommy,” I asked, “why are the ugly sides on the outside? The colors aren’t nice, and you can’t see my flowers.” I tried to pull the two pieces apart to show the side I wanted to see.

“Oh, no, honey, don’t do that.” Mommy stuck in another pin. Then she reached for my hand and pulled the fabric away from me. “You’ll get poked that way. And don’t worry, baby, the fabric is in the right place.” Her voice reminded me of when she laughed, and she was smiling. But I couldn’t tell why.

I frowned. “But mommy,” I tried again, “it won’t look pretty this way.”

“Oh, sweetie, yes it will.” Her smile grew with my frown, and she reached over and wiggled my lower lip with her fingers. “What’s this, huh, little one?” She sounded like she usually did right before tickling me, but then her face changed and got serious. “Baby, does Mommy know what she’s doing?”

I thought about it, and then nodded.

“Can you wait a little bit until Mommy can show you?”
I thought again, and stopped frowning a little. “Uh-huh.” I grabbed the arm of her chair and pulled myself higher to watch. I still didn’t see how it could work. “But Mommy, I want to know now.”

I smiled at my little girl’s curiosity as I finished pinning the two skirt-sections I would sew together next. She was always impatient to understand the hows and whys of everything. She wanted so badly to know what it all meant.

She stood on her tip-toes staring as I turned to my sewing machine and set the two pieces in place.

“Mommy, what does that do?” She asked and reached up toward the needle.

I grabbed for her hand. “Melody,” I said, giving her my warning look, “what has Mommy told you about her sewing machine?”

“Not to touch,” she replied, lowering her head.

“And why aren’t you supposed to touch?”

“Because I could get hurt,” she mumbled.

“That’s right.” I smiled to let her know I wasn’t angry. She brightened immediately, and I pulled her up onto my lap. “This is called a presser-foot,” I pointed to the part I had just moved, “and it helps Mommy keep the fabric moving the way she wants it. And while Mommy and the presser-foot are moving the fabric, Mommy will press the foot petal.” I pointed to the floor and held her so she could see under the desk, “The foot petal will make the needle,” I pulled her up and pointed again, “move up and down really, really fast and poke through the fabric. Every time it does that, it will pull thread through, and the thread will hold the pieces of fabric together so that it doesn’t
need pins anymore. Do you see now?” She nodded enthusiastically. “Okay, I’m going
to set you down, now, and you can watch me.”

“Okay,” she bounced off my lap onto the floor.

I turned back to the machine and started it. After a minute of removing pins and
guiding fabric as the machine whirred, the seam was done. I pulled the piece away from
the machine and clipped the remaining threads. Then I turned to my daughter.

“Now, remember how you wanted to know why the flowers were on the inside?”
She nodded vigorously.

“Here, see?” I took the newly-sewn section and pulled it open. “Now we have
one piece that will be part of your skirt, and we won’t have this-” I turned the piece
around and flipped the seam allowance back and forth “on the same side as your pretty
flowers.”

She smiled radiantly and bounced. “Ooooooh! Do another! Do another! I
wanna see again!”

_Ahhh, my sweety…_ I thought. _You’ll never get your dress at this rate._ “Actually,
baby,” I looked over at the clock. “It’s almost time for making dinner. Why don’t you
go find Daddy and see if he’ll let you help make it while I keep working on your dress? I
think he’s in his office.”

“Okay!” She nodded just as eagerly, then bounded away out the door. I
imagined Mark getting tackled and dragged into the kitchen by Melody and grinned. In
fairness, he had started the game first. But after that, Melody had become our entirely
willing go-between in Dinner Tag. Grinning still, I turned back to my desk and began
working again.
Houses, houses, one after another. They slid across my computer screen: profiles, pictures, dimensions. I filtered through, trying to convince myself that maybe there’d be something worth looking over with Tracy later, but I couldn’t focus at all. *Three weeks. We’ve only been looking for three weeks. Be reasonable,* I told myself. But I couldn’t help the frown that tugged the corners of my mouth downward. Reasonable? What was reasonable? “Well, after all, it’s just a house,” a co-worker had offered ‘reasonably’ when I’d first mentioned the move at work. *Just a house. Be reasonable.*

But what about wanting to grow old with your wife in the house you returned to from your honeymoon? What about wanting to watch your little girl grow up in the rooms where she’d taken her first steps? To simply want to keep the place that had seen your family’s history – wasn’t that *reasonable*? I laughed wryly. What kind of “reason” could imagine replacing those things?

*Lord, I don’t get it. I just don’t get it. Why?* I wouldn’t form the question further, but I couldn’t quell the depression that settled over me as, one after another, I surveyed the newest collections of colored pixels claiming that somehow, through the flat surface of my monitor, they could represent “homes.”

But no amount of color or claims couldn’t change the good – *good* – seven years’ difference that separated those “homes” and our home. Seven years, without even counting the Renovation Months. The place had been the classic “fixer-upper,” and Tracy and I had spent nearly every spare minute of our engagement nailing boards, washing windows, cleaning floors. Not that it was just the two of us – often as not, entity one set of our parents would be there, too, and sometimes both. Even now I had to smile
at the races we’d have: Dad, Dad and “The Boy” – as Tracy’s parents called me – versus Tracy and the Moms. Given the right mood, we could still get a good rivalry going about who had let who win. I sighed, still scrolling, but no longer seeing the monitor. Together we’d done everything, from roof to carpet to plumbing to painting. In those months alone we’d made so many memories, and since then… we’d just spent so much time. “Remember the time…” was a game we could play endlessly in this place, though most would probably see it as small and very ordinary. Ordinary or not, though, the memories were something no other place we’d seen – in person, in pictures – could claim. Of course, to expect any differently would be impossible. Unreasonable.

But still...

Incomplete. It made everything another house could offer simply seem incomplete. Lord, why send us incompleteness?

I leaned back restlessly in my chair, at a loss. Then a clamor in the hallway broke through my thoughts. The next thing I knew, the clamor had materialized into Melody tugging at the arm of my swiveling office chair.

“Daddy!” my girl tugged enthusiastically at the arm of the chair, pulling first one way then the other, “Mommy said to find you. She said to ask if I can help make dinner. Can I, Daddy? I wanna help! Is it time?”

So much energy! I had to smile. How is it that you always take me by surprise? Looking at the clock, he nodded to his daughter. “Yep, it looks like it’s time. Come on, let’s go.”
I couldn’t believe I was really standing here. Box in hand, I was actually facing our hallway – our gallery – ready to take the pictures down. Not that we were ready to move yet; we hadn’t even found a house. But time was passing, the time approaching, and I just couldn’t make it real. “I need to do something. I need to confront it,” I’d told Mark, and he’d understood. So I decided to start packing now, working on getting the extras, the things we wouldn’t really need between now and the move, into boxes.

And I’d begin here, in the hall.

In a way, everything was here. All of it, in pictures. Mark and I at our wedding. How crazy, I thought, taking the picture off the wall. I looked at us as we had been seven years ago. And we’ll be celebrating our eighth year together somewhere else, flitted through my mind. It was hard to believe.

Couldn’t we have stayed, Lord? Why couldn’t we passed all our years and gathered all our memories in one place?

I sighed, put the picture in the box, and moved on. The picture of us on our honeymoon, and a number from vacations. The picture I’d taken that even Mark had to admit had turned out beautifully, “I suppose,” as I’d heard him say dozens of times, “Even if it is of me hanging upside-down in the tree and wearing the silliest grin I’ve ever seen anywhere.” Inevitably he’d let a beat of silence pass, then he’d reach as though to take it down. “Y’know, why do we hang this one up again?” he’d always smile. I worked my way along the wall, and image after image of the two of us – hugging, kissing, laughing – passed from the wall to my hand to the box on the floor.

Then I reached the first picture of Melody. So tiny. Even then, I’d found those feet and hands unbelievable, but they seemed even more amazing now. You actually
used to sit still, I couldn’t help but laugh at the thought. *Nah, on second thought, that can’t be right. My Melody?* I took down each of her four yearly pictures – infant, one year, two, three. I studied each for a moment before setting it in the box. *Never did get this year’s up. Should probably get that now and put it with the others while I’m still thinking about it.* I stood and headed toward the living room. *We had* gone to get the picture taken right around the time of Melody’s birthday, but that was now over a month ago, and it never had found its way from its “temporary” perch on the entryway bookshelf to the wall.

*And I haven’t forgotten your dress, either, baby.* I thought as I retrieved the photo and turned back. That, at least, I should have finished. But the month had been a busy one, with house hunting consuming most of our evenings and weekends. And *that* had been draining, and I just hadn’t managed the time.

I continued with my task, working my way through the rest of Melody’s pictures. As many pictures as Mark and I had from the beginning years of our marriage, the hall was more Melody’s hall than anything. From one frame to the next, there she was. Playing dress-up in the living room in one of my old nightgowns. Grinning proudly over the marigold “she” had planted for me for Mother’s day in Sunday School, with Mark sitting next to her, holding the spade that had just dug it a place in our front garden. She flew like a bird through the front yard in Mark’s hands. She lay in her carrier in front of me, and later beamed over my head from my shoulders, in preparation for walks through the neighborhood. So many memories. I gazed at each, watching my baby growing up all over again, then set them one by one into the box.
Only a few scattered pictures remained: Melody with her grandparents, a couple with other family or close friends. Slowly I removed the remaining images and set them with the others. Then I straightened and looked around. It was so empty. A couple blank walls of empty nails. I couldn’t help but stare; the place was utterly changed. I had been there, I had changed it, but still the difference struck me. I dropped my eyes for a moment to the box of pictures on the floor, then lifted them to the hallway again. Those walls seemed so sudden, as though over the years I had forgotten their presence behind the pictures. After a few more moments, I knelt and picked up the box. I held it as I gave one more glance around the empty space. Somehow – I wasn’t even sure how – when I turned to leave, I was only leaving a hallway.

I played with my fingers and tried to stay still as Mommy turned me to first to face her and then to face away from her, and then from one side to the other, pulling and pinching my dress in different places and poking pins through it. She’d said because of the pins, it was important not to move unless she told me. “Is it done, is my dress done?” I asked. All the pieces Mommy had cut were sticking together. That would mean it was all done and my dress now, wouldn’t it?

“No, not yet, baby. Mommy needs to sew the top and the skirt together, and she needs to finish the hem. Then it’ll be all done.”

“But why isn’t it done? It’s all fixed now, isn’t it?” I tugged at my skirt. It moved!

“Oh, no, Melody. Don’t do that!” Mommy turned me to the side where I had pulled. Positioning things and pinning all over again, she said, “You can’t pull on it yet,
sweetie. It’s not sewn on. It just looks like it’s together because it’s got the pins to make it stay. Later Mommy will sew where the pins are holding. But for now she’s making sure it fits Melody just right.”

“Because that’s how you’re making it for me?”

“Yep, that’s right.”

I played with my fingers again, and finally she was ready to take the dress off.

“Be careful for the pins,” she warned me as she pulled up and I wiggled down. I only got poked once, and I was brave and just said, “Owie,” and didn’t cry. Mommy hugged me for that and said what a big girl I was growing into.

Then she said, “Okay, it’s time to sew together the last few parts, and then we’ll be all done.”

“And then can I wear it, Mommy? Can I wear it today?”

“Yes, as soon as I finish, you can wear it.”

“Yay!” I jumped where I was standing as she walked over her sewing machine, and then I followed her so I could stand and watch like I did before. She made the skirt go inside-out and cover up the top, and she stuck their ends both together under the pushing-foot and the needle.

“Later, Mommy, when you’re done, the edge part that flips back and forth will be inside and my flowers will be on the outside, right?”

She smiled big. “That’s right, sweetie. Good remembering!” And then she pushed with her foot on the petal underneath the table, and the machine went whhhiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiirrrrrrrrr and I watched the needle go lots and lots and lots of times up and down through my fabric, pulling thread through, too, and leaving it behind. Then, soon,
she was done with that, and she turned the skirt back so that now it looked like a dress.

And soon she was done with the little fold she had put on the bottom of my skirt that she called a “hem” and said was to keep the edge from turning into lots of little threads.

“There,” she turned from her sewing machine to me, pulling my dress with her.

“All done. Are you ready to wear your dress, now?”

“Yes!” I shouted, jumping up and down and holding up my arms.

“Can you put it on all by yourself like a big girl?”

I nodded and took it. I put it on my head and pulled, and then wiggled my arms and head through until I could see again and my hands were free.

“Oh, sweetie,” Mommy put a hand up in front of her mouth, “you’ve still got your clothes on underneath, and it’s backward.”

“I know.” I couldn’t really tell what was wrong, but I didn’t care. It felt a little funny, but I didn’t want to change it. My big dress because I was four was done, and I had all my purple flowers around me. I twirled around and watched my skirt reach out and fly with my arms and me.

“Hey, Tracy,” it was Daddy’s voice coming from the hallway, “the realtor just called. She has a house she wants us to come-”

Daddy walked into the room, and I ran and jumped and caught his leg. “Look, Daddy, look! My dress is done!”

“Oh, wow! I can see that!” Daddy looked down at me, and I stepped back, put out my arms, and spun so he could see it more. “Did you put it on by yourself?”

“Yep!” I answered from the middle of my spin.

“I can tell!” His voice laughed, even though he didn’t..
Then he got more serious and said to Mommy, “Tracy, the realtor called with another house she’d like us to look at. She was wondering if we could meet her early so that we could get through a few places today.”

“Sure. This was all I needed to finish today. What time?”

“Well, we’d pretty much need to leave now.”

“Okay. Just let help this little one get her clothes fixed, and then I’ll be ready.”

Looking at me, she said, “Melody, do you want to wear your clothes from this morning, or do you want to wear your new dress?”

“Ooooh, my dress! Can I? I can show Re-a-tor Beth!”

Mommy laughed, but nodded. “You sure can. Let’s go to your room, then, and get you changed.” She looked up at Daddy. “Once this is done, we’ll be ready to leave.”

I had to hop down to my room, because my legs wanted to bounce because I was happy. My dress was done! My dress was done! I hopped along in front of Mommy and played with my skirt as I went.

Melody bounded up the steps of the house to the front porch. In minutes she was jumping up and down and twirling her new dress for the realtor lady. And, of course, chattering the entire time. Tracy and I reached the porch a few minutes later.

“Hello, Tracy, Mark. How are you two today?”

“Oh, doing well enough.” I replied. “How about yourself?”

“I’ve actually been having a very good day, thank you.” She paused and looked down at Melody. “So Tracy, Melody tells me you made her dress.”
“Yep. Just finished it.” Tracy grinned. “I’m sure you couldn’t tell that she was excited.”

“Well, of course. You never can tell with her.” Beth grinned back. “You did a very nice job.”

“Thank you.”

“So,” she turned to the door, pulled out a key, and unlocked it, “I called because I wanted you to have a look at this one. I think it’s something you may like. And after this, I have a couple others in the area I’d like to show you, just since we’re out.” She proceeded to lead us through the house, pointing out various features, and then she allowed us to explore for ourselves.

“What do you think?” Tracy asked me once we were somewhat on our own.

“Oh, it’s nice,” I replied. It was, really. It had a good amount of space, the rooms were seemed to be well-arranged, and there were more of them than in the old house. The kitchen and bathroom had been upgraded, too. There were a number of good things about it.

“Nice,” my wife repeated, some amusement in her tone. “Always one for the flattering reviews, aren’t you?” She punctuated her words with a hug.

“Well, you know, it isn’t…”

I trailed off, but she knew what I was going to say. “Yeah, I know – it’s not ours. But unfortunately-” her statement was cut off by the return of Melody, followed closely by Beth.

“Guess what! Guess what! I got to see it – there’s a tunnel that clothes crawl through from upstairs all the way down to the basement. I got to look at it ’cause Re-a-
tor Beth showed me, and she gave me a pen to drop, and now we have to go down to the basement to get it!"

"Is that so? And are Daddy and I supposed to come with you?"

"No!" she declared emphatically.

"No? And why not?" Tracy crouched down to look Melody in the face.

"'Cause it’s a secret," Melody’s voice dropped to her surprisingly – or perhaps unsurprisingly – loud whisper. "If you knew, then the clothes wouldn’t use it anymore."

"Oh, is that so?" Tracy glanced up at the realtor curiously, but she was actually looking a little confused. The smile widened on Tracy’s face, and she nabbed Melody.

"Is that so? Is it really?" She asked as she tickled our little girl. Melody squealed with laughter and, of course, tried to escape. Tracy just tickled more, and the two of them both fell together to the empty, carpeted floor.

I watched their play, then looked at Beth with a shrug and a smile. At last Tracy released Melody to run in the direction of the basement.

For a moment I could actually imagine us years down the road, Remember Melody’s story about the secret tunnel for clothes?

And I began to wonder whether, in the end, where we lived really did mean anything important.
Analysis of Meaning and Process in “Making”

When I began this story, I had no really clear idea of what I wanted to write about; I simply knew I needed to write a story. Though it was not necessary for my purposes,¹⁴ I had some inclination toward focusing on a theme related to meaning, so that afforded me a starting point. However, aside from the fact that I wanted the process of writing it to be, as much as possible, an example of how I “usually” write, I didn’t really have any other direction.

Thus I started with some reflection on where I had gotten the material and direction for various works I’d written in the past. In many of the cases I considered, some form of assignment – and therefore, some form of starting point – had been involved as a given. However, I usually built from those starting points by drawing on materials from my own life, such as mindsets I knew or issues with which I was grappling.

I proceeded from that reflection to brainstorm ideas with which to actually start the story. The ideas mostly had to do with moods and concerns and interests that were standing out to me at the time. I toyed with one particularly: it was a recent experience I’d had with moving. My family had moved out of the house where we’d lived for thirteen years, and I actually found myself surprised that it wasn’t harder for me, that I hadn’t become very emotionally attached to the place itself. In a way, I almost wanted to have been. But there did come a point in the process of moving – since we weren’t moving very far away – at which my parents moved over and started sleeping in the new house while my sister and I remained in the old one to finish our packing and wait until

¹⁴ In a discussion of meaning in fiction, it is not necessary for the fiction to follow the theme of meaning so long as it has a meaning. That meaning, whatever it is, provides the illustration and corrective for how meaning in general may be conveyed.
things had been moved over for us to sleep on. It was during that interval, when my parents had left that house, that it stopped feeling like home. That change – from a place feeling like home to not feeling like home based on the people in it – was still vivid in my mind, and it was something I could see writing about.

However, in the process of also thinking about meaning and things relating to meaning, I ended up toying with the idea of a completely unrelated metaphor. I wondered if things like sewing, knitting, or crocheting could serve as good metaphors for meaning. The image was strongest with sewing, since that is the process I know best: it was one of materials chosen and then shaped and attached in certain ways in order to fit a given purpose. In the same way, I could see meaning – and particularly fictional meaning – made up of materials drawn together, shaped and connected in certain ways, and pulled together in this process for a purpose, to fit a given goal like the fabric of a sleeve would be shaped to fit an arm. In both cases, they could be used for something different, but the process of shaping and connecting for a given end was still there.

That image of sewing was interesting enough to me to pursue, and that was what actually launched me into writing at first. I began with a detailed, somewhat naïve view and description of the process of a single stitch being taken as someone sewed by hand. That image was still based largely on the idea that the process of sewing could parallel or serve as an example of the process of making something meaningful, though I soon gave up on trying to develop the idea strictly or obviously as the metaphor for meaning I’d begun with. I did have the naïve voice to work with, though, and that quickly became the perspective of a young child watching her mother sew and not understanding the reasons behind the various things her mother would do. The idea of the dress probably connected
to the idea of the sleeve in the meaning metaphor, and it was strengthened by the fact that my mom used to make special dresses for my sister and me when we were young. The constraints of realism that rose from the fact that she was making a dress, though, forced the change from my original hand-sewing image to a process of machine sewing.

The element of not understanding actions became a significant point in the development of the ideas behind the piece. I was still wanting to connect the ideas to meaning, and I had a good deal of interest in idea of the mother doing something with a purpose her daughter could not identify, so that the daughter, due to her lack of understanding, thought it was a mistake. Another thing I was wanting for this piece was to in some way include my faith in it, and the idea of the daughter not understanding the mother formed a parallel in my mind with the idea of God doing things in ways and for reasons that He understands even if the people in whose lives He’s working do not. This ended up being the idea behind pairing the story line of moving with the story line involving the girl’s dress. Once I decided to include this story line, I needed a way that the family could be forced to move, and here again, life provided the material. Not very long before I’d begun writing the story, my family had found out that the new house we had moved into might end up being bought through public domain for the purposes of widening a nearby road. This prospect, incidentally, also provided one of the ties I tried to give the parents to their home: before we were able to move into the new house, my family and some of our friends had needed to spend a summer completely renovating it. My family did not end up having to move, but those prospects still provided material for the story.
This accounts for the ideas – the meanings – I had wanted to have at work in the piece. However, it only accounts for part of the writing process. These ideas had been established before I was really through with the beginning of the piece. Most of my actual thought process while writing concerned trying to realistically shape the flow of events around the direction set by the ideas. Thus I was mostly focused on trying to reason through the characters’ mindsets, attitudes, and reactions to figure out how those things should work. In doing this, I would try as much as possible to figure out how the character would think and see things, almost to the point of trying to adopt that character’s mindset. I was actually able to enter into and enjoy this process the most easily when writing Melody. She represented an opportunity to try seeing and describing things from an unusual perspective. I had to try and figure out how she would identify things and what limits there might be on her understanding, and the process of trying to come up with ways to reflect this was an enjoyable puzzle for me. In addition, I was able to think about a little girl I know who, though younger than Melody and therefore not offering a model for her understanding, still served as a vivid model for Melody’s energy and temperament. I thus had a range of resources to help me with Melody’s perspective. Her parents, on the other hand, ended up being cases in which I found this a great deal more difficult to do, especially during the process of writing the first draft. I started out with very few identifying features for them, and I had an incredibly difficult time trying to figure out how they would experience things.

My process in this case, then, seems to be one of formulating an idea or plan – in which would also be centered a great deal of my meaning – and then working out how things would need to happen in order to accomplish that plan. “Things happening”
would of course include, not only events, but communication and thought and the formulation of attitudes, as well. My use of material from life is intended, in part, to support this by providing me with things about which I can ask, “How do these work?”

The process of writing and meaning development that I used for this piece does reflect, I think, many characteristics of my writing process generally. Looking back on other instances of my writing I see, at very least, the processes of drawing material from my life, working out an idea around which to build the piece, and then working out what progression of characters and actions could and would fit the idea I’d set out. The idea or meaning and the process of trying to reason through the realistic progression of things do hold something of a mutually shaping relationship: the idea shapes the materials I use while the materials shape how I can accomplish the idea and sometimes even the idea itself. However, I do tend to need to get the idea or meaning worked out early on, because it provides me with direction for everything else, and I have a very difficult time proceeding without some sense of direction for the process. Those pieces in the past for which I had no clear sense of direction have ended up set aside until I felt that I had a stronger idea around which to build them.

Meaning in Writing and Reading Compared

One of the initial goals of this chapter was to view my approaches to reading and writing alongside each other and consider how they compare. And there are, of course, points of interest to be found in comparing them. One main connecting point does stand out immediately, and other, perhaps less obvious, points could be drawn out as well.
At the core of my general strategies for understanding reading was the idea of finding parallel or corresponding patterns and relationships. It is notable that these elements often serve as a basis for the structure of my writing, as well. In many cases metaphors will form the basis for my poems, and a metaphor was, if not the starting image, then the source of the starting image for “Making.” In addition, the parallels between the two story lines in “Making” formed a significant portion of the basis for the meaning I sought to develop. Additionally, I think the levels of narrative meaning that I applied to reading could be used to understand “Making,” though I think it likely that they would apply more easily to isolated components of a text – such as the one on which they were used – rather than a text as a whole. These connections are not necessarily intended to confirm to any of these principles; the judgment that my reading methods would serve to illuminate my own writing, even if true, does not say anything one way or another about how they would apply to different writing styles. However, at very least it does show some continuity in my thought. Parallels, patterns, and connections prove central to my way of thinking about meaning whether I am reading or writing.

My thoughts about reading and the potential ambiguity in elements such as these, however, suggest an interesting question that my thoughts about my writing process do not necessarily answer, though perhaps they could: how much of my meaning, my idea, do I hope for readers to understand from my work? This question cannot necessarily be answered with a clear and straightforward reply, because I would tend first to ask how well I’ve done my job in conveying the idea. I know when I write that a given word, phrase, passage, or entire story may not function the way I want it to. It may suggest something entirely different from my intent. This goes along rather well with the point
that it is possible for a piece to imply something the author did not mean. However, what and how much do I hope will come across if all goes well? Intriguingly enough, I realize that the material upon which I drew in formulating the story – and especially in adding details to the story – would not necessarily be particularly illuminating in leading to the meaning I wanted. It always fascinates me to discover the inspiration or material used in writing a story. In the case of “Making,” though, there are ways in which looking at the material in order to interpret the story could end up being misleading, if not about the story then at least about me.15

The levels along which I would like people to see lie elsewhere. There would be no way for someone to guess all the things I draw upon for material, and even if they knew, the material always undergoes some level of transformation, whether drastic or slight. I would, however, hope to properly convey – well, obviously the story itself – but also, at least to some extent, the tone through which I write. And even more, I tend to hope the parallels and idea structures I try to set up come across, especially when they’ve played a central role in forming the story. So in general I do tend to want my meanings to come across. However, there is a class of reading experience that I did not necessarily have occasion to include at the beginning of this chapter. That class of experience is that in which I relate a piece to specific situations in my life without regard to whether those situations could have formed any recognizable part of the author’s actual meaning. This class of experience has to do largely with songs for me, but the fact remains that in such experiences I am more concerned about my own patterns than I am for anyone else’s, including the author’s. However, even in such cases, I can draw distinctions between the

15 I am thinking particularly of the material offered to “Making” by the potential loss of my family’s house to the road-widening project. The fact is, while I didn’t want the house to be taken, I did not have the emotional involvement in the experience that my characters did in theirs.
specific case in my life that the author couldn't possibly have meant and the general idea of “such cases,” which I come to believe do exist because of the frequency with which I find my own experiences described by others. With my writing, though, I do not think I would be troubled by someone connecting a specific situation I could never have known to a work of mine simply on the basis of similarities in situations. Perhaps the generality of specific situations is in fact the meaning I want to convey.
Works Cited


Chapter 2


In what ways could one respond upon reading the lines above? There is an array of potential reactions. One could look for a pattern or organizing principle in them. One could read with the expectation that they would eventually be explained. One could ask the reason for – and even question the legitimacy of – opening in such a way. Each of these responses differ in mood, approach, and more, but nevertheless, they share something important. Each, in one sense or another, seeks to find the meaning of what they are responding to. Though they ask different questions, their answers each deal with aspects of what it can be to mean.

Yet what is it to mean? People almost reflexively seek to understand or make sense of the things they encounter. One could point to this type of action, or to actions such as those described above, as seeking meaning, but what is it that these actions seek? Order? Explanation? Reason? Sense? In my project thus far, I have assumed an unspecified, “general use” sense of the terms “mean” and “meaning.” I have used what I, at least, would tend to take as a “common sense” idea of what meaning is. This was necessary for my goal of examining my own tendencies of thought. I also think such
assumptions are not unusual in contexts where meaning is part of a discussion centered elsewhere, such as discussions of literature and literary meaning. Yet pervasive as a general sense of meaning may be, meaning is not necessarily a simple, straightforward matter. In fact, the case is actually quite the contrary. Rather, as Cooper observes, “Meaning is one of our ‘big’ notions – big in scope, big in the roles it plays in human thought and conduct, and big with the issues it spawns” (10). The words used to indicate meaning also include a variety of senses connected to various experiences and concepts, many of which are likely to influence individual conceptions of meaning to varying degrees. Thus it will be helpful to this endeavor to do some exploration of what meaning itself is and what factors are involved in how it operates. While literary meaning is the ultimate concern of this project, the potentials of literary meaning form a part of and are therefore based in linguistic meaning, which is in turn a part of meaning in general. Thus some understanding at all three levels will help to clarify the potentials and limitations with which this project is primarily concerned: those relating to a writer and the meaning created through the activity of writing.

The current chapter will explore various senses within the definitions of the words “mean” and “meaning” with the goal of forming a clearer understanding of the range of ideas they can be used to represent and the questions about meaning they raise. This will suggest issues and considerations that will help in negotiating the varying potentials and claims within the specific context of meaning through words and fiction.

*Meaning According to Dictionary Definitions*

The definitions and senses considered here are drawn from the online versions of the Oxford English Dictionary and the Fourth Edition of the American Heritage
dictionary as well as the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. They are not intended to be comprehensive, but merely to provide a range of senses for consideration. There are instances in which these different dictionaries provided nearly identical senses as well as instances in which senses are formulated rather differently. This fact formed the first point for comparison in the formulation of this chapter and helped inspire the definition charts (pages 60-61) that will serve as references for this discussion. In an attempt both to see where the differing dictionary sources converged or diverged and to discover more generally how the content of these senses related to each other, highly similar senses were grouped into categories and then arranged to reflect some of the relationships that seemed to hold between the groups.

The discussion to follow expands on the patterns established through the formulation of the meaning charts, tracing relationships based on the groupings they outline and considering their implications. Unless specifically stated, however, this tracing of relationships should not be seen as making claims about the development of these words. It will merely be seeking patterns among the ideas that the wording of the included senses indicate.

Preliminary Categorizations

The analysis of the senses charted here began with a focus on what this discussion will term the *elements* of those senses – that is, the individual operative portions of the conceptual content of a given sense. For example, a particular sense of meaning might imply the idea of *someone* meaning (as opposed to *something* meaning), or it might
particularly apply to linguistic meaning (as opposed to non-linguistic meaning). Such facts would constitute elements of that sense.

In the course of identifying the elements of different senses, one observes certain elements recurring through most of the senses as alternatives to one another, so that one or the other element would characterize nearly every sense of “mean” or “meaning” given. This situation suggested the idea of certain conceptual variables to be filled by a limited number of alternate elements. These variables, referred to here as aspects of meaning, would apply to meaning generally.

One of the points identified here as an aspect of meaning includes the variable of an emphasis on either linguistic or non-linguistic meaning. Within the senses examined here, this variable tended to be fulfilled by a sense’s emphasizing linguistic meaning, by failing to specify an emphasis, or by relating in some way to actions. Though only slightly addressed in these senses, this variable could also be filled by emphasis on the meaning of non-linguistic objects. The variable represented by an emphasis either on a bearer or an agent was the other aspect of meaning this exploration identified.

A number of the boxes in the accompanying charts contain a linguistic element. Boxes [a], [d], [e], and [h] on the “mean” chart all contain the element of using words as the medium for conveying something, as do [2] and [7] in the “meaning” chart. Though they otherwise differ in specifics, they share with each other an emphasis on meaning being tied to language.

One of the alternatives to this emphasis – that of not specifying an emphasis at all – in other ways operates very similarly to the specifically linguistic senses, with an element of conveying, signification, or communication being present. Such senses could
be seen as connecting to a specifically linguistic medium; the connection is simply not 
made explicitly, and therefore leaves open the possibility of other mediums, as well. 
Unspecified senses include those found in [b] and [c] of the “mean” chart and [1], [3], and [8] in the “meaning” chart.

Within the groups above, a further distinction can be drawn between those senses 
that emphasize an object (including but not limited to a word) as meaning or carrying 
meaning and those that emphasize the user of that object as meaning. One could refer to 
these, respectively, as the bearer of meaning and the agent (Hill 2, 26). The senses in [a], 
part of MWOD2 in [b], [e], [1], and most of the senses in [3] along with those in [7], all 
emphasize the bearer of meaning. In each case, an object of some sort means or is used 
to mean. Boxes [d], [e], [h], [2], and OED6a in [a], in contrast, illustrate an emphasis on 
an agent as meaning through their focus on intent. Such senses of “mean” and “meaning” 
are quite familiar, coming into play in cases of communication.

Interestingly, however, linguistic meaning does not comprise the majority of the 
senses these definitions of meaning record. Non-specified senses could apply to either 
linguistic or non-linguistic meaning, but even if both of these aspects of meaning are set 
aside together, an intriguing number of senses of both words remain.

Suggestions From Non-linguistic Cases of Meaning

Linguistic meaning, obviously plays an essential role in literary meaning, and it 
will be discussed more fully later. However, non-linguistic senses of meaning introduce 
a number of relevant considerations connected to meaning.
On one level, which will not be discussed here, such senses of meaning involve material that would commonly play an active role in literary meaning on a narrative level. I have chosen to mention and exclude this level of relevance to literary meaning because it is precisely the level of meaning the senses themselves are formulated to articulate. They already identify their contribution to meaning on this level.

The level of contribution to an understanding of meaning with which I will be concerned here, in contrast, has to do with what varying potential uses of the words “mean” and “meaning” may indicate about general ideas surrounding what meaning itself is. Because linguistic meaning is so closely tied to thought about meaning, consideration of non-linguistic uses especially can offer a number of useful and perhaps easily-missed elements of these general ideas (1-3, 5).

One element of interest can be found in the senses of “mean” and “meaning” in [g] and [1]. Like a number of the non-linguistic senses, senses in these groups involve an element of action. This involvement of action is unique, however, in that most often in such senses the action is not the bearer of meaning. In at least certain cases of these senses, in contrast, the action does constitute a bearer of meaning, though in [1], a condition can be the bearer of meaning in addition to an action.

The senses [g] and [1] contain are the senses exemplified in the exclamations, “What do you mean by this [action]?” or “What is the meaning of this [action or situation]?” The intriguing point in these senses is what a situation or action can imply, communicate, or mean. Questions such as those above can be asking what a person was trying to do (which would be the kind of purpose or reason active in the [j] and [k] senses of mean), but they can also be asking about causes, motives, and justifications. By
asking in this way about the conditions that brought a situation or action about, these senses introduce an element of causality to meaning. In this sense, to ask “what does this mean or signify” could essentially be equivalent to, “what is the cause, motivation, attitude, reasoning, etc. of which this [action or situation] indicates the existence by requiring it in order to come about?” This aspect of cause and effect also merits a second consideration of MWOD2 in [b], in which the element of indicating can involve one thing generally following or being associated with, and therefore being implied by, the other, as in the example given of “a red sky means rain.”

Another element is introduced to the general definition of meaning in the set of senses found in [f]. These senses each have to do with value, significance, or import. The introduction of value as an element of meaning is in itself a notable contribution to the overall idea of meaning. However, it could also be considered to a certain extent as relating to the element of causality, as well, because it implies the bearer as having some form of impact or effect. Indeed, while the senses in [g] and [l] connect to causality by pointing out that effects can mean (that is, indicate) the existence of causes, this sense is an example of meaning acting as a cause bringing about and therefore meaning an effect. This sense, exemplified in phrases like, “It means a great deal” refers to impacts or effects – to the “lot” – as being the meanings of some force that has the ability to bring them about – that is, to mean them. Thus meaning as connected to causality can work in such a way that the effect or latter element means the cause or prior element, as in [g] and [l]; it can also work such that the cause or prior element means the effect or latter element. In addition, many of the impacts and effects, especially, relate in some way to
emotion or sentiment. Thus these senses introduce the elements of feeling or emotion to the idea of meaning, albeit in a limited way.

As said above, a number of the non-linguistic senses of “mean” and “meaning” involve action. In many of these senses, this is because they are the action. The senses of “mean” in [k] and [l] provide instances of this. In these cases, an agent means – that is, intends or purposes – to do a given thing. One point worth noting is how this sense of meaning could be tied back into meaning in the linguistic form. If one considers the communication, representation, codification, etc. of something to be an action, then the element of meaning that emphasizes an agent meaning becomes a particular case of the more general sense involving “meaning to do something.” This relates quite directly to the linguistic senses of mean in [d] and [e], which look at what someone “means to say.”

A closely related sense of meaning is characterized by having an intended or wished-for outcome. This is the sense used when it is said that someone “means well,” as indicated by [j] from “mean” and [4] from “meaning.” The most important element of difference between this group and the last is the level of definition given to the intention: one is more specific, the other less. The very fact of having a distinction between vague and defined intentions is interesting: it brings up the question of how defined intentions generally are. If one were to extend the application of “meaning to communicate” as “meaning to do,” this also raises the possibility of intending some form of general communication as opposed to intending to communicate a particular thing.

Additional senses that involve action can be found in “mean” boxes [n] and [o]. These senses, though now obsolete, were also characterized by the element of intention, and that intention specifically applied to heading toward a particular place. Thus these
senses reiterate intent as an element of meaning, and they introduce to meaning an element of directionality. Both of these elements can be tied into the senses of “mean” found in [m], most of which imply intention, and all of which contain elements of a purpose or end – the latter of which connects at least figuratively to the idea of a destination. “Mean,” in the sense in which it contains the element of an ultimate purpose, would further relate to the sense of meaning in [5]. Purpose is thus behind the quite important sense of meaning used in the phrase, “the meaning of life.”

In addition to the elements of intention and purpose or direction, the sense in [m] include an element of design, suggesting a selection or structuring of traits arranged to suit the purpose in question. This sense involves an object with traits that are so precisely suited for a particular purpose or function that it seems that they must have been selected and arranged for that purpose. The fact may be that the fitness does indicate design for the purpose, or in some cases it may be that it was not. In either case, however, the traits so fit the function that a connection between the object and the function could be taken as obvious. The object could still be used to fill different functions, and these may make varyingly efficient use of its traits. Indeed, the object could conceivably be better fitted to an unintended function than the one for which, in some cases, it was made. When dealing with a designed object in such instances, considerations of social implications rather than considerations of possibility would impose what constraints of use one acknowledged.16 Additionally, while this sense of “mean” would be used to indicate a particularly high degree of correspondence between traits and purpose, one could

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16 Hill distinguishes between designed and undesigned bearers of meaning. Designed bearers of meaning “are produced, either consciously or unconsciously and either momentarily or over extended periods of time, to be bearers of meanings” (4). Undesigned bearers of meaning are “commonly said to have meanings but not produced to that end” (4).
conceive of a situation in which the object, though made for a purpose, was poorly
designed and therefore poorly suited to it.

The inference of intent or purpose from a set of traits ties this sense back into
causality, identifying the intent as a cause and the traits as an effect. This situation of
inferring intention as the cause of patterned traits in turn connects the situation to literary
meaning.

These statements could apply, at least in the way stated above, apply to literary
objects. In such cases, particular traits – that is, particular words and phrases – were
chosen and put together in specific ways, and those choices and arrangements were made
for a reason or purpose. Ideally, one could recognize the reason, and therefore the
meaning, behind the choices of words, phrases and arrangements. In some cases, various
portions (most notably parts, though at times, perhaps the whole) of a literary object
could be fitted for, and therefore suggest, a meaning other than the one intended. This
could be due to a poor choice and arrangement of the traits,\textsuperscript{17} or it could be for some
other reason. In such instances, the potential for application to an unintended meaning
would exist; constraints on such application would be those imposed by the social
situation, and it would be possible to ignore them.

Difficulties could, of course, be found with this parallel. One such would be the
way in which features of an object would be fitted to a task as opposed to the ways in
which words may be fitted to a task. In the case of objects, natural traits such as size,
shape, strength, and weight, among others, would be the ones fit or unfit for a given task.
In the linguistic case, the words and phrases here held parallel to traits would only
function as traits insofar as they themselves have meaning, and one could raise questions

\textsuperscript{17} The situation description, though not the argument is drawn from Hirsch (23).
as to the nature of this connection. In addition, the uses of a given word can change over time, and even at one given point in time, it is no uncommon phenomenon for different people to have different ideas as to what a word means. For that matter, one could argue similarly that different people could perceive the traits of objects and the potential applications of those traits in varying ways. However, it is also a fact that people do at least have the experience of perceiving purpose behind the way things are made or the way words are put together, and that at times the maker of the object or writer of the words would call that perception correct. This issue is one that will be revisited later in the chapter as well as in the next chapter.

It is striking, in looking at the range of “mean” and “meaning” senses above, how many of these senses involve an element of purpose or intention, which also generally imply an emphasis on an agent meaning. There are those senses of meaning that emphasize the bearer of meaning in their formulation. Boxes [5], [6], [7], [a], [c] and [f] are examples of this emphasis. However, a great number of the senses of meaning, whether linguistic or non-linguistic, do in some way include intention, reason, purpose, or emphasis on an agent as elements of meaning.

The presence of this element in “mean” can be traced through various developmentally related words, as well. Of the cognates of “mean” in Middle Dutch, Dutch, Saxon, Middle Low German, Low German, Old High German, Middle High German, and German, all include the element of intention. Interestingly, the cognates include various other senses of an internal nature, including “think,” “have in mind,” “hold an (esp. good) opinion of”, and “love.”  

18 Think – Middle Dutch, Dutch, Low German, German
Have in mind – Saxon, Old High German, Middle High German, German
include “signify,” which is operative in all the cognates except the German, as well as mention, make known, and say.\textsuperscript{19}

This strong connection between “mean” and “intend” raises questions. Obviously in certain senses, “mean” and “intend” are synonymous. What about them makes them so? One point they share is that when one means, as when one intends, one means \textit{something} and intends \textit{something}. There is the action of meaning or intending, and there is the meaning itself or the intent (Hill 169). So when asking “What is the nature of meaning?” one ends up dealing both with the situation surrounding the action of meaning and the nature of the thing “meaning” itself.

\textit{Issues of Linguistic Meaning}

Non-linguistic senses of meaning can help illuminate different factors and situations at work in meaning as a popular idea. Linguistic meaning, in contrast, is a specific case, with elements that come out most clearly in the particular context of language. One element of meaning that is particularly important within the dynamics of the linguistic meaning is the agent/bearer variable.

The prominent element of intention and the aspect of meaning represented by the agent/bearer variable raises a number of issues important to both the situation and nature of meaning. The distinction itself rests on the fact that when an agent means, that agent, as an active entity, \textit{does} something. In contrast, when a bearer means, that object, as an

\textsuperscript{19} Mention – Saxon, Old High German
Make known – Old High German
Say – German
All from the OED
inert entity, will not have performed an action of itself (Schiffer 1). Meaning is inactive on the part of the bearer, but active on the part of the agent. The variable itself introduces complications to the discussion, because the alternatives it introduces can serve as sources of fundamental disagreement or even of confusion if participants do not specify which one they have chosen to pursue.

This agent/bearer variable is closely related to the alternative between “I mean” and “it means,” an alternative that Willis Overton identifies as a central issue in discussions of meaning:

‘I mean’/‘it means’ constitutes the relational matrix from which all issues of meaning are generated. When we focus on the “I mean” pole of this relationship, we focus on the contribution of the person to meaning. The “it means” pole focuses us on the contribution of the manifest world of common sense. (Overton 2)

These alternatives are closely related, but they are not the same. The difference becomes clearer when the designation of “I mean” is held next to the designations of “the person” or agent meaning: a person or agent could be considered from a first person perspective – an “I mean” perspective – or a third person perspective, in which “he” or “she” means. This latter perspective combines elements of both “I mean” and “it means” by on the one hand dealing with a meaning that originates outside of the interpreting perspective (in contrast to the “I mean” perspective, which will be taken here as interpreting the meaning it originates, most often through the act of reporting that meaning), and on the other hand retaining an emphasis on an originating agent. Thus the variable represented by this aspect of meaning actually becomes more than just a space to be filled by one of two alternative elements. It could rather be expressed – still in a simplified manner – as the “I
mean”/“he or she means”/“it means” variable. Broken down further, this distinction is based on the combined answers to two questions:

1) Is the meaning, from the interpreting perspective, originating with the interpreting self or elsewhere? This could be represented by the alternative “I mean”/“other means.”

2) In the case of “other means,” is the emphasis on an agent or a bearer? (This is already answered in an “I mean” emphasis, which is simultaneously an emphasis on an agent.) This could be represented, as it already has been, by the alternative agent/bearer.

Each of these elements form potential emphases in a discussion of meaning, and these emphases, along with the reasons behind them, will influence that discussion tremendously.

This influence is incredibly important in the case of language. Each of the emphases described above are potentially applicable to linguistic situations, which generally include an originating agent, a bearer, and an interpreting audience. They will therefore also include at least the potential, if not the likelihood, of an intention or “I mean” on the part of the originating agent; a content or significance attached to the bearer that would constitute what “it means”; and a perceiving and interpreting audience to interpret what “he or she means” or what “it means.”

This formulation of the linguistic situation is not new or unfamiliar; it can be found in various forms, though at times with some additional considerations, in literary theory anthologies. One theorist, for instance, takes the elements of a literary or artistic situation to consist in the work; the artist; the source from which subject matter is drawn,
termed in this case “universe”; and the audience. An orientation toward or emphasis on one of these areas is taken by this theorist to be a basic element of almost all literary theories (Abrams 6). Another theorist makes use of similar organizing divisions, discussing them as perspectives or contexts one can use when interpreting literature (Keesey 2). This organization includes the contexts of the work, the author, the audience, the general body of literature, and reality (3-4).

One could choose to emphasize each of these elements within the activity of interpretation, and one could do so for a variety of reasons. One could ask which one or ones influence the situation most, and therefore deserve the most attention. However, one could also take this question one step back. At that level, one could ask simply what influence each elements might have on the situation at hand that would merit giving that element consideration. What remains of this chapter will be focused on what questions are raised by considering the potential influences of each element in the linguistic and literary situation.

A number of factors come into play when considering the influence of the originating agent – or in the case of literature, the author – on meaning. This agent determines, as has already been observed, what words and what structure to give the linguistic artifact. At the very least, the artifact to be considered was formed through the operation of that agent’s will and intellect. Beyond this, however, is the further implication that the originating agent often, if not always, employed a particular design for a particular purpose, and many times this purpose is to convey something. The questions raised by this aspect of the linguistic situation begin with one raised by the parallel between literary meaning and the recognition of an object’s purpose: what factors
influence the potential of a purpose or intended content being recognized on the basis of words and structure chosen with the goal of indicating them? Conversely, what might an originating agent with a desire to convey something need to take into account or perhaps even be willing to compromise in situations that involve other wills or agencies along with additional potential variables beyond that agent’s control?

The bearer of meaning presents an important case. The believed nature of the bearer – that is, beliefs about what that bearer indicates and the nature of its connection to what it indicates – is a significant portion of the basis upon which selections of word and structure by an agent and interpretations by an audience would be made. Thus an understanding of the nature of the bearer – and also perhaps an understanding of the believed nature of the bearer – forms a crucial part of understanding the possibilities and functioning of the linguistic situation. Indeed, logically, the bearer would be the first element of the linguistic situation of which one would have to form an understanding. As observed, both the agent and the audience must make use of the bearer, and they must hold some idea of the bearer’s nature before they could determine how to do so. This does not necessarily indicate anything concerning the actual role the bearer does play in meaning, though. The bearer is simply the factor in the meaning situation that one must understand first. In seeking this understanding, one could think, in a greatly oversimplified schema, of a bearer, a link or connection between the bearer and something else, and the something (or meaning) to which the bearer connects. This raises three questions: What is the nature of the bearer; what is the nature of the link or connection; and what is the nature of the something else – the meaning – to which it connects?
When considering the audience, there are also factors to be taken into consideration. The audience is the context of interpretation and the location in which all final influences will come into play. The audience may be interpreting with a specific set of concerns and emphases different from that of the author, and its members may also have understandings of the bearers that differ to varying degrees from that through which the originating agent put them into use (Smith 59). The questions raised in this instance can, again, be seen reflected in the parallel between a usable object and a literary text: what potential range of personal use can be made of a literary object given the constraints of that object’s designed use of particular bearers in particular patterns? Conversely, what might an audience need to take into account or possibly be willing to compromise in light of an originating agency along with the potential variables of bearers and perception?

These questions will determine the direction of the remaining two chapters in this work. The next chapter will discuss those questions above that relate to possibilities within the meaning situation. The chapter that follows will address the questions that deal with responding to those possibilities.
Works Cited


Chapter 3

Chapter 2 considered various elements of meaning in general and identified the factors involved in linguistic meaning situations. While the elements of general meaning provide insights into and considerations for the meaning situation, it is the meaning situation itself and the factors involved in it that touch directly upon the concerns of this project. The factors of the meaning situation represent the potential determiners or contributors to meaning, and since these factors include the agent or author, the clarification of their roles will also be the clarification of the specific role with which this project is particularly concerned.

As observed in Chapter 2, the nature and status of the bearer of meaning must logically be the first points considered when determining what roles the three factors play in meaning. Among the points involved in this consideration, are certain issues concerning meaning itself, and a couple of these are worthy of special note. The first is the issue of whether meaning is determinable – an issue that hinges partly, but only partly, on the factors of the meaning situation. This issue, however, is crucial to the concerns of this project since the potential for an author to play a role in determining meaning is entirely eliminated if meaning is not determinable in the first place. Also relevant to the nature of meaning is whether it can actually be about real things- that is, whether meaning can be true. This issue, while not directly relating to the role of an author in meaning, has significant bearing on what literature in general can do. It also bears a critical relation to the way I generally think of literature as operating. This chapter considers both these issues as well as the roles that the factors of the meaning situation play in meaning.

Saussure and the Sign
Put simply, the bearer is “that of which the meaning is a meaning” (Hill 1-2). The bearer may be a range of things, from physical entities to events to sounds (Hill 4-19, Cooper 21-23). As noted in the last chapter, seeking an understanding of bearers of meaning will involve questions concerning the nature of bearers, of their link to meaning, and of what they link to – that is, the nature of meaning itself. One influential view of the nature of the bearer and its connection to meaning is the complex but detailed model formulated by Saussure. It is a model that carries significant implications for both the bearer and meaning, and it will serve as the starting point for this discussion.

Saussure begins his explanation with an account of thought. This account takes thought to be “a shapeless and indistinct mass” or “vague, uncharted nebula” that is “chaotic by nature” and must have order imposed upon it (Saussure 8-9). This unordered thought is divided and organized into distinct ideas by linguistic signs, and ordered ideas with particular contents do not exist until they have been divided by language (Saussure 8). Developed in parallel to this account of thought is an account of sound – the element that makes up vocal expression – as also being indefinite and unfixed until divided and made part of language.

The dividing of thought into ideas and sound into the expressive unit of the sign involves two factors. The first of these is the structure of the sign. A sign is made up of two elements: a concept and a sound-image. The concept is the thought-material allotted to the sign in question. The sound-image is the mental record or impression of the sound – for instance, the word – to which the concept connects in the head (Saussure 61). These are called the “signified” and the “signifier,” respectively, and the sign is the single entity or unit that they form. It is important within Saussure’s thought that the connection between the signified and the signifier is completely arbitrary in the sense that there is nothing about either element that would connect them to each other outside of the system of language (61-62).
As it stands, however, this understanding of the sign is incomplete. It explains how the parts of the sign are put together, but it does not explain how the parts are identifiable as parts in the first place. Saussure views signs – and therefore the signifier and signified – as essentially divided and delineated, or defined, arbitrarily, so that their only distinguishing features are their differentiations from one another. Outside of this differentiation, they have no definition – i.e. distinct identity – and therefore no meaning (66-67). He supports this point with separate cases for the signifier and the signified.

For the sound-image or signifier, this case is derived from its function purely and only as something distinct from other signifiers. The actual sound or sound-images that make it up are irrelevant outside of this fact. Any division of sound to make a sound-image could have performed the function of signifier equally well, so both the division of the signifier and its connection to the signified is arbitrary. One recognizes and is able to use it simply because it is different from other signifiers (Saussure 62, 68).

For of the signified, the case is derived from the fact that the concept is only intelligible insofar as it is divided and distinguished from generalized thought and so given a definite content. Such divided portions only have meaning through the differentiation between concepts. Concepts are at times divided from one another differently in different languages, so the division and therefore the content and nature of a given concept is arbitrary and determined only by its formulation through language (Saussure 66-68).

Though the signified represents what would normally be called “meaning,” Saussure argues that this element still cannot mean outside of its place in the entire range of signs. Saussure calls the sign’s place and relationship to this range its value (65-66). Because the both divisions of the signifier and the signified and their joining into a sign are arbitrary for Saussure, he concludes that the value of the sign as a whole is arbitrary and based solely on differential relationships. He states,
Not only are the two domains that are linked by the linguistic fact shapeless and confused, but the choice of a given slice of sound to name a given idea is completely arbitrary. If this were not true, the notion of value would be compromised, for it would include an externally imposed element. But actually values remain entirely relative, and that is why the bond between the sound and idea is radically arbitrary. (Saussure 9)

According to this view, language, and therefore meaning, would be relatively constituted. That is, the identity or content of signified concepts would be created through the relationships they hold to each other rather than each having an identity independent of the system of language. The sign arbitrarily divides the thought and sound material from which they are drawn, and these divisions have meaning based on how the signs differ from one another. Thus concepts are “defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not” (67). Neither thought nor sound, within Saussure’s schema, are of a nature to in any way dictate how they are divided, but they provide the material from which the sign and its meaning are arbitrarily derived. This makes thought and ideas – the basis for what would popularly be considered meaning – dependent upon language.

Language in turn is a sign system developed within a society and is therefore relative to society. Thus Saussure makes a case for a nature of meaning that is relative to the given sign system rather than one based on reference to reality. It is relevant here, however, to ask both what implications such a nature may have for meaning and how far this view could be the case.

Saussure asserts this arbitrary and relative nature of language in opposition to a more common view of words as directly naming the objects to which they refer. He introduces his model of the sign in contrast to this view that sees language “when reduced to its elements, as a naming-process only – a list of words, each corresponding to the thing that it names” (60). Such a view, according to Saussure, “lets us assume that the linking of a name and a thing is
a very simple operation – an assumption that is anything but true” (61). Language as a naming process would tie meaning to solid, pre-existing entities. Meaning would exist independently from individuals, and could thus involve basic ties to real things.

Questioning Saussure

From one perspective, Saussure’s view could be considered questionable on the basis of its account of thought and the seeming extent of the severance of language from reality. A great deal of Saussure’s claim of an arbitrary, relative basis for signification is drawn from his view of the nature of thought. This thought he describes, in various places, as shapeless, indistinct, vague, uncharted, chaotic, shapeless, and confused. This view of thought in itself one could find questionable. However, even given this view at the outset, it is difficult to see how thought could be completely featureless and without positive qualities while still being defined into concepts by differentiation. If there are no inherent traits in the content of thought, then where would the defining differences of thought material divided into concepts come from? Saussure does to some extent touch on this idea when he says, “a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences without positive terms” (70). He goes on from there to state, “language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system. The idea or phonic substance that a sign contains is of less importance than the other signs that surround this” (70). One could grant Saussure that the specific differences between the conceptual, meaningful element of signs would be created by the division of the conceptual material, simply because different divisions would create different sets of traits to contrast with each other. However, thought must have some positive traits or some inherent differentiation, because without this there would be nothing to make any concept “what the
others are not.” And given at least some content, traits, or inherent differentiation outside the system of signs, at least part of the meaning of signs would come from outside those signs, as well.

The question of how formless thought could be finds extension in the fact that thought is usually about something. Yet to say that the formulation of ideas and concepts within language is entirely arbitrary and independent of any “externally imposed element” seems to imply that such divisions have nothing whatever to do with the things that thought would be about. At least sometimes, however, events and demands outside the system of signs would be the factors that created the need for a new conceptual division. The division of thought into ideas and concepts does differ from language to language. However, language systems also develop, not just among people, but among people in a world within which their language must function, which would provide material for and place demands upon both the people and the language within it. To call the division and linguistic formulation of concepts entirely arbitrary would suggest that those divisions bear no relation to – that is, are entirely uninfluenced by – either the content they divide or to the world that thought would be drawing from, responding to, and interacting with. Yet needs for conceptual division and integration would indeed sometimes arise within this world. This would provide an instance in addition to the nature of thought in which the meaning would be based at least in part on something beyond language.

These arguments, however, represent only one potential perspective from which one could question Saussure’s thought. From other perspectives, very different difficulties would be argued. Derrida’s use and critique of Saussure represents one such differing – indeed, almost entirely opposite – perspective. His influential perspective takes certain elements of Saussure’s thought – such as an arbitrary and differential view of meaning – even farther than
Saussure while critiquing those elements that still reflect a basis in more traditional thought or philosophy.

*Derrida’s problem with Saussure*

Derrida, while on certain levels considering Saussure’s project suggestive and useful, argues that it gets caught up in concepts that prevent it from having the critical impact that it could. He considers Saussure’s identification of the signifier and the signified as one unit to be a useful critical move, and he considers Saussure’s emphasis on the differential and formal20 nature of both the signifier and the signified to be valuable, as well (Semiology 332-333). However, Derrida considers the thought as a whole, while containing critical potential, to be undermined by basic assumptions taken from Western metaphysics. It is, in this instance, Saussure’s use of the word “sign” that ties Saussure to the assumptions Derrida questions. The fact that Saussure makes a distinction between the signifier and the signified suggests the classically philosophical division between the sensible and the intelligible (Semiology 333, Grammatology 307). This division, Derrida says, “inherently leaves open the possibility of thinking a concept signified in and of itself, a concept simply present for thought, independent of a relationship to language, that is of a relationship to a system of signifiers.” In doing this, Saussure ends up, according to Derrida, ascribing to the ideal of the “transcendental signified,” an entity that “in its essence, would refer to no signifier, would exceed the chain of signs, and would no longer itself function as a signifier” (Semiology 333). Derrida challenges the possibility of such a signified, considering it to be rooted in the flawed assumptions of Western metaphysics (333).

*Derrida’s thought*

20 I.e. Saussure’s view of language as a form rather than a substance. (??)
Like the transcendental signified, Derrida considers the idea of meaning, the divisions of bearer and meaning, signifier and signified, and even the idea of ideas themselves to be problematic. All of these are based in the metaphysical tradition that founds itself in a privileged logos or knowing through the mind, which has generally been regarded as the method through which truth can be found (Rivkin and Ryan 300, Grammatology 306-307). This way of knowing was considered able to lead to truth because it was able to hold concepts or signifieds as immediately present to the mind (Rivkin and Ryan 300):

Within this logos, the original and essential link to the phonè has never been broken. [...] As has been more or less implicitly determined, the essence of the phonè would be immediately proximate to that which within ‘thought’ as logos relates to ‘meaning,’ produces it, receives it, speaks it, ‘composes’ it. (Grammatology 307)

Such presence within the mind would be considered direct, unmediated, and the closest one could achieve to truth because it would be undistorted by mediation.

This view of ideas or meaning as immediately present to the mind relates closely to the functioning of a consciousness that can be aware of its functioning and hear or understand itself (Rivkin and Ryan 300). This conception, in turn, serves as the basis for a range of other metaphysical concepts:

The system of ‘hearing (understanding)-oneself-speak’ through the phonic substance – which presents itself as the non-exterior, nonmundane, therefore nonempirical or noncontingent signifier – has necessarily dominated the history of the world during an entire epoch, and has even produced the idea of the world, the idea of world-origin, that arises from the difference between the worldly and non-worldly, the outside and the inside, ideality and nonideality, universal and nonuniversal, transcendental and empirical, etc. (Derrida in Grammatology 304)

Derrida ties this sense of one’s voice in one’s mind to various conceptual divisions that form part of traditional understanding to the experience of this phonic presence, which by establishing an experience of direct presence, helps to encourage a fundamental privileging of Being as known through its presence. Such presence would also be tied closely to truth,
meaning, and, again, the logos (315). It is precisely such an immediate, unmediated 
presence, however, that Derrida considers impossible.

In contrast to the idea of a simple, self-constituted presence of being, Derrida argues 
that all presence is constituted by what he calls différance. As he describes it,

**Différance** is the systematic play of differences, of the traces of differences, 
of the spacing by means of which elements are related to each other. This
spacing is the simultaneously active and passive […] production of the
intervals without which the ‘full’ terms would not signify, would not function.
(Semiology 337).

Différance includes both the suggestion of “distinction, inequality, or discernibility” and of 
deferring, delaying, or “put[ting] off until ‘later’ what is presently denied” (Différance 279).
This différance bears explicit resemblance to Saussure’s differentiating difference that forms 
the basis for the identity and meaning of signs. However Derrida applies this principle to 
thought and the understanding of being in general, and nothing is left outside of it (278).

Rather,

The play of differences supposes, in effect, syntheses and referrals which
forbid at any moment, or in any sense, that a simple element be present in and
of itself, referring only to itself. […] Nothing, neither among the elements
nor within the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent. There are
only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces. (Semiology 337)

This view of everything as constituted by differences, referrals, syntheses, and traces is the 
counterpart to Derrida’s critique of seeking a transcendental signifier. The reason there is 
and can be no transcendental signifier is that the identity of everything depends upon the 
defining role of différance. There is nothing with a singular, simple presence undefined by 
its relations of difference from other things and outside of the system in which it is always 
already both referenced and referring to something other, so that what we know as an idea is 
made up of those roles:

This is why the a of différance also recalls that spacing is temporalization, the
detour and postponement by means of which intuition, perception, 
consummation – in a word, the relationship to the present, the reference to a 
present reality, to a being – are always deferred. Deferred by virtue of the
very principle of difference which holds that an element functions and signifies, takes on or conveys meaning, only by referring to another past or future element in an economy of traces. (Semiology 338)

The usual human ways of knowing are in a similar state. “Intuition, perception, consummation” and in general one’s relationship to the present or presence end up simply referring and being a reference, if not to other ideas at least to the past and the future (338).

One should not expect anything beyond this chain of references, because,

If the diverted presentation continues to be somehow definitively diverted and withheld, this is not because a particular present remains hidden or absent, but because difference holds us in a relation with what exceeds (though we necessarily fail to recognize this) the alternative of presence or absence. (Différance 292)

Thus to Derrida, there is no present to ultimately reach. Rather, “presence” and “absence” are inadequate, and the actuality is something other than and beyond presence and absence.

Rather, when related to presence and absence, différance is a challenge to them, and it remains emphatically separate from them.

There is no essence of differance; not only can it not allow itself to be taken up into the as such of its name or its appearing, but it threatens the authority of the as such in general, the thing’s presence in its essence. That there is no essence of differance at this point also implies that there is neither Being nor truth to the play of writing, insofar as it involves differance. (Différance 297)

Differance is not part of the realm of essence or being, but rather undermines the ideas of presence and being and does not itself, in its functioning, come under the constraints of truth, either.

The difficulty this thought presents for meaning as it is often understood is that, in a way similar to Saussure, it isolates the systems of thought, understanding, and meaning from the actual reality or Being to which one would usually suppose they refer, thus separating them from the standard by which they could be determinable and verifiable. Indeed, this is a central claim of the arguments: language for Saussure, and thought in addition to language for Derrida, are systems that function apart from reality
or the presence of Being. In the case of Derrida, this situation comes about due to his proposed endless system of references beyond which one can never reach to a presence, transcendent signifier, or reality. Instead of the mind actually reaching the presence of true, real things in themselves, both identity and an understanding of identity are formed through their relationships to other elements, which means that such things can only be understood as relationships between elements. ‘Things’ as we understand them are not actually themselves, but rather a bunch of reminders or ‘traces’ of the ‘things’ related to them. The roles they play are such that – especially when one considers terms opposed to each other – the make-up of one term is necessarily the make-up of another, opposed term changed in certain ways (Différance 290). This interrelation of associations, rather than reference some actuality, is to Derrida how meaning functions. However, this constitution of identities based on interrelation would be true of everything, and thus one would never arrive at a meaning as such, at an ultimate destination from which one could go no further (Semiology 337).

Derrida, with this view, is quite professedly attempting to destabilize typical Western philosophical thought and terms, including the bases for such terms as “idea” and “meaning” (Semiology 332). Even if one is not prepared to adopt this goal, however, his ideas, as well as Saussure’s, can raise a point about meaning for consideration: what if objects or things in themselves – which both agree cannot be directly referenced, either through language or through thought – are not in fact even supposed to constitute meaning? What if the networks of references and relationships that both thinkers discuss actually are themselves meanings?

*Meaning as Pattern*
One recurring view of meaning can be found in ideas that tie meaning to patterns, connections, and relationships. One can find varying articulations of this approach. In one such view, Thomas E. Hill posits “a concept of repeatable patterns that I shall refer to as ‘experience patterns’” that, along with the factor of fulfilling one of a limited set of meaning functions, constitutes “a disjunctive set […] of sufficient conditions for the concept of meaning” (262, 274, 253). In an account that puts a strikingly similar idea into very different terms, Christine Hardy describes meaning as “consist[ing] of linking, connecting, and bringing into relation,” and suggests the concept of “semantic constellations” as the basic structures or “semantic entities” through which to understand meaning (Hardy 18-19). Using yet a different set of terms, Frank Smith suggests that meaning exists in a “nonverbal, inaccessible theory of the world in our head” and meaning through this theory of the world acts by “underlying the language we produce and making sense of the language we understand” (Smith 50). Again approaching from a rather different direction, David E. Cooper claims that understanding the meaning of something is understanding its appropriate relationship to Life (Cooper 30, 35).

The commonality shared among these perspectives is illustrated quite vividly through the terms in which their central concepts are described. Hill, in detailing the concept of experience patterns, says,

One sometimes speaks of having the same thought, feeling, or purpose that he had yesterday or of two or more peoples having the same idea, sensation or impulse. More generally, one may speak of his repeatedly having the same experience or of several people’s having the same experience. When people speak in these ways, they seem often not to be speaking of actually occurring physical or mental events; for one person’s thoughts now and later are necessarily different events, and so are one person’s feelings and another person’s feelings. They seem rather to be speaking of repeatable and sharable contents or patterns of their own and other people’s experiences. Such contents or patterns of actual or possible repeatable and sharable experience, I shall call experience patterns.
Essential to any experience pattern is the character of being a recognizable content of a possible experience, the notion of experience being broadly conceived to include not merely sensible experience, but also thinking, desiring, hoping, loving, hating, and whatever else experience can consist in. Experience patterns inevitably involve structure aspects. The relevant structures may be relatively simple as is, for example, that of the experience pattern exemplified by an idea of an equilateral triangle. They may also be very complex as is the sort of pattern recognizable in an idea of justice. (Hill 264)

Within this description, the wide and very open range of material is important. Experience patterns can include objects, events, emotions, ideas, actualities and possibilities. Any content of real or imagined experience can be included in experience patterns. The one other element that forms the identity of the experience pattern is the pattern or structure itself. Not just given elements within the range of potential content, but those contents in a particular relation to each other, form the experience pattern. Granted, this analysis may boil down to an elaboration of the words “experience” and “pattern” themselves, but the points are important to note as individual factors even if they are implied through the phrase itself. The concept of experience patterns in and of itself does not constitute meaning for Hill. Rather, it supplies the material for meaning, and the material becomes meaning as such when it is meant through one of four ways or functions of meaning – that is, when the material is meant intentionally, dispositionally, causally, or implicatively (252-254).

Hardy is centrally concerned with meaning as something continually in the process of being generated or created (11). In her view “The essential characteristic of meaning lies in its dynamic generation: it belongs to consciousness as a whole, and it expresses a living, integrative process” (18). This process is “complex and multidimensional, bringing together all levels of being. It continuously forms connections and points to implications; it is a constant flux, embedded in communication
and exchange processes” (18). She states that “the generation of meaning is, in itself, an organizing process shaping reality, while the mind is, in turn, shaped by a reality endowed with meaning. Attributing meaning is a mental act that pervades and organizes all experience” (11). This emphasis on constant generation, development, and interaction is an important part of Hardy’s perspective that she does not share with Hill.

The content they identify for meaning, however, is something they share. In Hardy’s account, “specific images, sensations, feelings, words, ideas, memories, experiences, and so forth” form part of meaning, and “Human beings generate meaning while drawing upon experiences and exchanges, contexts and perceptions, feelings and affects, needs and intentions – through a dynamic being-in-the-world involving other subjects who are themselves sources of meaning. Although language and signs are among the richest supports and sources of meaning, they certainly are not the only ones: feelings, mental imagery, affective and sensorimotor processes are all woven into the semantic networks” (Hardy 19, 18). Again, the entire range of elements that form or could form part of experience, of “being-in-the-world,” offer content for meaning. And again, the content is not the sole element in to be found in meaning material; structure is important, as well.

Structure, and more specifically structure in motion, is at the heart of how Hardy explains meaning. Concepts, which Hardy views as “complex, organized semantic entities – constellations of meaning that are dynamic in nature,” form the basic elements in her explanation. Concepts are constantly engaged in what Hardy calls a “spontaneous linkage process,” in which “clusters of semantic elements are attracted to, and link themselves to, other semantically related clusters. This highly generative dynamic, based on network-connections rather than algorithmic operations, is proposed to be the ground
of thought” (Hardy 5). This constant and active formation of links between related semantic elements creates what Hardy terms “semantic constellations,” or SeCos. As she explains this process,

The meaning of any concept depends entirely upon its relations with other significations, while its link-structure is constantly subject to modification and change. In other words, the very materials with which we create, within and around us, a universe of meaning are continually being modified and put into new perspectives. They are constantly being diverted, shifted and reconverted, displaced and transposed.

To express this complex link-structure, I introduce the fundamental concept of a constellation of meanings, or semantic constellation (SeCo). It is the simplest semantic object, a dynamical and self-organizing system that constitutes the ‘unit,’ so to speak, of our mental life.

The semantic constellation is an organized aggregate, a moving and changing network of indeterminate size that is constituted by virtue of its inner interconnections and its connections with other constellations. However, this fluid constellation does have a nucleus, a signifying core, a central concept around which meaning is organized and that allows new elements to become linked. A semantic constellation may be defined as a dynamical and evolving network of meanings and related processes, organized around a nucleus. The nucleus, the central meaning, ties together interrelated concepts, internal sensations, images, sounds, colors, gestures, acts, attitudes, behaviors, moods, and so forth, while the SeCo is the ensemble, the network implicating all these various elements. (Hardy 16)

Hardy’s proposed structures are obviously complex and rarely remain the same. Any circumstance that evokes a given SeCo automatically adds to it (131). Yet they do still function within experience as recognizable structures of experience-related information, and they form the basis not only for attributing meaning and thereby responding to given situations, but also for thought and therefore for communication (16-17, 128-129). In this way Hardy’s perspective remains very much like Hill’s. They share the idea of meaning as revolving around the indication, in some manner, of experience as constituted by a wide potential range of content arranged in particular patterns or structures.
Smith’s understanding of meaning is founded largely on his theory that people form a model of the world through which they understand everything. He describes the content of this model thus:

To say that the brain consists of thoughts, memories, ideas, concepts, associations, beliefs, or knowledge, is too limited, too fragmentary. Whatever is inside the brain is all of a piece, not compartmentalized into sections, or functions, or aspects. Our understanding of the present cannot be separated from our experience of the past or from our expectations of the future; perceptions cannot be distinguished from intentions or understandings from feelings. To the extent that the world around us seems coherent and organized and systematic, so the content of the brain must be coherent and organized and systematic. In my view the brain must contain nothing less than a working model of the world, a theoretical model that every living brain has constructed for itself, with nothing more specific to work on than the cryptic neural bulletins it receives from whatever constitutes the world outside. (Smith 33)

It is through the understanding based on this model of the world that people are able to read and write, or generally to use language and communicate. This theory of the world allows us to communicate because it is the basis for what Smith calls “deep structure” in language – that is, the processes of thought that underlie but cannot be captured by words (34, 50). He contrasts this as an aspect of language with “surface structure,” which is “the part of language that exists in the world, however transiently, outside the minds of language users. We produce surface structure when we speak or write; we interpret surface structure when we listen or read” (49). Surface structure is tangible and quantifiable, where as deep structure or meaning is not (50).

At first glance, Smith’s ideas do not seem as obviously connected to Hill or Hardy’s ideas as their ideas did to each other. Nevertheless, the resemblance is there insofar as Smith’s model or theory of the world – his basis for and source of meaning – consists, essentially, of everything that one has learned or assimilated from experience structured inside the mind. One could even, perhaps, consider the totality of Hardy’s
semantic constellations to be a complex, detailed and dynamic mapping or model of the world. Smith retains the idea of specifically structured experiential content as forming the basic material of meaning.

Cooper’s thought on meaning starts out seeming even more distant from these ideas than Smith’s. He starts out by suggesting the approach of forming an understanding of meaning by forming an understanding of how one explains meanings (Cooper 29). To clarify and direct this approach, he sets out two questions: “First, to what do explanations of meaning – meaning-indicators – relate items? What, in the case of all such explanations, is the ‘beyond’ – the ‘permanent subject’, to use Wilhelm Dilthey’s expression (1979: 220) – to which they connect items? Secondly, what is the character of the relation or connection indicated? How does it differ from other relations to the ‘beyond’, such as causal ones?” (Cooper 30) His project, in essence, is first to find out what makes something an answer to a question about meaning, and second, what kind of relationship establishes a meaning as a meaning.

In regard to the first question, he says, “I take my lead from Dilthey. Meaning, he writes, is a matter of ‘belonging to a whole’. That ‘whole’ is what he calls ‘Life’: hence, something is meaningful ‘in so far as it … signifies … something that is part of Life’” (1970: 233, 236, as cited in Cooper 30). He later elaborates on this with the explanation, “To provide explanations of meaning, I suggest, is to respond to actual or potential questions about the relationship of items (utterances, gestures, rituals or whatever) to Life, about their location in the framework that enables the possibility of significance. That relationship or location is what the questioner has yet to grasp.” (Cooper 31) In answer to the second question, concerning what kind of relationship meaning
explanations trace to life, he suggests that it is a given item’s appropriate relationship to life (35).

This view does indeed differ in some ways from the others. However, the fact remains that Life – and therefore the general and comprehensive realm of experience – remains the element in relation to which things mean. And meaning is still found in structure. It is expressed by describing a “location in the framework” (31).

These views, despite their differences of formulation, each suggest the same basic considerations for what meaning is. Meaning draws upon and is given content by all the elements of life experience, including sensible and sensual, emotional, conceptual, and linguistic elements, as Hill and Hardy, especially, observe. However, these things alone are not meaning. Meanings are actually the structures or experiential patterns of such elements and their relationships to one another, whether the elements be single concepts or wider portions of experience. This is how the view of meaning just given merges with the idea shared by Saussure and Derrida that meaning does not refer to things. However, Saussure and Derrida consider differential patterns to be the source of meaning. The view I now suggest would make the distinction that meanings are the patterns of things, the patterns drawn from an experience of and interaction with things.

This view of meaning is not, however, one that equates meaning with individual and discrete structures, patterns, or relationships. There is, as Hardy points out, motion, change, and development. In addition, as Hardy, Smith, and Cooper each discuss in their own way, meaning as the structures, patterns, or relationships between contents ultimately ends up being – not just as a situation, but as a portion of its essence – part of a larger whole. It is structured in constellations that are part of constellations that are part
of other constellations; it is related to a comprehensive model of the world, it is fundamentally connected to having a relationship to Life.

*Meaning as Pattern and My Own Thought*

It is only fair to note, of course, that this view of meaning also fits closely with the sense of meaning I developed in Chapter 1. Hill’s experience patterns, especially, fit very closely with the patterns of traits I found in both symbolic and narrative meaning. Indeed, I could use the term “experience pattern” for the parallel set of situational traits that I discussed in Chapter 1 as applying to the relationship between Digory and Aslan. The patterns of certain elements of experience – be they images, emotions, ideas, or otherwise – do indeed seem to be what I tend to think of as meanings, both when I read and when I write. Hardy’s semantic constellations are more dynamic and changing than I tend to think of in regard to meaning, but this is likely more a matter of simplifying for the sake of limiting information than anything else. When I consider the experience (again, an experience pattern) of discovering connections and finding patterns, I find her view makes sense. And in any case, the view of traits, contents, or informational or semantic points structured into patterns or constellations remains the same.  

At this point, it could be asked whether it is not just my recognition of a view I already hold that leads me to this conclusion. I would say it is rather the case that I consider it fascinating that one can find the same basic form – experiential information structured in a particular way – being identified with meaning not just by one author, but in four very different authors spanning a range of 32 years and writing with the concerns of varying goals and perspectives (with that not including myself). Admittedly, this is

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21 Incidentally, my use of the term “constellation” does predate my reading of her book.)
not conclusive proof of anything, but surely it is both fascinating and worthy of closer examination. And upon further examination, it becomes evident that the element, if not the concept, of specifically structured experiential content plays an important role in a number of literary theories, as well.

Meaning as Pattern in Literary Theory

One of the most obvious of these would, of course, be mimetic criticism. Within this view, literature is said to mean by imitating reality in one way or another, whether this imitation is to be done of the essential, dominant features of reality or of the uncertainty and detailed complexity of reality (Keesey 208-209). In either case, though, according to mimetic criticism the work’s meaning rests on content that, as similar to reality, would be part of experience. Furthermore, this content would be specifically structured to reflect something in the structure of real experience.

Another view with a similarly clear relationship to meaning conceived as structures of experience would be the kind of view Keesey calls “intertextualism,” which for him is any criticism that bases understanding on the literary and linguistic conventions of a piece (265). This would include critics concerned with genre or kinds of literature, ones who focus on archetypes, and ones whose discussion is in the general terms of convention (265-266). Within this perspective, the meaning available to a reader and even the work done by a writer has its basis in what conventions they have learned form the body of literature (273). Advocates of this view may consider that body of literature to be the proper primary context within which to interpret, as for instance Fry contends when he calls “trying to see what meaning could be discovered in works of literature from their context in literature,” “the first operation of criticism” (Frye 280).
He opposes this primary meaning to seeking an authorial meaning that could be represented merely as a paraphrase (280). Other emphases and interpretive techniques also, according to Frye, make literary study mostly about something else – it subordinates literary to other concerns and can even cause literature to cease being literary (280). Focus on literary context is proper, in contrast, because elements such as images within poetry are as conventional as language, and must be produced as a logical extension to the already existing body of poetry (283).

Arguments about proper focus aside, however, Frye’s terminology when stating what a reader actually does when reading is striking: “the real reader knows better: he knows that he is entering into a coherent structure of experience, and the criticism which studies literature through its organizing patterns of convention, genre and archetype enables him to see what that structure is” (286). From this perspective, such ‘structures of experience’ are the essence of what is happening in reading and how an understanding of literature is formed.

In a couple of his concerns, at least, Frye’s thought shares something with Formalism. Both have a paramount concern for what makes literature unique, for what separates it from general discourse, and both are dissatisfied with the suggestion that a work’s meaning could be summed up simply in a paraphrase. Thus Brooks says, in a list of “articles of faith he could subscribe to,” “…in a successful work, form and content cannot be separated,” and “…form is meaning” (22). An idea or meaning in an abstract sense, such as a straightforward, directly paraphrasable moral is expressly not the point of literature for Brooks. Rather, “…specific moral problems’ are the subject matter of literature, but the purpose of literature is not to point a moral” (Brooks 22). Literature does not exclude ideas – indeed, literature is built upon them – but ideas are not the point
Rather, the whole of a piece and how the parts work together are both the point and the meaning of literature (22). This meaning-as-form is created by

…‘something either in the nature of the details themselves, or the method of using the, which invests them with poetical power.’ Their nature, one may add, as assumed through their relation to one another, a relation which may also be called the method of using them. The poetic character of details consists not in what they say directly and explicitly (as if roses and moonlight were poetic) but in what by their arrangement they show implicitly. (Ruskin as quoted in Wimsatt 45)

Such showing can be demonstrated through the functioning of metaphor, in which the meaning hinges upon “a resemblance between two classes, and hence a more general third class. This class is unnamed and most likely remains unnamed and is apprehended only through the metaphor. It is a new conception for which there is no other expression” (Wimsatt 46 R).

Aside from the formalist rejection of ideas as meaning, however, such conceptions of meaning fit remarkably well with a description of meaning as particularly structured experiential content. One could conceivably argue with the use of the words “experiential content” in formalism, and indeed, I would include ideas within this content, contrary to the formalist standards. These would be ideas, however, in the sense Hardy uses of concepts as semantic constellations – entities of structured content that have meaning through their internal structure and through the relationships they form with other such entities. This view of conceptual meaning actually meshes well with the statement, “Form is meaning.”

In each of these views, one can find descriptions, not just of issues bearing on meaning, but of the kind of thing meaning actually is and the mechanisms by which one recognizes it. When one comes across these descriptions, they bear distinct similarities to the view of meaning as structures of experience. They may single out specific types of
structures, such as structures patterned after reality or structures within the language of
the text. However, in each of these cases, certain structures or relationships among
information are taken to be meaning. Indeed, in the latter two, especially, there is a
distinctive insistence on paying attention to structure and not ignoring its role as part of
meaning.
Out of Reference and Into Illimitability

This view of meaning as, essentially, the relationships that exist between things seems at first to counter the inability to reach something outside of the chain of reference that forms the basis for Derrida’s challenge to the idea of presence – and thus to, among other things, the ideas of perception, truth and determinacy of meaning. Derrida challenges perception and thought on the grounds that nothing is ever present, but rather that everything is traces and differences. The elements one thinks of as being simply there is actually an entity of syntheses, referrals, differences, and traces (Semiology 337). However, even granting such constitution, a gathering of differences and referrals is still a gathering of something, and unless everything were to appear the same, it would have to be a gathering of different sets of things. Thus one comes back to identity – not, perhaps, one based upon a self-contained object, but still an identifiable gathering. Furthermore, as a gathering made of syntheses, referrals, and differences, it would be an entity of relationship or pattern. Such a gathering would bear resemblance to Hardy’s definition of the concept as a semantic constellation. One’s concepts are in a state of flux as, through experience, they form links with the things one encounters. However, there is a core around which those links gather. They form a unit that has no definite boundaries and indeed no make-up that is permanently the same. At the same time, though, that unit has a nucleus – a name, a sound, a feeling – around which the associations and relations gather as an entity. Derrida would object to this formulation with its centering and probably with its interpretation of syntheses, referrals, and differences. The contention here is not that the application of the concept ‘entity which is syntheses or referrals,’ is the intended one, but rather that this is the way such an entity would have to work.
This idea does have its own difficulties, though. The fact is, any given point or object may exist in many different relationships. In a situation that involves multiple objects and potential focal points, these relationships will overlap, exist in relationship with one another, and extend from thing to thing. In addition, in a dynamic situation, there will be the potential for relationships to change and develop, for some to break and others to form. These relationships are inherently part of the situation; or rather, they are the situation, insofar as something’s being situated involves it being set in place, and therefore also into relationship. These relationships are also multiple, complex, and ultimately impossible to focus on in their totality at one time. The difficulties suggested by Saussure’s conception of mutually defining words and Derrida’s constant and endless chain of signification arise here in a slightly different way: one can still not reach a point beyond which there is no further reference or relationship, but the problem here is not that one needs to reach exactly that kind of point; rather, one needs a way of determining which sets of entities and relationships on which to focus.

This latter need could be considered central to the process to the identification or interpretation of meaning in general, and especially within literature. And it can present a problem, as could be illustrated through any literary work, though the story “Making” from Chapter 1 will be used here as an example. One could identify any number of relationships within that piece. There are the obvious relationships between the characters of Mark, Tracy, and Melody – not only in the sense of human relationships such as ones of kinship, friendship, or love, but also relationships in terms of traits and comparisons such as age, size, temperament, and knowledge or understanding. There are the respective relationships that each of these characters hold to aspects of the setting, including ones of proximity and interaction as well as ones of attitude, imagination, and
understanding. Furthermore, there are multiple aspects of the setting to which they can relate, such as the house, the floor, the kitchen, the computer, and the fabric as a handful of examples among many others. This list could continue, including relationships among different entities in the story and even ones that included some of the same primary entities. All these relationships can be found within the story alone, and some critics, such as the Formalists, would say this is all one need be concerned with. But one could also ask what relationship any number of the relationships within a story bear to reality, or to particular aspects of or concerns within reality. One could ask what relationship they bear to other works of literature, or to particular patterns of relationship within other literature. The potential relationships continue to widen.

The question then becomes, upon which relationship or set of relationships should one focus? How does one determine which relationships or patterns to identify as the meaning(s) of something, and what signals where those patterns end? Though one could say meaning is based in actual structures, one still faces the question of how a meaning is defined in the sense of being delimited or circumscribed, because one still has to deal with a situation quite like the one Derrida describes of one reference or relationship leading to another set of references or relationships which would lead to still others continually. Whether dealing with ideas, understandings, or experiences, one must be able to abstract particular points and segments of pattern, if only because one cannot focus on everything at once. How is this done?
A potential point for helping to “focus” the process of answering this can be raised by yet another question: why would anyone care about meaning in the first place? This may seem a strange question to raise at this point in a project so focused on meaning, but it reveals something valuable. People look for meaning in the statements and actions of others, in the situations they encounter, in movies and books. People care enough about meaning to try and clarify statements in discussion and to spend lifetimes studying it and filling libraries with books on topics in communications, literary theory, and philosophy – all of three of which, as disciplines, take meaning as one of their major concerns. There can be no doubt that people care about meaning. Why?

One could think of various answers. People need to understand the actions and communications of others in order to know how to respond in a given situation. People wish to add to their knowledge and think more clearly. People wish to earn a diploma. In the case of books, people may want to be entertained, or to exercise their imaginations, or to learn new perspectives. Or they may wish to communicate something, for any of a variety of reasons. The potential specific examples could go on. The first point about raising the question, though, was not for the examples themselves. Rather, it was that people do in fact have reasons for caring about meaning, and further, that they care about meaning for certain reasons. That is, meaning is essentially a thing that one wants for its use. This use may be survival; it may be personal development; it may be enjoyment. It may be a need for help from others or a wish to offer them help. All the same, one always deals with meaning for a reason, with the intention of doing something with it. Indeed, Smith goes even farther than this, saying, “Intention is fundamental to all behavior and learning, and therefore must be crucial to our consideration of writing.
Indeed, everything we write has such an intimate relation to the purpose for which it is
written that intention will be impossible to ignore” (Smith 38). Of reading, he says,
“Intentions underlie comprehension as well. We never attend to language for no reason
at all. When we read, we have a purpose. We read with certain expectations. Our
purpose reflects global intentions and our expectations generate focal intentions (to look
for particular things); there is nothing passive about reading or listening” (Smith 59).
Intentions, purposes, needs, goals – these represent the reasons people look for or create
meaning in general and the reasons they try to create or understand particular instances of
meaning. People do not deal with just meaning, but with meaning and purpose, with
meaning in respect to purpose.

The import of this point is that it offers at least one focal point and director for the
identification and isolation of specific patterns and relationships of meaning. It limits the
range of the endless relating or referring chain. It does this by establishing a standard of
relevance. In both books and life, one will not see the totality of relationships that exist,
because there are more than one could handle, so one will focus on the relationships that
are relevant to the purpose for which one was looking in the first place. This is not to say
simply that people only see what they want to see or what interests them, for reasons to
be discussed later. It is to say, however, that while the patterns people focus on may be
quite real, they have come to focus on particular patterns in part through the particular
purposes they brought to the situation. The patterns they see can be part of actuality, but
they will also be partially relative to the individual viewpoint.

As a limiter, this focus provided by purpose would operate according to
essentially the same principles as those that govern Hardy’s semantic constellations. The
purpose would serve as the core or nucleus, and the elements or traits of the entity to be
understood would be arranged around the purpose in the sense that the mind would
variously relate and emphases things as they fit or did not fit the purpose. The limits to
the meaning found, then, would be similar to the limits of Hardy’s concept – not firm or
distinct; fuzzy and fading off, rather – but also not radically indeterminate, either. Some
things would definitely be more relevant to the purpose, and some would be less so.
Some relationships would – and some wouldn’t exist. Different people might see
different relationships and both relationships might actually be part of the structure; but
in other cases the identification of a relationship might be dead wrong.

*The Truth-Potential of Meaning*

One could ask at this point what consequences this view would have regarding
the potential of meaning being true. This question, as stated at the beginning of the
chapter, ties crucially into what capabilities one could consider literature to have even
apart from the question of how those capabilities would be taken. However, it is also
relevant because the question relates, in part, to the question of whether interpretation
could be true.

Before answering the question, however, one must to clarify by what standards a
meaning would be considered true. According to the line of thought thus far developed,
the situation of a true meaning would involve the identification or communication of a
pattern of content that actually existed and that included all the content and relationships
relevant to the meaning in question.

Notably, the first thing the situation would have to involve would be either an
identification or a communication. This would be the meaning: it would be either a
meaning an agent identified or interpreted, or a meaning an agent tried to mean or communicate.

The next thing required for the situation would be the existence of the pattern of experience identified. This is the point at which one runs into the first difficulty of a meaning that’s true. How does one identify whether a pattern one identifies actually exists? The answer, though qualified and provisional, involves two methods of testing this.

The first of these tests is rooted in what I will call here an experience of resistance. Some patterns and entities are ones that a person in a manner of speaking “runs up against,” and they offer resistance when a person does so. It is the kind of evidence upon which one might believe that an invisible object existed after trying to move a hand through what appeared to be empty space and at a certain point feeling something solid. This kind of evidence functions primarily if not solely on a physical level, and it is prone to notable limitations. But insofar as it is accurate to say, “resistance indicates the presence of something doing the resisting,” it can at very least offer evidence concerning the existence of certain kinds of patterns or parts of patterns.

The second test is not so much a test as a practice based on what could be called a “principle of parallax”. It takes as a premise that when looking at and understanding things through a concern of particular purposes, there will be elements of a wider whole that one will miss or at least fail to understand in their fullness. It also acknowledges that perspectives looking at the same thing – whether a situation or a set of words – with different purposes will highlight different sets of details and come away with more or less different understandings or interpretations of that thing. However, it is at this point that the connection to the phenomenon of parallax can be made, because though parallax
influences how one sees – it makes things appear to be in different places from different angles – it also opens up the possibility to learn more about those very things. The use of parallax at one time allowed the approximation of the distance of stars from Earth. A practice based on parallax would try to examine what could be learned about a thing interpreted differently by trying to account for what particular roles variations in purpose and perspective might have played in bringing about differences in understanding or interpretation.

Finally, after the considerations related to whether the pattern of content in question existed, one would also have to consider whether the pattern indicated did indeed include all the relevant content and relationships. The most obvious observation to make about this necessity is that there would be cases in which it would be impossible to know this, or impossible even to comprehend it. As Cooper, Smith, and Hardy all observed in their discussions of meaning, the ultimate context of meaning situations is the entirety of the world. In certain cases the most relevant context might be a good deal less, but in complex situations, relationships still could be traced endlessly.

So, what implications does the situation described above have for the potential of a meaning being true? One thing it does not imply is an utter impossibility for meaning to contain truth. It also does not allow for meanings – or really, for human communications – to carry the entirety of the truth, and it does not allow for those meanings to be independent from human perspective. Rather, human meaning could be considered a hybrid: it can involve a reflection of the real world that is to a certain extent true, but this extent is limited both by the limitations on human knowledge and by the perspectives and concerns through which people do and must interact with the world.
Application to the Meaning Situation

These conclusions are the keys to thinking about the roles of the two remaining factors in the meaning situation. On one hand, as already observed by Smith, the purposes carried into that situation by readers will influence how they read and what they understand from that reading. There are facts and structures built into a literary work by authors, and oftentimes these are included for the purpose of communicating something. However, the relationships recognized between those facts and the emphasis given them will be limited and organized by the concerns the reader brings to the text. One of the concerns brought to a work by the reader may be to understand the author’s meaning, and such efforts might result in an approximation of the author’s meaning (Hardy 181). However, there may also be readers who do not choose to particularly seek the meaning or meanings the author may have intended in the text, and in any case there will always be an array of other purposes brought to the text, as well.
Works Cited


This project began with a question: how should I, based on the nature of meaning and how it functions within literature, approach the element of meaning in my own writing? The question encompasses a great deal, from possibilities concerning meaning to personal attitudes about writing. As the last chapter concluded, the possibilities arising from the nature of meaning were a left a good deal more to the reader and a good deal less to the author than I, as a writer, have often tended to think and hope. Those conclusions did not entirely eliminate the potential for an author to communicate something; however, they indicated that the chances of a reader perceiving the meaning the author intended are limited, and even then the communication will not be perfect. What remains for this project, then, is to settle what attitudes and processes of writing I ought to apply in light of the possibilities set out. Despite the limited potentials for communication, the question of whether I should try to mean something remains open, as does the question of what my attitude should be in light varying determinations of meaning that others may make in regard to work and meaning I still tend to want to call my own.

My concern that others to understand the meanings I intend stems, I think, from two roots. The first is a fear. One could perhaps call this fear, rather than Bloom’s “Anxiety of Influence,” an “Anxiety of Interpretation” (Abrams 240). It is a fear that my work, and therefore that I, may be taken as saying didn’t mean, and worse, something I never would have wanted to mean. Deeper still, it is a fear that if I were to say, “No, that’s not what I meant at all,” my statement could simply be ignored. Such fears may be
exaggerated. Then again, they may not. Given the open nature of meaning and human freedom, there may well be nothing to do about these fears except choose to set them aside.

However, I do have another reason for wanting to express meanings that an audience will understand. One of the common motivations for my writing has been a desire to share something with others. Whether that thing be an image or a quality of experience, quite often one of my reasons for writing – and indeed, for wanting to create in general – is a desire for others to feel the sunset, the moss-covered stone, the quiet, or the comfort I may have a chance to encounter through the course of my life. More importantly, I have often wished to share through my words the kind of encouragement I have often found in the words of others. This, too, I touched upon in the introduction, but it now raises further considerations. One of the chief forms of my encouragement was when someone else’s words seemed to describe perfectly an experience I was having. I saw that as evidence that someone else had experienced the same thing, so I was not alone. Of course, I knew if I thought about it that the situations and feelings to which I matched the words were on some level likely to be rather different from the experience the writer had used those words to describe. Regardless, however, I was encouraged, and I wanted to give the kind of encouragement I had received.

This desire to give encouragement, however, raises a question. If others, applied my words to their experiences but were encouraged by an application different mine, would that trouble me? Yes, I think, if the application implied things I believed to be false. However, this looks only at the negative case. What if the application were one with which I could have no conflict other than the fact that it was not my own?
This possibility could be taken even farther. C.S. Lewis at one point says, “One of [an author’s] intentions usually was that it should have a certain meaning: he cannot be sure that it has. He cannot even be sure that the meaning he intended it to have was in every way, or even at all, better than the meaning which readers find in it” (140). The possibility of someone finding a better meaning in my work than the one I intended is not one I often think of, but it is worth thinking of. This idea can also be found in what George MacDonald says concerning the meaning of his fairy tales. When asked how a reader could be assured that they were understanding his meaning rather than their own, he answers, “Why should you be so assured? It may be better that you should read your meaning into it. That may be a higher operation of your intellect than the mere reading of mine out of it: your meaning may be superior to mine” (152). Indeed, MacDonald considers starting readers thinking their own thoughts to be one of the purposes of writing. “The best thing you can do for your fellow, next to rousing his conscience, is—not to give him things to think about, but to wake things up that are in him; or say, to make him think things for himself’” (MacDonald 154). This kind of attitude stands at least as a counterpoint, and at best as an alternative, to fears about how others might interpret the meaning of my work.

Yet while this view offers insight into an attitude I can consider and form, it does not necessarily settle the question of how I should go about the actual process of writing. If an author does play as tentative a role in meaning as the last chapter indicated, and if others may find better meanings in my work than I could intend, one could wonder what remains to be determined. However, even the matters of possibility do not tell me
whether there is actually a reason I should write with an intention. Even if, in the most extreme case, the intention were only for me, should I work in one way or the other?

One writer who gives a detailed and thoughtful account of the author’s relationship to meaning and the process of writing is John Gardner. I explored his work along with that of C.S. Lewis – who I consider a role model both in writing and thought – in pursuit of some perspective on what role exactly intention should play in the writing process. What I found through this exploration was both like and unlike what I had expected.

Both, contrary to what I might have guessed, agree in rejecting the idea of writing for a moral. Gardner considers literature written for the purpose of making a point or conveying a determined message to be propaganda, no matter what the technical quality of such a story may be (107-109, 115-116). Lewis also rejects – specifically for children’s stories, but in general as well – the idea of writing with a specific moral in mind, “For the moral you put in is likely to be a platitude, or even a falsehood, skimmed from the surface of your consciousness” (On Stories 41). If one is going to write with a conscious moral, he feels that one should choose it based on the question, “‘What moral do I need?’ for I think we can be sure that what does not concern us deeply will not deeply interest our readers […]” (41) However, even this method, in Lewis’ eyes, is not the best one for reaching a story’s moral. Rather, “[…] it is better not to ask the questions at all. Let the pictures tell you their own moral” (41). Both writers seem on a certain level to advocate essentially the same view that I referenced as so troubling to me in the introduction: “Don’t necessarily worry about what you’re saying; if you go into it with a point to make, it’s propaganda, not literature.” Yet at the same time, neither of
them necessarily recommend as an alternative that one write without considering about the meaning at all, which has long been the only alternative of which I could think.

For Lewis, the alternative is rather simple. From his advice to “let the pictures tell you their own moral,” he continues, “For the moral inherent in them will rise from whatever spiritual roots you have succeeded in striking during the whole course of your life” (On Stories 41). To Lewis, “The only moral that is of any value is that which arises inevitably from the whole cast of the author’s mind” (Lewis 42). In a sense, one is not writing thoughtlessly, but rather from the fullness of one’s understanding and character. In addition, Lewis doesn’t view this meaning that in a sense rises out of the author’s being as constituting the whole of the writing process. The development of the creative idea is independent. To a certain extent it grows and develops on its own; this is the nature of an author’s inspiration. However, while the writer as an artist lets this material develop and wants to write it, the writer as a person operates differently:

While the Author is in this state [of inspiration], the Man will of course have to criticise the book from quite a different point of view. He will ask how the gratification of this impulse will fit in with all the other things he wants, and ought to do or be. Perhaps the whole thing is too frivolous and trivial (from the Man’s point of view, not the Author’s) to justify the time and pains it would involve. Perhaps it would be unedifying when it was done. Or else perhaps (at this point the Author cheers up) it looks like being ‘good’, not in a merely literary sense, but ‘good’ all around (46).

For Lewis, the writing process is not entirely without thought about meaning. One must – indeed, has in something of the way I had thought – a responsibility for the choice to write something. However, this is not a responsibility to make a piece mean or not mean a certain thing; it is rather a responsibility to discern the worth of the ideas once they have developed.

Gardner also advocates a natural development of ideas, though his view of how this happens is somewhat more active than Lewis’s. Gardner believes that writing should
be an exploration, a discovery, and the ideas within the story are formed by pursuing writing as a process of inquiry. "What literary critics claim is true: writers do communicate ideas. What the writer understands, though the student or critic of literature need not, is that the writer discovers, works out, and tests his ideas in the process of writing. Thus at its best fiction is, as I’ve said, a way of thinking, a philosophical method” (107). The writer, as an artist, seeks to use that art as a mode of questioning and thought. The goal is to learn and change. And this process absolutely requires thought.

It also requires caring about what one writes and ends up saying; this care is simply a different from the one I would have thought of. The thought must be combined with a “passionate commitment to discovering whatever may happen to be true (not merely proving some particular thing is true)” (Gardner 122). It is concerned with saying something true and good, but not for the sake of ideas. Rather, “we affirm what is good – for the characters in particular and for humanity in general – because we care. The artist who has no strong feeling about his characters – the artist who can feel passionate only about his words or ideas – has no urgent reason to think hard about the character’s problems, the ‘themes’ in his fiction.” (Gardner 84) Gardner contends that for the work to be genuine, writers cannot focus their concern on particular ideas, because this concern needs to be focused on discovering what really is true and good beyond just that writer’s opinion. A statement made by Cleanth Brooks about metaphor fits quite closely with Gardner’s thought here:

The poet does not select an abstract theme and then embellish it with concrete details. On the contrary, he must establish the details, must abide by the details, and through his realization of the details attain to whatever general meaning he can. The meaning must issue from the particulars; it must not seem to be arbitrarily forced upon the particulars. (84-85)
Brooks, like Gardner, argues that the meaning has to proceed from what is actually in the material. They share a commitment to restricting oneself from using one’s opinions so as to discover what actually fits. Lewis could be seen as joining with them in advocating, if not a process of searching through writing, at least a commitment to allowing one’s writing to be shaped by the best understanding one has attained. In any case, they are united in saying that one should not force a point upon the writing process because one needs to be concerned with what actually fits and is true about the material.

It must be noted that this process does not guarantee that a reader will necessarily recognize even a meaning arrived at in this way, and if they do, they may well not agree with it. Authors must depend on the audiences’ ability to see the reality of what they have discovered and written, as Gardner observes, “The writing of fiction is a mode of thought because by imitating we come to understand the thing we imitate. Fiction is thus a convincing and honest but unverifiable science (in the old sense, knowledge): unverifiable because it depends on the reader’s sensitivity and clear sense of how things are, a sense for which we have no tests” (116). The author may discover truths about reality through the writing process, but if the readers’ viewpoint is not such that they can recognize the discovery as truth, the author can do nothing to actually prove the discovery.

This point, however, helps to emphasize and sharpen the reason behind a warning against writing simply in order to make a point. If meaning is, as established in the last pattern, based in recognizable structures of experience, then the recognition of these structures not only involves understanding what is being said, but being able to identify it as foreign or familiar, false so far as one’s own experience has revealed, or conversely, true. Structures of experience are not only meanings, but evidence, and so attention to
experience is in fact checking one’s evidence. If one’s attitude is set, in contrast, on the
goal simply of making a statement, this can easily lead to the a situation in which one is
simply saying something, without evidence or thought about whether it is true. In these
instances, the argument against trying to make a statement through one’s work really
amounts to the idea that one should “ask not, ‘Is it mine?’, but ‘Is it good?’” and, one
could add, ‘Is it true?’ (Christian Reflections 179).
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A Walk Through Reflections:

A Story in Conclusion

It feels like there should be a story in all of this.

I walk along, looking down, thinking. It’s wet today. Bare tree branches and patches of mottled gray sky glimmer up at me from between grass blades and shine out of the pavement blackness. They draw my eyes as though into another world – into the muted, fading new colors and the vast expanse of clouds. And then- all of that crisp, clear existence cuts off abruptly against an edge, dissolving into submerged ice and green and long-dead leaves. I somehow find myself surprised.

It’s that other world – that feeling of a story. Except the story is missing: a story-feel without a story. So what is the story to go with the feel?

I don’t know, and I continue walking. It’s cool today. A stirring haunts the air, drawing across my face a cold that’s almost warm as well. The motion is lighter than a caress: it’s almost nothing. But I can still feel it on my face, the only part of me left uncovered for it to reach.

I look around. I’m on a way I know well –I walk it each day, to and fro. Going from one thing to the next.

But I’ve never noticed that crack in the sidewalk before.

It’s not a crack right now. In the flooded walkway, it’s become a watercourse. A liquid wavering fills and overfills it, and seals it into itself. The flow smoothes sand and stony asphalt into swerves and curving shine. And it arrests me. I stop to study it. What is it, exactly, that makes the sight mesmerizing? What traits of form, what elements, create that feel? That feel, again – as of a story in some other world. The question holds
me motionless, gazing. Perhaps if I could answer, I would also find the story in it. It seems unlikely, but perhaps.

“Are you okay?” The voice breaks in, unexpected. I look up to see a girl passing by, looking at me as I stare at the ground.

“Oh, yes. I’m just looking. It’s very interesting.” Which doesn’t explain anything, doesn’t fit at all, I know. But I still drop my eyes again, not waiting to see the response to my half-answer. She doesn’t stop, anyway. We are agreed, then: there is no time, no reason for something more complete.

But the exchange prompts me to motion again, at any rate. After all, I can’t stand here staring all day. So I walk again, think again, look again. I leave the sidewalk for the grass, and the sodden ground responds to my step with a squish. It really is wet today. And cool. And the air carries that hinted scent of moisture that makes it seem fresh, washed clean, and somehow new. A squish attends each step I take, except when I reach a lingering, icy patch of snow, which offers a rustling crunch to accompany my walk, instead.

And I wonder, Is it forced, and if so, false, to look at things this way? My mind flits back to the image of my sidewalk rivulet, and transforms it into the sheltered swimming-hole of a tree-lined stream. I survey the melting snow around me with a gaze-turned-aerial view of a realm filled with writhing, tossing torrents carving out an ice-bound mountain range. That haunting stir to the air has shifted at last into a breeze, and the hauntedness itself seems to have shifted, as well – diffused into everything the breeze has touched.

And I shake my head to myself. Do I try to see the transformations, the shadow-traces of the large within the small? Perhaps. And yet they are still beautifully haunted,
haunted by beauty. Indeed, that – that, I’m sure, is what I’m feeling. A sense of beauty, a soothing burning that swirls passion and peace into one.

What need have I, now that I think of it, for a story? Why go searching for one, when I have this? I have worlds filled with beauty, and all they require of me is to wander, wonder, absorb…

I could be happy with that. Is it not more than enough, indeed, a wealth?

Yet even as I think, the swimming hole rebukes me. It knows nothing of swimmers except a phantom possibility. Is it to remain forever empty? The mountain range reminds me that it has never seen an explorer’s tread. Will it always be a vast, unexplored unknown? My glimpses of cloud and branch through the puddle windows join the questioning, saying, Silence and No One alone people your worlds, your realms. Should they truly continue empty?

And it strikes me: Continue empty? But that is what I cannot bring myself to change!

I had not expected that thought. It catches me off guard. But I realize now that in a way, it’s true. I cannot see a story in my places… but I also cannot truly look, for fear of finding one. It is an odd fact to come to: I have not been looking for a story, really; or I have been looking and not looking at once. But why?

Why, I wonder, and my way leads me at length to another sidewalk. It runs one way and the other, and branches off some way down in a third direction as well. Which way? Left, right, the branching off, or the grass on every side? Choose. That’s what I have to do, what I hate – choose this or that when after all… do I know where I am heading? A choice again. But before it’s made, does direction really matter? But I must
choose, regardless. For the moment I can no longer amble along without thought or considered decision. *Choice, choice... I hate choosing.*

*Who and what would I want to see in these worlds?* I ask myself as I step onto the sidewalk and turn to follow it, mud-steps following me for several strides until the dirt has finally almost cleared. Who and what, indeed? For even *given* a who and a what, would their presence not ruin the place?

Yes, ruin. Even my own presence – I think as the sidewalk and my steps turn up a hill past some trees – even my own presence could not fit them for long. But a story? Part of the beauty is peace, after all. Introduce the mess of events, personalities, conflict that is the essence of story... and the silence would be shattered.

I look around me. Trees with upraised arms stand to one side and another, their browns and moss greens nearly set glowing by the dampness. The faintest of musical patterings hangs in the air – the landings of droplets gathered on branches and fallen to the snow.

*Does the silence sometimes exist to be broken?*

Or is the real question whether or not I could hold any place or anything silent – and unmoving and unchanging – forever? But put this way, the answer is clear. There are some things you cannot hold without destroying them, just as surely as would an attempt to reach in and hold a puddle world. The first brush of fingertips, and the mirage would fragment, solidity would flee in wavelet ripples. And what would you have left? *In your hand you would find... cold, and wet, and a withered, muddy leaf disintegrating like the image you broke to touch it.*

So, what now? My walk and my pondering keep on as always, when a voice from somewhere ahead cuts through them. “Hey! How are you doing?” I look up at the
words to see a slightly familiar face – one I recognize barely, a passing acquaintance mostly unknown. I hesitate for a moment, deciding how to respond. Yet at length I’m settled – I pause, and meet the speaker’s eyes, and speak in turn. “I’m doing well enough today, thank you. And how are you?”
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