# Using Fiction Sociologically

Benjamin Moodie

University of California, Berkeley

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* Reserved for acknowledgments. Address correspondence to author at bmoodie@berkeley.edu or Department of Sociology, 410 Barrows Hall, University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, CA 94720-1980

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ABSTRACT:

This article argues that narrative fiction can be used as a rich source of data about culturally patterned emotions and evaluations that are difficult to study in other ways. It first reconsiders the research which has led sociologists to be increasingly pessimistic about drawing conclusions about wider cultural meanings from cultural objects. After sketching a theory of how fiction works psychologically, the author provides concrete guidelines for sampling fiction for analysis. Using examples drawn from the author's own research on short stories in American and French women's magazines during the 1950s, the article demonstrates how to analyze the content of fiction so as to tap its unique strengths as a medium for communicating the ethical truths of culture

Since the mid-1980s, the sociology of culture has brought a renewed appreciation for the role of ideas and meanings in a wide array of sociological phenomena, from social movements (Johnston and Klandermans 1995: 37-50; Polletta 2006), to historical transformations (Sewell 2005b), to politics and civil society (Alexander and Smith 1993). Yet it has suffered a surprising defeat on its own turf. Sociologists of culture have lost confidence that cultural artifacts themselves can be reliably interpreted in order to gain insights into broader cultural meanings. This hermeneutic pessimism is the consequence of research into audiences' interpretations of cultural objects that has made the meanings of those objects seem so fluid as to be inscrutable (Binder 1993; Bryson 1996; Griswold 1987a; Jacobs 1996; Liebes and Katz 1990; Shively 1992; Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991).

My own research has led me to question this conclusion. When embarking on a project investigating the dominant gender ideologies in France and the United States before and after their women's liberation movements, I turned to a variety of standard sociological sources. Demographic and time use data provided some concrete and basic information about behavior, but could reveal little about how people think about their circumstances. Survey data furnished some insight into American and French attitudes toward egalitarian and traditional norms, but unavoidably decontextualized those opinions, making it difficult to discern the deeper cultural assumptions that gave rise to them. In-depth interviews and ethnography, sociologists' standard methods for investigating meaning in context, cannot reliably capture the everyday cultural assumptions of half a century ago.

As a last resort, I sampled popular short stories for clues about everyday gender culture in pre-feminist France and America. To my surprise, fiction illuminated the texture of each cultural context much more vividly than standard sorts of sociological evidence could. The fiction I read invited—indeed, I realized, if it was to "work" as fiction, it *required*—the reader to empathize with culturally inflected emotions and evaluations. For instance, depictions of erotic attraction in pre-feminist French stories often center around the hero's ability to perceive and sympathize with emotions that the heroine is trying to conceal from public view. This suggests that masculine empathy was central to French understandings of erotic attraction during this period. In contrast, American stories of the era tend to emphasize the competitive abilities as opposed to the psychological insight of their heroes. In these stories, a certain degree of emotional obtuseness can be charming in male characters, since it confirms their need for a woman's sympathy and intuition (Moodie 2008). In short, fiction seemed to provide access to the mainstream midcentury French and American cultural imagination about the dynamics of heterosexual erotic attraction.

This article argues that narrative fiction—by which I mean any kind of made-up story, be it a novel, a short story, a television show, a film or a play—can indeed provide a rich source of data about emotions and evaluations in culture that are difficult to study in other ways. It begins by reconsidering the research that has led sociologists to assume that the meanings of cultural objects are so fluid that they cannot be used as a source of evidence about the larger cultural contexts in which they are created and received. Then I sketch a theory of how successful fiction works and how it can be used for the purposes of cultural comparison. The remainder of the article suggests resolutions to some of the

methodological challenges that such a research strategy entails, addressing sampling and interpretation in turn. I draw examples from my own research to provide concrete illustrations.

**The Turn Away From Content**

In the mid-twentieth century, eminent sociologists had few inhibitions about making strong claims for the meaning and social significance of literary content. For instance, in *Literature and the Image of Man,* Leo Lowenthal justifies sociological attention to the works of great authors on the grounds that they portray "what is more real than reality itself... [I]t is often only after [the artist's] creative tasks have been performed that society recognizes its predicaments" (Lowenthal 1957: 1-2). Lowenthal's student Will Wright extended this argument to popular Western films, arguing that they provided a mythological dramatization of the modern economy's demands on the individual (Wright 1972). Other prominent social thinkers worried that the shoddy crowd-pleasers served up by the entertainment industry rendered the masses incapable of critical thought (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 [1947]; Marcuse 1964). All such arguments presupposed that cultural products contain and transmit powerful meanings.

Since the "cultural turn" of the 1980s, however, sociological research has focused less on the meanings embedded in cultural objects themselves, and more on the social processes by which meanings are imputed to cultural objects. The most creative work in this vein, beginning with Wendy Griswold's classic article on the critical reception of George Lamming's novels (Griswold 1987a), tends to emphasize how different audiences' pre-existing preferences and preoccupations shape their interpretation of the same cultural object. This observation has been made with a wide variety of cultural

objects, including cowboy films (Shively 1992); novels (DeVault 1990; Griswold 1987a); the internationally distributed television series *Dallas* (Liebes and Katz 1990); American television soap operas and sitcoms (Press 1991); the Rodney King riots (Jacobs 1996); the Vietnam War Memorial (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991) and musical genres (Binder 1993; Bryson 1996). While these studies typically concede that the "internal" content of a cultural object plays some role in the meaning attributed to it (e.g., DeVault 1990: 915; Griswold 1987a: 1106; Liebes and Katz 1990: 140-149; Shively 1992: 728), their research design of holding a particular cultural object constant and varying its audience inevitably highlights the extent to which meaning is in the eye of the beholder.

Earlier studies which examined a single audience's reception of a spectrum of different cultural objects had been better positioned to detect "content effects." Thus, the small group of romance readers studied by Janice Radway took great pleasure in their favorite romances and read them repeatedly, but found other novels disappointing or even repulsive. Radway was able to trace clear differences in plotting and characterization that made romance novels more or less gratifying to the "Smithton readers" whom she studied (Radway 1991 [1984]). Similarly, Will Wright found that particular features of Western films predicted their American box office success quite apart from whether they featured well-known stars or were heavily promoted by movie studios (Wright 1972: 13-14). These studies provided a fairer test of the proposition that audiences are sensitive to differences in the intrinsic content of cultural objects; they found that content matters.

In the wake of Griswold's 1987 article, however, reception studies tended to downplay these findings. In the 1993 *Annual Review of Sociology*, Griswold characterized the "most significant new direction taken by work in the sociology of

literature" as a new emphasis on readers' agency in construing meaning from texts (Griswold 1993: 457). Ten years later, Victoria Alexander encapsulated the findings of "reception approaches" as follows: "*audiences are the key to understanding art, because the meanings created from art and the ways it is used depend on its consumers, not its creators*" (Alexander 2003: 181, emphasis in original). Ironically, a conclusion this extreme ends up undermining the rationale for reception studies themselves. After all, if all cultural objects are a kind of mirror in which audiences see only reflections of their prior commitments, researchers might as well bypass art works and speak to individuals, who by default become the only reliable sources of cultural meaning. Thus, despite its optimistic title, Andrea Press's review essay from 1994, "The Sociology of Cultural Reception: Notes Toward an Emerging Paradigm," admitted to anguished doubt about the future of reception studies. Press concluded by predicting that scholars may "divorc[e] cultural study almost completely from its focus on particular products to a preoccupation with culture in a much broader sense" (Press 1994: 243). Reception studies were in danger of becoming self-cancelling.

While some sociologists continue to extrapolate from the content of cultural objects to wider social concerns, such efforts seldom use standard methods for ensuring the representativeness of their findings (see, e.g., Bergesen 2006; an unusual exception in this regard is Griswold 2000). Most work along these lines now takes place in the field of cultural studies, which is based mostly in humanities departments and interdisciplinary programs, not at the center of the sociological discipline.

The most prominent contemporary research in the sociology of art has sidestepped the problem of interpretation by treating aesthetic products as tools of social

inclusion and exclusion. Following the strategy mapped out by Pierre Bourdieu in *Distinction* (Bourdieu 1984), this highly fruitful work has investigated the way people use cultural objects to draw symbolic boundaries against groups they disapprove of (Bryson 1996; Lamont 1992; Lamont and Fournier 1992), or to form social linkages with those who share common tastes (Erickson 1996; Lizardo 2006). While the Bourdieuian perspective on culture contributes importantly to the study of stratification, it emphasizes the instrumental functions of aesthetic taste and confirms the discipline's move away from in-depth engagement with the content of art objects.[1]

**How Narrative Fiction Works**

Rehabilitating fiction as a source of sociological evidence requires an explanation of how fiction appeals to its audiences. Griswold's methodological framework for the analysis of cultural phenomena (Griswold 1987b) contains many helpful general guidelines, but I felt the need for an approach more closely tailored to the specific characteristics of narrative fiction. In what follows, I sketch the psychological dynamics of narrative fiction and explain why appealing fiction is a rich source of insight into wider cultural meanings.

*The psychology of narrative*

First and foremost, prose fiction—including stories told in writing or enacted dramatically[2]—is a variety of narrative. According to psychologist Jerome Bruner, narrative is a distinctive mode of thought that "deals in human or human-like intention

[1] Bourdieu does, of course, explain broad patterns in the aesthetic preferences of different social classes, arguing that working class people, driven by necessity, see art in substantive terms, while the privileged can afford the "aesthetic gaze" with its attention to aesthetic form. But this analysis does not use art objects to probe deeper, more complex cultural meanings.

[2] For convenience's sake, I subsequently refer to fiction as being received by "readers" rather than "readers and viewers." Nevertheless, the argument is intended to apply to written and dramatic fiction alike.

and action and the vicissitudes and consequences that mark their course" (Bruner 1992: 13). In other words, narrative is human beings' way of bringing experiences that are distant in space and time into the present moment. This is what occurs in a statement as mundane as: "I bumped into your friend Maria on the way to work this morning." The narrative representation of "human or human-like" experience takes place spontaneously and frequently during everyday social interactions. It is also provides a medium through which individuals reflect upon their own behavior and that of others, and play out possible courses of action when fantasizing about or planning the future.

Fiction simply extends the narrative representation of human motivation and its consequences to events that have not actually happened. The ability to follow a flow of events and grasp the motivations of characters when reading fiction is no more surprising than our ability to comprehend another person's verbal account of something that happened to them.[3] All audience reactions to fiction *as fiction*—reactions ranging from rapt absorption in a fictional world to disgust at a story for its racist or sexist portrayal of characters or even simple boredom at a trite, formulaic plot—are secondary judgments that depend on a basic comprehension of fiction as a flow of action (Booth 1989: 138-42). Empirical studies unanimously confirm that, despite post-modern critiques of "transparent" or "mimetic" approaches to texts, ordinary readers experience fiction as a representation of characters undergoing experiences, whatever the higher-order interpretations they make of those characters and experiences (Allbritton and Gerrig 1991; Derné 2000; DeVault 1990; Halász, Short, and Varga 2002 ; Jose and Brewer

[3] Indeed, young children could be said to "reverse engineer" this process, using stories as a means to hone their understanding of human motivations and their consequences (Paley 1991; Paley 2005). Herbert Fingarette has also argued that psychotherapy in adults also involves the search for a story that will make sense of the self (Fingarette 1965).

1984; Lembo 2000; Liebes and Katz 1990; Long 1986; Miall 1990; Press 1991; Radway 1991 [1984]; Reed 2002; Rossen-Knill 1994; Shively 1992).

These observations account for why people are able to comprehend and immerse themselves in the virtual worlds offered up in fiction. Next, we must explain what makes fiction successful with a particular audience. To be precise, what makes fiction enjoyable to a reader while he or she is reading, or why does a reader feel glad to have experienced a fictional account even in cases where it provoked wrenching emotions at the time of reading?

*Evaluations and emotions in fiction*

For a piece of fiction to be successful in this latter sense, it must invite an implicit evaluation of the fictional experience being presented which the reader can assent to. The most basic evaluation that successful fiction requires of the reader is the sense that something significant—something emotionally engaging enough to be worth paying attention to—is "taking place" in the story. Furthermore, literary theorist and rhetorician Wayne Booth argues that all fiction contains "fixed norms" which are meant to apply both to the fictional world and to the reader's social world (Booth 1989: 142ff). As an example, Booth points to *King Lear's* endorsement of "simple kindness" and respect for one's parents (Booth 1989: 152). A reader who thought it morally acceptable to deceive and cast off an aging parent or to put out an old man's eyes for protesting this behavior would be unable to grasp the play's pathos. To take a more contemporary example, Dan Brown's bestselling thriller *The Da Vinci Code* relies upon a reader who recognizes the social importance of major Western cultural touchstones like the Mona Lisa and Christian theology. Furthermore, without some assent to the judgment that religious orthodoxy is

needlessly repressive of sexuality, readers will be irritated or repulsed by, rather than enjoying, the book's climactic revelation that the Messiah was a happily married family man.[4]

The implicit evaluations upon which fiction relies are both emotional and ethical in character. The most persuasive philosophical and scientific accounts argue that emotions evince implicit judgments (Aristotle 2002; Damasio 1994; Frijda 1986; Nussbaum 2003). For instance, the feeling of fear involves a recognition that something important (e.g., one's own life) is at risk; anger expresses a sense that a wrong has been committed; and love includes admitting that another person is of great value to oneself. This means that every emotional response produced by a narrative—and no fictional work could be successful without provoking *some* emotional reaction in the reader—also implies a visceral value judgment. For instance, a thriller can create a sense of suspense only if a reader appreciates the threat that its villain poses to the protagonist and to the larger moral order. Sad or tragic stories prompt the reader to feel grief, which depends on a sense that someone or something worthwhile is being lost. A romantic novel must generate erotic longing; this requires appealing protagonists whom the reader will want to see paired with one another. Similar observations could be made about any sort of fiction.

[4] The closest counterpart in the sociological literature to the psychology of fiction that I have sketched here is Keith Oatley's theory of identification in fictional narrative (Oatley 1995; Oatley and Gholamain 1997). Our main differences are my remarks about the continuities between comprehending everyday speech and fiction as well as my sense that the terminology of "identifying" with fictional characters actually underestimates the degree to which people's inner experience is continuously constituted through language and so is inherently porous to narrative, fictional or otherwise.

Given the importance of emotion to successful fiction, Arlie Hochschild's observation about the "magnified moments" contained in nonfiction advice books applies just as powerfully to fiction:

> Stories contain magnified moments, episodes of heightened importance, either epiphanies, moments of intense glee or unusual insight, or moments in which things go intensely but meaningfully wrong. In either case, the moment stands out; it is metaphorically rich [and] unusually elaborate (Hochschild 1994: 4).

Fiction relies even more heavily than advice literature on tacit assumptions about what is truly important and meaningful, since fiction does not offer explicit expert advice.

*Fiction as a medium for cultural truths*

Thus far, I have argued that fictional narratives embed evaluations in representations of experience, and, inasmuch as they are gratifying to readers, win their reader's participation in those evaluations. I now wish to point out some important ways in which fictional narratives are well-equipped to communicate the distinctive logic of ethical[5] evaluations as embedded in culture more broadly construed.

Clifford Geertz points out that all human cultures pair a world-view—a series of causal assumptions about how the world works—with an ethos, or a set of moral and aesthetic judgments. He writes that:

> "though in theory we might think that a people could construct a wholly autonomous value system independent of any metaphysical referent, an ethics without ontology, we do not in fact seem to have found such a people... The powerfully coercive 'ought' is felt to grow out of a comprehensive factual 'is'" (Geertz 2000 [1973]-b: 126-7).[6]

[5] Throughout this article, I use the term "ethical" to denote judgments about what is felt to be important to a good human life (Nussbaum 1993) or, differently phrased, people's "strong evaluations" that are "stand independent of [our own desires, inclinations, or choices] and offer standards by which they can be judged" (Taylor 1989: 4). Thus, "ethics" encompass strongly felt moral *and* aesthetic judgments, a usage which is also in keeping with Geertz's description of a cultural "ethos" (Geertz 2000 [1973]-a) (see discussion below).

[6] Geertz's claim has a substantial pedigree. Clyde Kluckhohn earlier acknowledged that, in all societies, "existential propositions also supply the clues for major values" (Kluckhohn 1951: 392). And Max Weber

Fiction is a powerful medium for the portrayal of any cultural world-view-cum-ethos. Because authors of fiction control both plot and characterization, they can coordinate the depiction of 1) the motives behind characters' actions, 2) the practical consequences of action, and 3) the way a person's acts reflexively transform his or her self. These aspects of moral action are respectively emphasized by three major philosophical schools: Kantian deontology, utilitarian consequentialism, and Aristotelian virtue theory. But whereas each of these lines of thought prioritize *one* aspect of ethical action, ordinary people generally take all three considerations to be salient to ethical evaluations. Fiction—particularly novelistic fiction—embeds these three types of "ethical data" in a representation of personal experience, making them all the more vivid and immediate.[7] Whereas quotidian experience regularly subverts cultural truths in their purest form, fiction allows ethical truths to be portrayed in an overdetermined way that maximizes their force and consistency.[8]

My own research comparing short fiction from popular American and French magazines during the 1950s provides an illustration of this. American stories frequently emphasize the close links between self-confidence and the moral determination necessary to win personal happiness. Self-assured characters persevere and ultimately succeed in life, whereas the misdeeds of protagonists are often misdirected efforts to compensate for faulty self-esteem. Both the behavior of characters and the outcomes of American story

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himself argued that religious ideas have their greatest impact on behavior not by purely moral exhortation but by fashioning "world images" which shape the ethical landscape (Weber 1958: 280).

[7] This helps to explain philosopher Martha Nussbaum's observation that fiction is a subtle and rich source of ethical insights (Nussbaum 1990). Nussbaum attributes this to fiction's stylistic resources without spelling out exactly what those resources are. In a sense, the account of fiction that I provide above is an effort to do just that.

[8] This may be one important reason why anthropologists, evolutionary psychologists and sociologists find narrative, or "myth," to be crucially important in constituting cultural beliefs (e.g., Bellah 1967; Bellah 2006; Donald 1991: 258; Malinowski 1948: 83-4).

plots thus reinforce the importance of self-confidence as a source of moral virtue. In contrast, French stories from this period are more likely to depict moral maturity as a matter of tempering childish illusions and overweening self-confidence. In French stories, happiness comes from being realistic about one's horizons and letting personal ambition take a back seat to one's close emotional attachments. These contrasts illustrate profound differences in midcentury American and French cultural ideas about the causal consequences and ethical significance of self-confidence.

I discuss this cultural contrast in greater detail in the section of this article devoted to analyzing fiction. Before broaching that topic, however, we must address the question of which fiction to choose for analysis.

**Sampling**

A successful sociological strategy for sampling fiction must fulfill three criteria: audience appeal, topical relevance, and comparative leverage. I discuss these three requirements in turn. Finally, I address the special problems and opportunities entailed in sampling high-brow fiction.

*Measuring audience appeal*

The inference that audiences accept the implicit evaluations that drive a piece of fiction depends on the knowledge that an audience accepts and enjoys it. This sets sociological analysts the double challenge of ascertaining who is "receiving" a particular piece of fiction and whether it is being enjoyed. Researchers use two main methods for doing this: direct testimony from audiences, and sales or audience figures. I discuss each in turn.

Janice Radway's pathbreaking study of the reception of fiction came from first-hand reports about which romance novels particularly appealed to the circle of working-class, mostly married women whom she was studying (Radway 1991 [1984]). Other reception studies have similarly used ethnographic observation, focus groups or written reviews to ascertain which works of fiction are appealing (Ang 1985; Derné 2000; DeVault 1990; Liebes and Katz 1990; Long 1986; Reed 2002; Shively 1992). As is characteristic of qualitative methods more generally, this approach has the advantage of being able to assess audience reactions "up close" and the drawback of providing less thorough evidence about the representativeness of the tastes being observed.

Sales figures provide less detailed but more systematic evidence about a work's appeal (e.g., Corse 1997; Uzzi and Spiro 2005; Wright 1972). The assumption behind this measure of audience appeal is that the number of people who seek out a particular work—sacrifice money and/or time to "consume" it—indicates both the breadth and intensity of a work's appeal. This way of measuring "fictional success" is strongest when there is a substantial menu of similar—and similarly priced—offerings for consumers to choose from. Major asymmetries in pricing (Durham 1998; Griswold 1981), promotion, or availability (Katz and Wedell 1977) make it more difficult to correlate sales or audience figures with the intrinsic appeal of different artistic content. Thus, Will Wright considerably strengthens his contention that the blockbuster Westerns he analyzes owe their box-office success to their intrinsic appeal for American audiences by pointing out that some low-budget productions became hits while others with star actors and the backing of major marketing campaigns flopped (Wright 1972: 13-4).

An important caveat about high sales figures is that they can be compatible with intense niche appeal. There is nothing wrong with this, of course, so long as the analyst is aware of and interested in these specialized audiences. Scholars can exploit this fact, as some have with Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins's *Left Behind* bestsellers, which appeal especially to millenarian Christians (Forbes and Kilde 2004; Frykholm 2004). Of course, a sample of sufficient size will include fiction appealing to all of the largest audience segments within a particular population. Another sampling strategy to maximize the "mainstream-ness" of a sample is to choose fiction that has been selected by knowledgeable editors for its breadth of appeal. For instance, by sampling fiction published in magazines with a very large circulation, the strategy I have used in my own research, a scholar can sacrifice some precision about the intensity of each individual work's appeal in exchange for assurance that magazine editors have pre-screened stories for their broad appeal.

In short, the first principle of sampling fiction with a view to what it reveals about its audience's cultural suppositions must be to find works that appeal strongly to the audience which interests the analyst.

*Topical relevance*

This is the most straightforward sampling criterion of the three. Sociologists wishing to investigate a specific cultural theme must ensure that the fiction they sample engages intensively with that theme. Thus, for instance, Janice Radway's classic work uses romance novels to illuminate readers' gender ideals (Radway 1991 [1984]), Griswold's comparison of detective fiction in Nigeria and the modern West uncovers contrasting assumptions about what causes crime and how (or whether) moral order can

be restored (Griswold 2000: 238-254), and John Levi Martin examines Richard Scarry's *What Do People Do All Day?*, a children's book which portrays animals characters working in different occupations, to study the naturalization of the division of labor (Martin 2000). Assessing the topical relevance of a particular kind of fiction requires some prior knowledge of genre. For instance, my rather superficial acquaintance with science fiction makes me think that it could be revealing about themes such as the impact of technology on social life, the ethical implications of the boundaries of humanness, and utopian/dystopian thinking about radically different models of social order. But I would want a deeper knowledge of the genre before embarking on a study of it.

*Sampling comparatively*

With very few exceptions (e.g., Martin 2000), the most revealing sociological analyses of the content of fiction employ a comparative design. The simplest procedure is to hold fictional genre and format constant while varying the cultural context in which fiction was produced and received. Holding genre and format constant helps ensure that thematic differences in a sample of stories are not attributable to fundamentally different storytelling tasks (see Swidler, Rapp, and Soysal 1986). In studies designed to illuminate the influence of national culture on fictional content, some analysts have further tightened the comparison by examining the edits made to a story as it is modified to appeal to a new audience. For example, several scholars have examined the alterations made to French films when they are remade for American audiences (Carroll 1989; Durham 1998; Modleski 1988). Similarly, scholars could get a glimpse of French and American women's differing erotic ideals by examining the edits that French publishers make to the sex scenes when translating American-authored romance novels for a domestic audience

(Weber 2000: 137). In both instances, editors have economic reasons to minimize the changes they make to stories, and so focus on points in the narrative where incompatibilities between different audiences' cultural sensibilities are most striking and easiest to repair by limited emendations. This tightly-focused approach has the advantage of highlighting material that producers or editors deem most salient to culturally different audiences. At the same time, of course, it obscures the thematic differences that may arise when authors have the latitude to compose entirely original fiction for audiences within their "home" cultural context. Figure 1 highlights this basic trade-off of comparative design.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Though the focus of my own research leads me to use examples using a cross-national comparison, scholars can of course compare similar fiction with audiences that span any division of sociological interest, be it class (e.g., Gecas 1972), religion (e.g., Clawson 2005), historical period (e.g., Griswold 1986; Lantz, Schultz, and O'Hara 1977; Taviss 1969), or something else. As previously noted, comparisons between same-genre fiction that succeeds or fails with a single audience can also powerfully illuminate what makes a particular sort of fiction appealing to that audience (Liebes and Katz 1990: 130-9; Radway 1991 [1984]: 157-185). In all of these cases, within-genre comparisons help the analyst cut through the welter of implied evaluations in any piece of fiction to focus on salient thematic patterns. Sociologists are used to thinking about comparison as a tool for establishing causality, but it can be just as useful in clarifying the subtle thematic *description* required of good cultural analysis.

*Sampling high-culture fiction*

My argument thus far suggests that researchers who wish to use fiction to make broadly representative claims about culture should sample popular fiction. Nevertheless, it is worth noting the distinct advantages and drawbacks of sampling high-culture fiction.

One reason to sample high-culture literature is to investigate the societal self-image cultivated by intellectual elites. After examining canonical novels assigned in American and Canadian university syllabi,[9] Sarah Corse concludes that these works deliberately champion culturally distinctive ideals during periods of elite-sponsored national self-definition (Corse 1997). Literary canons can also become the subject of heated intra-elite disputes, distancing the criteria by which literature enters the canon even further from its capacity to entertain readers (Csicsila 2004; Duell 2000; Grobman 2007).

Another reason to study high-brow literature is precisely because it tends to withhold comfortable solutions (i.e., "escapist" resolutions) when exploring ethical tensions within a particular culture. This tendency to avoid easy resolutions of the contradictions within a culture makes highbrow literature a potential source of insight into processes of endogenous cultural change. For example, Milton Albrecht's study of fiction in American magazines in 1950 compared codings of short stories with a list of ten independently formulated "moral ideas or values of the American family" (Albrecht 1956: 723). He found that 95 percent of stories written in low-brow or middle-brow magazines endorsed a list of mainstream norms independently identified by sociologists of the American family, whereas only 75 percent of stories in high-brow publications did (724). Albrecht concluded that high-brow fiction tends to "express freedom in dealing

[9] The content of works that win prestigious literary prizes seems to occupy something of a middle ground between the academically consecrated canon and popular tastes (Corse 1997; Rogers 1991: 57).

with subjects that are socially taboo—a freedom that is often interpreted as license" (729) by critics.[10] The counter-normative themes that Albrecht found in the high-brow stories in his 1950 sample included greater tolerance for extra-marital sex, divorce, and even homosexuality (Albrecht 1956: 726-8). This list of non-normative family values looks prescient from our contemporary perspective. Of course, high-brow literature cannot be mined mechanically for predictions about future ethical developments,[11] but it can furnish insight into the sorts of internal tensions which contribute to cultural change (e.g., Collins 1998; Taylor 1989).

The stylistic acumen displayed in some high-brow fiction presents its own opportunities and challenges to the sociological analyst. Lewis Coser's *Sociology Through Literature* excerpts classic literary texts on the grounds that "[t]here is an intensity of perception in the first-rate novelist when he [*sic*] describes a locale, a sequence of action, or a clash of characters which can hardly be matched by those observers on whom sociologists are usually wont to rely" (Coser 1972 [1963]: xvi). Coser thus sees realism as high-brow literature's primary advantage.[12] Against Coser, it

[10] This pattern of ethically adventuresome high-brow literature is over-determined by audiences and artists alike. In part, it is demand-driven, since in modern times, elites have tended to be more ethically tolerant than the rest of the populace. Claude Fischer and Michael Hout's study of U.S. survey data gathered over the course of the 20th century shows that new currents of (usually socially liberal) opinion are often adopted first by the most educated and cosmopolitan groups within society (Fischer and Hout 2006). Other studies find that upper-middle-class childrearing emphasizes communication with people outside one's home community (Bernstein 1971; Lareau 2003); as adults, well-educated individuals tend to be more comfortable than others contemplating the lives of people unlike themselves (Houtman 2001; Reed 2002). More cynically, Pierre Bourdieu argues that audiences with high cultural capital consume ethically adventuresome art in order to demonstrate their superiority to economic elites and to the unenlightened masses (Bourdieu 1984). On the supply side, pushing the ethical envelope is felt to be a duty among high-brow artists in the modern West (Bourdieu 1996; Lowenthal 1957).

[11] For instance, Albrecht also found that highbrow fiction endorsed social status considerations in marriage more frequently than did middle- and low-brow stories (Albrecht 1956: 727). I am aware of no evidence that such unromantic considerations have gained legitimacy in mainstream American culture over the 60 years since Albrecht's study.

[12] For an example of a prominent sociologist using literature in this way, see Bourdieu's reading of Virginia Woolf as part of his discussion of masculine honor (Bourdieu 2001: 69ff).

could be argued that consistent patterns of fictional stylization and distortion can be even more culturally revealing than unusually faithful descriptions of experience (e.g., Wylie 1974 [1957]: 265-7).

In sum, the advantages and drawbacks of using high-culture texts are opposite sides of the same coin. The vividness and ethically pioneering character of high-brow fiction can reveal important cultural contradictions and trends, but is likely to be misleading if read as representative of mainstream cultural convictions.

**Analyzing the Content of Fiction**

Once a researcher has solved the problem of sampling appealing fiction, he or she must be able to capture the distinctive ways that fiction makes cultural meanings come alive in narrative form. Too often, the sociological coding of fictional content is schematic and lifeless. Even sophisticated scholars frequently do little more than record characters' membership in standard social categories, stories' geographical settings and the conflicts and/or achievements (i.e. romantic, career, etc.) described in fictional plots (e.g., Corse 1997; Griswold 1981). Only rarely do sociologists make analytical use of the emotional flavor of the "magnified moments" presented in fiction (for exceptions, see Griswold 2000; Wright 1972). By neglecting the emotional experiences and evaluations that are most important to a thorough enjoyment of a story's plot—and hence most reliably noticed and understood by appreciative readers—sociologists fail to exploit the most culturally revealing aspects of fiction.

Table 1 lists some of the questions that I have found most helpful for opening up the cultural content of fiction in my own research. For heuristic purposes, the questions are organized into three categories: *plot*, *characterization* and *interactions* between

characters. Once the analyst has uncovered a pattern of interest in one of these domains, its implications can typically be traced to other elements of the narrative as well.

[Table 1 about here]

Two examples from my own comparative research help illustrate the analytical process I have in mind. They focus on one predominantly French and one characteristically American theme.[13]

*Masculine empathy and eroticism: A French theme*

French narratives tend to foreground romantic heroes' ability to empathize with heroines. Indeed, the drama of erotic attraction in French stories typically hinges on a man's insight into a woman's emotional state.

French romance stories often have the hero fall in love with the heroine when he witnesses her unsuccessfully disguising her unhappiness. The protagonist of "The Youngest Son and the Orphan Girl" [*Le Cadet et L'Orpheline*], a story published in *Marie Claire*, a magazine with a comparatively educated and affluent readership, is a young, impoverished aristocrat named Gérard. On the road to Paris, he stops to request refreshment at a chateau. The unexpectedly striking castellaine, Mlle de Maucorps, offers him a meal with unhesitating generosity. Gérard is famished, but when he sits

[13] The 61 French and 103 American short stories on which these generalizations are based were sampled from a class-stratified sample of the largest-circulation (Ayer 1957; CESP 1957) women's magazines in France and the United States. Conclusions about the socio-economic profile of magazines' target audiences are based on audience data from a large 1957 survey (CESP 1957) by a para-governmental research organization in France and on several independent American rankings of the cultural prestige and audience profile of U.S. magazines (Kass 1949; Kerr and Remmers 1941; Morgan and Leahy 1934; Warner and Lunt 1941) cited by Milton Albrecht in his study of magazine fiction from 1950 (Albrecht 1956: 722). Among my sample of magazines, the (relatively) highbrow titles are *Marie-Claire* and *Elle* in France and *Good Housekeeping* and *Ladies' Home Journal* in the U.S.; the middle-brow titles are *Echo de la Mode* and *Femmes d'Aujourd'hui* in France and *Cosmopolitan, Redbook,* and *Woman's Day* in the U.S. The magazines with largely working-class target audiences are *Nous Deux* and *True Story*. I excluded a few stories written by foreign authors from both samples, so the stories are written by authors within a particular cultural context for readers in that same context.

down with his hostess, his awareness of her emotional state overwhelms his bodily impulses :

> They were face to face with one another at the table. Mlle de Maucorps ate little and drank only water. Suddenly, Gérard felt disgusted by all food. Each detail of their bearing and of their conversation took on an immense importance in his eyes. Each time silence fell between the young girl and him, he felt a terrible malaise (Spens 1957:145).[14]

The hero's surge of sympathy for the heroine has a physical impact on him. It is as if he is infected by her delicacy and sorrow.

This ideal is shared by stories targeted at a working class audience as well. In the following scene, a soldier departing for military service glimpses a woman who is struggling to hold back tears. He disembarks from his transport train and lightly touches her shoulder to gets her attention:

> "Mademoiselle, my train departs in three minutes. Any reasonable person would condemn me [i.e., for addressing a complete stranger so boldly]… I do not know what words to find, to invent, and yet it is so simple: I saw you just now; you were in pain; I don't know why, and I don't ask you why. But I wanted to console you. Then, as now, I would have liked to take you in my arms… I have no right to do that, but must one always justify oneself? ...I don't even know the sound of your voice, although I know I would love it. Mademoiselle, I am departing for the [Foreign] Legion because I no longer believed that life was worth its pains, but [just now] I glimpsed your blue eyes, and knew I had found what I had been searching for. If I could, I would let the train leave without me and would walk side by side with you until nightfall…" (Anonymous 1957b: 5).

In this scene, the hero himself is as much a lost soul as the woman he spies on the train platform. The spark of sympathy he feels for her unleashes a torrent of emotion that sweeps aside social convention. Like the scene depicting Gérard and his delicate hostess, this passage puts *emotional simultaneity* between a man and a woman at the heart of erotic love.

[14] All translations from the French are mine.

The importance of masculine empathy in French love stories is also evident in the emphasis on villains' lack of sympathy for women. For instance, in "The Youngest Son and the Orphan Girl" [*Le Cadet et L'Orpheline*], the comte d'Aurice is described as "a fat, sanguine man, doubtless better at taking down a stag than at paying a compliment… [H]e should have preferred the company of a master of hounds to that of beautiful ladies" (Spens 1957: 150). In other words, the count is gross and crude. His heart will never sing in sympathy with a woman's joy or sorrow. A similar anti-hero appears in "Byron's Secret Love," [*L'Amour Secret de Byron*]. Sir William, the older husband of the story's aristocratic young heroine, takes his new wife for granted, remarking to others how much she adores him. He never notices any trace of the mocking contempt for him that she pours out in the pages of her diary. Unsurprisingly, the heroine later jumps at the chance to cuckold this boorish man with the sensitive poet, Lord Byron (Maurois 1955).

*Comparative counter-examples*

It might plausibly be objected that male sympathy for women is likely to be a universal feature of popular depictions of eroticism in any broadly egalitarian society. Is the French styling of eroticism in 1950s fiction really culturally distinct, then? Only a comparative approach allows the analyst to resolve this question.

A close look at comparable American stories at this period shows that the romantic climaxes tend to emphasize men's physical command of women rather than masculine empathy. For instance, the heroine of one story describes the satisfactory culmination of a date with the man she hopes to marry: "[H]e grabbed me. He put his mouth on mine hard and squeezed me so close I couldn't have moved if I'd wanted to.

And I didn't" (Furgeson 1957:98). The heroine appreciates this gesture, calling it a "he-man act" and hoping for a repetition.

In another story, the hero approaches the heroine at a college party with the intention of dancing with her. He proposes a dance but does not await an actual response from the heroine, whereas he makes sure to request permission of the boy who has brought her to the gathering:

> Tony urged, "Let's have a dance first, Faith. Do you mind, Paul, old man?"
>
> As Paul shrugged his shoulders, Tony took her in his arms and, without another word, they danced through a complete record. Then, still without speaking, he delivered her back to Paul and strode off to another part of the room (Beliveau 1957:77).

Tony's nearly wordless command of the heroine is audacious—he is a little drunk—but it evidently strikes her as exciting and attractive, since the following day she accepts Tony's suggestion that they go on a date. The two are soon engaged.

In other scenes, the hero literally sweeps a woman off her feet, swinging her around in a circle while "whooping like an Apache" (Wolfe 1957: 73) or carrying her upstairs to bed (Peeples 1952: 98). Another gesture is so common to romantic stories in American women's magazines as to be a cliché: the romantic lead puts a finger under the heroine's chin and tips back her head so that she is gazing up into his eyes (e.g., Beliveau 1957; Carroll 1957: 80; Furgeson 1957: 77; Henderson 1957: 74). All of these expressions of affection derive their excitement from a welcome display of masculine physical dominance.

One final example of this contrast can be seen in the depiction of masculine physical vigor in American and French stories of the period. In American stories, men often draw attention to their sporting successes while courting women (e.g., Adams 1952:

110; Watkins 1952: 89), casting women in the role of admiring spectators of masculine physical prowess. "A Weekend with Ebony" describes the teenage protagonist's evolving feelings for her neighbor in just such a context:

> In high school at Weymouth, she had begun to see him in a new way. There was a queer excitement to it that wasn't always happy. Whenever he won a basketball game for Weymouth, she nearly died of a painful ecstasy, and her throat was so tight she couldn't cheer when the rest were shouting his name (Ogilvie 1952: 30).

In contrast, when French stories show attractive men displaying their physical vigor, the typical pattern is for them to draw women into an activity *with* them. This involves the two in a shared physical and emotional experience whose elation comes in large part from its simultaneity. Thus, the narrator of "To the Dreaming Child," [*A L'Enfant Qui Rêve*] illustrates the deepening love between her and her employer in the following passage:

> Marc had taught me to ride a horse. Nearly every morning, we galloped along the forested paths of his property, the wind whipping our faces, the scents of trees and earth slipping that subtle intoxication of simplicity, beauty and nature's beauty itself into our bodies (Anonymous 1951: 7).

In a story that describes a French teenager's first experience of love, the narrator initiates contact with the girl he fancies by inviting her to kick around a ball on the beach. Their play becomes a moment of shared ebullience:

> I was happy without knowing why, or rather for reasons that were too simple: my agility, the silence which presently isolated me from the rest of the world, and the feeling of being made to live out this moment for centuries and centuries. *Moreover, I was certain that the young girl felt happy in exactly the same way.*
>
> When we came down to earth again, panting with fatigue, we threw ourselves on the sand. Her hair came down to her waist, her teeth sparkled, and she panted with plaintive joy (Rolin 1957: 108; emphasis added).

Again, the erotic charge of this passage coincides with the sense that both characters are feeling an emotional entrainment that draws them together and shuts out the rest of the world.

In sum, this comparison reveals a characteristic French emphasis on emotional symmetry and sympathy as critical to eroticism, whereas American stories of this period tend to derive romantic excitement from displays of masculinity that dramatize the physical contrast between men and women.

*The struggle for moral self-assurance: An American theme*

The plots of roughly one in six of the short stories in my American sample hinge upon a struggle in which the central character wins a new sense of self-assurance. In these stories, a newfound self-confidence provides a character with a powerful moral orientation, opening the way to personal fulfillment and enabling him or her to forge sound relationships with others.

In "Return of the Thief," for example, Larry is a charming and skilled but also emotionally vulnerable young man. The reader learns that he was neglected as a child and orphaned at a young age before being rescued by a kindly professor. Larry grew up to be a well-liked teenager in his home town. At the age of eighteen, however, he was framed for stealing a car and fled town without even confronting his accuser. Ever since, he has been mistrustful of others and unsure of himself. The story begins with Larry opening a letter that invites him to reclaim a bequest left to him by the professor who rescued him and brought him up. Larry recounts the story of his disgrace to Jenny Poynter, a young woman with whom he is friendly. I quote Jenny's response at length because she is the clearest voice of moral insight in the story:

"You've got everything wrong, Larry," she said sternly and changed before his eyes. She lifted her small chin. Her tiny body trembled with rage, her eyes darkened and she was full of anger and strength. "You act as though you stole that car."

"I keep telling you," he said wearily. "What difference can it make so long as they think I did? That's what counts. Anyhow, I always have bad luck."

"Luck—nonsense!" He could see the sweat on her brow. It shocked him that she, usually so mild, should care so much—enough to fight like this. "You shouldn't worry about what they think so long as you know the truth."

"I never got a toe hold anywhere, in the Army or in a job, when something didn't happen sooner or later," he said doggedly.

"You made it happen. You always believed it would. You like being the kid from the mud flats that nobody can expect much from. That lets you off easy" (Chidester 1957: 93).

As this scene continues, Jenny reveals her affection for Larry even as she diagnoses his moral flaws and goads him to confront his fears:

"All right, all right," he said, looking around to see if anyone in the restaurant noticed them. "Don't make a scene, Jen."

She lowered her voice. "I love you, Larry," she said.

He shook his head from side to side. He didn't want to hear that.

"Yes. I love you," she insisted, "but that place is your home, and if you don't go back there once, you'll never get another home. You'll be scared of every town. People talk, and you'll be sure they're slandering you even if they're only talking about the weather. Once you think people are getting close enough to make demands on you, like loyalty or—or love—you run. You say you don't want to hurt them, but it's yourself you're thinking of. Always yourself."

"That's strong talk," he said angrily, but very quietly. His whole body was burning in rage.

"You're scared to go back," she said and walked away, leaving him alone to finger the letter and feel caught in a trap. He should never have told her.

Now he began to feel a strong drag, as though out there, not too far away, a magnet of some kind were pulling him back to the town against his will" (93).

The remainder of the plot fully confirms Jenny Poynter's insight. When Larry returns to his hometown, he finds that no one there believed the boy who framed him so many years ago and that everyone recalls him fondly. This realization is emotionally overwhelming

and restores Larry's flawed self-respect. He departs from his home town newly determined to open his own business and marry Jenny. "It was all possible—at last" (95), concludes the story. As Jenny Pointer had predicted, renewed self-assurance makes Larry a mature man, able to commit himself to his work and to accept a mature love relationship.

This basic narrative motif of a breakthrough to a deeply morally significant self-assurance appears with many different emphases and elaborations in American stories. Often, the occasion for new self-confidence is a physical struggle such as a fight (Balling 1952; Brownell 1952; Gavin 1957) or a starring performance in a team game (Bruckner 1957). In one story, a boy holds his own as a lion-tamer (Reeds 1952). In another, the confrontation is won by proxy when a young farm boy's mutt bests a bullying neighbor's larger purebred (Ames 1952). In other variants, the protagonist's struggle with self-doubt is resolved by a career promotion (Holder 1957), a vote of confidence from a stranger (Hunt 1952), a courageous journey through a storm (Alzamora 1952; Garris 1957), a speech in front of the local PTA (Henderson 1957), a refusal of the temptation to beg or commit a crime despite gnawing hunger (Keasler 1957), or a decision to take a financial risk and go into business (Bradley 1952).

Some stories assert this pattern in the negative, depicting protagonists who forgo moral maturation by failing to rise to life's crucial challenges. In one story, the heroine breaks off an engagement when she realizes that her fiancé's unwillingness to pursue his career dreams is destroying him from within (Beliveau 1957). In "The Rut," a wife responds to her middle-aged husband's firing by encouraging him to take a long-deferred chance at a new life as a writer or in a business on his own. The mood of the story goes

sour after the husband gets an apologetic phone call from his boss inviting him back to work. He grudgingly accepts, and the story ends with his wife dissolving in tears as she sits alone in the dark (Kingsfield 1952).

In many of the examples I have cited, a hero undergoes this struggle for self-assurance with crucial support and encouragement from the heroine. Nevertheless, women can also be the protagonists of these plots. "Gift Beyond Price" opens with the heroine, Gail, listening to the radio with its morning news of "hydrogen bombs and unrest and small wars that were bred of fear and discontent" (Henderson 1957: 33). Gail's sense of helplessness in the face of these global catastrophes only worsens her perplexity about what to say at her address to the Parent-Teacher Association that evening. She knows only the life of a housewife and feels unqualified to comment on the assigned topic, "women's work." Here, it is her husband Ray who expresses unshakeable faith in his wife. After an ordinary day of caring for and encouraging her children, Ellen, Peter and Timmy, Gail gets up to give her speech:

> She wet her lips, and then she caught Ray's eyes. They were warm and shining, confident and proud. Like Peter's eyes when he took Timmy out to play. Like Timmy's eyes when he gave her the dandelion. Like Ellen's eyes when she was perched on the edge of the bed. [These moments of childlike happiness occasioned by Gail are described earlier in the story.]
>
> Gail drew a deep breath, because she knew now what she was going to say. Her hands grew still, and she laid the gloves on the desk. She was going to tell them what every woman ought to do, what every woman *had* to do to bring peace and understanding to a troubled world.
>
> She looked directly at Ray. *I love you*, she thought.
>
> "A woman should make a home," Gail began and knew a great certainty in her heart… (Henderson 1957: 76)

Gail's self-doubt ends once she recognizes her womanly vocation to endow her children with the mutually supportive self-confidence and altruism that are needed to repair the world's shortcomings person by person.

American stories which build their plot around a confidence-building struggle issuing in a renewal of moral self-assurance are only a subset of the fiction in which this theme appears. But stories whose entire plot foregrounds this dynamic of self-confidence can help the analyst understand related patterns in American stories of this period. It explains why some American stories (admittedly, these stories appear in magazines catering to less educated readers) can forgive behavior such as actual or attempted rape (Anonymous 1957e; Gavin 1957) or assault (Anonymous 1957a) by men who later turn out to be the heroes of stories once their morally crippling sense of inadequacy is resolved. It helps to explain why women's primary responsibility as mothers and wives is to support their children's and husbands' self-esteem, and why their failure to do this is so disastrous (Anonymous 1957d; Anonymous 1957f).

*A comparative counter-example*

Thus far, the discussion of this theme has been confined to American fiction. If we look only at the American sample, however, we may be left doubting whether this archetypical plot of moral redemption through successful struggle is peculiarly American or is a more universally appealing way to generate good stories. Again, this problem highlights the value of a comparative approach to the sociological analysis of fiction. Turning to the French sample, we find plenty of important personal epiphanies, but none that highlight a protagonist's comparable struggle to consolidate self-confidence.[15]

[15] One exceptional story, "For you, all my love..." [*"Pour toi, toute ma tendresse..."*] features a peasant girl who overhears local ruffians planning an attack on a handsome local gentleman. She conquers her fearfulness as she runs through the forest at night on the way to warn him. Her transformation could be read as following the American pattern, but without the familiarity of the theme in other stories, it is harder to interpret as being about a kind of consolidation of moral self-assurance. Indeed, the major contrast in the story is between the heroine and the unpleasant bourgeois wife whom the local gentleman is "entertaining" when the heroine arrives to warn him of the coming attack. This lady shows no contrition for cuckolding her husband, and is entirely preoccupied with her own safety. The heroine, by contrast, overcomes her

(Revealingly, most "aha moments" in French plots come from characters' learning something new about important relationships they have with other people, whereas American stories tend to portray inner moral crises that, once resolved, permit more healthy relationships with others.)

One French story entitled "The Last Fight" [*"Le Dernier Combat"*] seems poised to play out the typically American self-assurance narrative when it begins. Its striking divergence from American plot patterns provides a helpful reminder that the American narrative is not some Levi-Straussian universal structure, but is culturally particular.

"The Last Fight" is narrated by the daughter of a boxing trainer who runs his own gym. A young orphan happens into the facility one day and wins the father's affection:

> "Léo is a brave kid. He's alone on the earth, without a family or fortune, without support. He has only his fists and his will to succeed... He reminds me of my own youth..." (Anonymous 1957c: 16).[16]

This has the air of a classic American introduction for a hero: the boy is an independent sort and has pluck and ambition. But the blurb that advertises the story hints that standard American genre expectations may be out of place, since it reads: "What would he choose? The love of his wife or the uncertainties of his career?" (16). Indeed, the heroine, Gaby, gives way to her affection for Léo only after her father discloses his judgment that the young orphan *lacks* the physical hardiness necessary to become a real boxing champion. Her father plans to make him an assistant at the gym, and will make this proposal "gently, so as not to injure the petty vanity he derives from building castles in air" [*en douceur, pour ne pas froisser son petit amour-propre de faiseur de rêves*]. This plan satisfies Gaby, who happily "imagine[s] a life with [Léo] in the tranquility of a

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fears for the sake of the gentleman, showing how richly she deserves his love despite the status differences that separate them.

[16] All translations from French to English are my own.

less glorious occupation, to be sure, but one that was regular and that would not encroach on our intimacy" (16).

In due course, Léo and Gaby get married and find bliss in their early days together. Léo works happily in his father-in-law's gym and sports equipment shop. Things go awry only when a villainous boxing promoter, Monk, tempts the young man with dreams of glory. Léo begins resenting his wife and father-in-law's efforts to confine him to the family business, a sentiment that an American story would find perfectly laudable. Monk puffs up Léo's reputation and his self-confidence by pitting him against has-beens and weaklings. The last fight that Monk arranges, however, pits Léo against an unknown opponent who is the sort of "denting machine" that Gaby's father predicted would one day get the better of Léo. Monk secretly bets all his money against Léo in this contest and, on the eve of the fight, arranges for him to suspect Gaby of being unfaithful. Rattled, Léo spends a sleepless night alone and fares terribly in his first two rounds in the ring. Then it dawns upon him that Monk has deceived him. Léo boxes like a man possessed, knocking out his opponent and then turning on the villainous Monk to deck him too. After the fight, Léo takes Gaby in his arms, saying:

> "it was no longer Doug [his opponent] in front of me, but all at once… everything that had interposed itself between you and me to undermine our happiness. I let fly like a madman not to win, but to avenge us. Gaby, forgive me… You did not want to be the wife of a boxer, and you will not be one. During this match, I have had a chance to measure my capacities… and my illusions. I won't always have such a violent stimulus to assure my victory!" (Anonymous 1957c: 31)

Léo goes on to say that he will rejoin the family business and one day succeed Gaby's father as director of the gymnasium.

In this story, Léo's moment of maturation thus takes place during a fight, as it does in several American stories of the same period. But the emotional transformation

that takes place is not the typically American consolidation of self-confidence that will enable a man to pursue his dreams of independent enterprise. Indeed, American-style ambition figures here as a sinister illusion. True fulfillment comes to Léo when he recognizes his limitations and takes his place as a member of a happy family, one which he will eventually head by demographic succession rather than competitive achievement.

In summary, this sample of mid-century American fiction points to a culturally distinctive nexus between self-confidence, successful competition, altruism and moral self-control. This kind of configuration of cultural assumptions never appears in such abstract terms in stories, of course. Instead, it is embedded in a narrative representation of experience that is both psychologically accessible and pleasurable to readers. While reading these stories, a sociologist first experiences a culture's emotional logic before stepping back to analyze and reconstruct it in more abstract terms.

**Conclusion**

Sociologists of culture have been frustrated at the difficulty of answering the question "What is the meaning of cultural object *x*?", discovering that cultural objects are polysemic (Sewell 2005a: 168) and can mean many things—too many things. But if the goal is not to understand the cultural objects for their own sake, but rather to use them for the evidence they provide about wider cultural meanings—about the emotions, evaluations, and world view that they evoke—a more fruitful question is "What makes cultural object *x* appealing to its audience?"

This article has examined narrative fiction from this latter vantage point. A necessary condition of fiction's appeal is that it must represent experiences that will strike audiences as dramatic and/or richly meaningful, and must invite an evaluation of

those experiences that audiences can assent to. This forges the crucial link between the emotional content of fiction and audiences' cultural predispositions.

Because narrative fiction represents human experience in both its interior (psychic) and exterior (eventful) manifestations, it is especially well equipped to reveal the three aspects of human action that are most relevant to moral judgments, namely the motivations for action, the consequences of action, and the way in which action reflexively marks and transforms the self of the actor. Fiction can also simultaneously evoke both world view and ethos, those basic constituents of cultural convictions. Consequently, fiction is equipped to make powerful (implicit) arguments on behalf of the ethical truths of a particular culture.[17]

In order to exploit fiction's evocative potential in a methodologically systematic way, sociologists must sample fiction that is highly appealing to its intended audience. Researchers can facilitate their analysis of fictional content by comparing works produced within and for contrasting cultural contexts while controlling for authors' basic story-telling tasks. I have drawn on my own research into popular short stories in mainstream mass-circulation American and French women's magazines to illustrate how analysts can use a comparison of plot, characterization, and the interaction between characters to capture contrasting cultural patterns in fictional texts.

In sum, fiction is particularly well equipped to illustrate the mix of psychological presuppositions, visceral evaluations, and emotional sympathies and antipathies that characterize distinctive cultural outlooks. By exploiting the representational power of

[17] Naturally, it also has the capacity to argue *against* dominant cultural truths. In general, the evidence suggests that popular fiction tends to support dominant cultural presuppositions while high-brow fiction is more likely to critique them—selectively, of course.

fiction, sociologists of culture can give themselves a richer, more multi-faceted picture of how different cultural contexts shape people's evaluative and emotional imagination.

Fiction's ability to represent experience vividly makes it a logical starting point for a re-examination of the links between artistic content and broader cultural ideas. Although extending this endeavor to other kinds of artistic content is outside the scope of this article, sociologists who wish to so may benefit from following similar steps: first, developing an account of how each aesthetic medium works psychologically; then establishing principles for how to sample and compare works so as to highlight what makes them appeal to different audiences; and, finally, describing how to analyze content in a way that exploits each artistic medium's particular communicative powers. Such efforts promise to expand sociology's analytical repertoire as well as its understanding of human culture.

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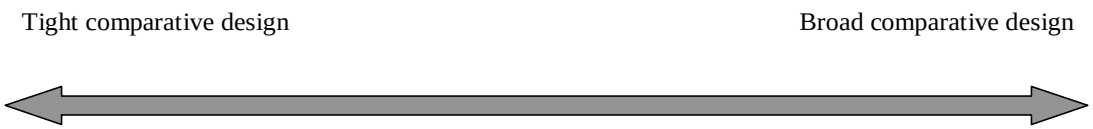
**Figure 1:** Trade-off between focus and breadth in comparative sampling of fiction




| | Same stories edited/ remade for different audiences | Original stories in same format/genre for different audiences | Representative sample of all fiction consumed by each audience |
|---|---|---|---|
| Advantages | • Differences consciously designed to increase audience appeal<br>• Smaller amount of content to analyze | • Differences not attributable to genre or format<br>• Latitude for compositional originality permits considerable culturally-motivated variation in content | • Closely replicates audience's full "diet" of fiction |
| Disadvantages | • Narrow scope for differences in compositional imagination | • Obscures cross-audience differences in genre/format preferences | • Differences may be largely attributable to genre or format<br>• Huge quantity of content to analyze |

**Table 1**

**Questions for the Analysis of Fiction**

**Plot**

- What is at risk in the story that generates its drama? How does the conclusion of the plot resolve the dramatic tension?
- How does each main character in the story change, if at all, during the course of the story? What new qualities, new status, and/or new knowledge does the character have by the end of the story?
- What catalyzes this personal transformation? An accident? An achievement? A moral choice or sacrifice? An ennobling or shattering experience?
- To what degree are characters responsible for what happens to them? On what grounds are they held responsible or not?
- What are the emotional ingredients of a happy ending, if they story has one?
- If the story ends on a sad note, what if anything compensates for the personal loss suffered? What moral victories or personal insights are won in defeat?
- How does the story's emotional tone inflect the "lessons" it teaches? For instance, if the story is comic, does it laugh forgivingly at personal lapses or bitterly satirize hypocrisy?

**Characterization**

- How are characters first presented to the reader? Which traits, physical, emotional and intellectual, are brought to the fore, and what role in the story do they prepare the character to play?
- How can the reader recognize heroes/heroines and villains?
- How do characters evaluate one another and themselves? What makes them confident or anxious when presenting themselves to others?
- How do each character's traits play themselves out over the course of the story?
- What character flaws are pardonable, and which are damning?

**Social interactions**

- What do characters most need or want from one another?
- What enables characters to make emotional connections with others? What barriers prevent or constrain them from doing so?
- What are the major ways in which characters hurt each other emotionally? How do people react when they are hurt?
- Which kinds of transgressions against others are most unforgivable? Most understandable?
- What are the signs of an erotic connection between characters? What are the promises and dangers of sexuality?

- What are the ingredients of a happy family life? What are the characteristic ways in which marriages, or relationships between parents and children, go right or wrong?
- What kind of presence does the larger community have in the story? Is it hostile, caring, indifferent, opprobrious, hierarchical, etc.?