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Questioning imaginative resistance and resistant reading*

Bradford Skow

Abstract. It is widely accepted that readers will resist imagining that a character in a story did something morally wrong, even if the story endorses this judgment, if the reader disagrees. This paper argues, first, that readers will not resist if the question of whether that act was wrong is not salient as they read; and, second, that asking a certain question can be part of correctly appreciating a story even if that question is not in the foreground of the story, and even if the story itself discourages readers from asking it, as is common in some forms of the “hermeneutics of suspicion.”

1 Missing Resistance

In the novel *My Side of the Mountain*, fourteen year old Sam Gribbley runs away from his home in New York City to live alone in the Catskill Mountains, where he forages, traps game, and converts a hollowed-out tree into a tiny house. Seven months pass before his father comes looking for him. His father is, mainly, impressed with the life Sam has built. He expresses no anger at Sam for leaving or sadness that Sam has been gone, and returns to New York the next day. Sam does not see his family again for another six months.

I first read this novel as a child, and have read it many times since, most recently to my own kids. My first readings were all about Sam. I wondered how he

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would survive his first winter. I worried when he climbed a cliff to steal a falcon chick while fending off the mother's attacks, and I admired him when he trained that falcon to hunt for him. The novel encourages this focus on Sam and his life in the mountains: Sam narrates the story, and he does not dwell on his absent family or what in his home life drove him to leave.

But when I read the story to my children I responded differently. I thought much more about Sam's parents, especially his father. What was the matter with him? Even in the 1950s (the book was published in 1959), when your son ran away from home it was not considered good parenting to regard this as no big deal, or to wait seven months before looking for him, or to act as if everything was fine when you found him. Sam's father, at least in these respects, was a bad parent, and his relative indifference to Sam's leaving was wrong.

I don't know how many people think these thoughts about Sam's father when they read the book, but I suspect it is only a few. If these thoughts loomed large in many people's responses to the novel, it probably wouldn't be on as many "best children's books" lists (it also won a Newberry Honor award in 1960). Certainly part of why these thoughts about Sam's father are uncommon is that thinking them involves reading against the book's own attitude toward Sam's father. The book itself thinks that Sam's father's actions and inactions are okay, rather than very bad, ways for a parent to react. But, as we will see, this is not the whole story.

When I say that the book itself has attitudes towards Sam's father, what am I saying? Stories cannot themselves think thoughts or feel feelings, so how can the novel itself approve of Sam's father's behavior? The answer is that the attitudes of a story are derived from attitudes had by certain relevant people. Which people these are is debated. I favor the theory that a story's attitudes are the attitudes had by the story's "implied author."

This theory needs to say when a story's implied author has a certain attitude—approval, disapproval, love, hate. My answer: the implied author has a certain attitude iff the admissible evidence supports the hypothesis that the (actual) author has that attitude more strongly than alternative hypotheses. The admissible evidence is the evidence you can get from reading the novel, and facts about the historical context of the novel; biographical information about the author that cannot be got

from these sources is not admissible. Further, this evidence is to be evaluated under a (possibly false) assumption: that the way the author wrote the story, the choices they made in what kind of people to include, and in which events in the story to focus on and which to treat briefly, are revealing of their mind and character. Making this assumption means also assuming that the author wrote the story as it is because that seemed the right way for the story to be, not because writing it that way furthered some other goals, or made it more likely to achieve certain effects. To illustrate how this assumption works, imagine watching someone walk down the street. They are walking very carefully, pausing to negotiate even minor obstacles. It is possible that they are a risk-loving, energetic person, who also happens to be an actor, practicing for a role as a cautious character. If you know that the neighborhood is full of aspiring actors, this hypothesis might even be as good as the hypothesis that the walker is a cautious person who is worried about getting hurt. But assuming that the way they are walking is revealing of their mind and character, the best hypothesis is that they are worried and cautious.¹

Applied to the case at hand, this theory says that *My Side of the Mountain* approves of Sam's father's behavior. That is the best hypothesis about what the author thought about Sam's behavior. To verify this, compare this hypothesis to its alternatives: the hypothesis that the author disapproved of Sam's father's behavior, and the hypothesis that the author neither approved nor disapproved. For the first alternative to be best, there would have to be something in the story suggesting that Sam's father recognized, or half-recognized, that he should have come sooner; an attempted apology to Sam, maybe, or a flicker of grief in his face. Or the story

¹Defending this theory is itself a paper-length project, at least. I will treat it as a presupposition of my arguments. Appealing to the implied author in critical writing was popularized by Booth (1961); he also treats the implied author as a site for attitudes towards characters and events in a story. More recent appeals to the implied author, under this or another name, are in hypothetical intentionalist theories of interpretation (e.g., Nehamas 1981, Levinson 2002), and discussions of artistic style (e.g. Walton 1979, Robinson 1985). Note that different theories use the implied author for different purposes, and that one use might be right while others are wrong. It might be that facts about the implied author cannot determine which interpretation of a story is right generally, but can determine the attitudes the story has towards its events and characters.

would have to contain some external sign of Sam's father's poor parenting, like things falling apart in the family home back in New York. But the story has none of this. As for the second alternative, it comes in two versions: either the implied author was uncertain whether Sam's father's behavior was okay, or the implied author never thought about the matter at all. The second version is hardly credible: the implied author, unlike Sam, is an adult, and not a superficial one; it is implausible that they could write of Sam's father gaily arriving at Sam's camp without considering whether he should have come sooner.² And for the first version—the implied author was uncertain—to be best, there would have to be some features of the portrayal of Sam's father that pointed toward his behavior being okay, and others pointing in the other direction; there are not.

So *My Side of the Mountain's* view is that Sam's father's actions are okay ways for a parent to react. And most readers go along with the story here. But I'm guessing that, for many of them at least, if they were asked to pause and think more about it, they would not agree with the novel. Certainly some would agree, but many I think would not. They would conclude that Sam's father's acts were those of a bad parent. So why is it that when they are reading, and they are not asked to pause, they go along with the novel's judgment?

Before trying figure out why this happens, it is worth pausing over the fact that it does happen. It is almost a philosophical dogma that when a story makes a moral judgment that a reader disagrees with, the reader does not go along with it. This is "imaginative resistance to fiction." A paradigm case of imaginative resistance is (most) readers' reaction to this piece of microfiction, by Kendall Walton:³

²A referee suggested that this version is the best hypothesis, on the ground that the implied author knew that their intended audience would have no interest in whether Sam's father should have acted differently, and so would have given little or no thought to the matter herself. But the criteria I described for attributing attitudes to the implied author—in particular, the possibly false assumption that is to be used when evaluating the evidence—rule out this kind of reasoning.

³Walton does not actually say that this sentence constitutes a stand-alone story. Important early works on imaginative resistance are (Walton 1994), (Gendler 2000), and (Weatherson 2004). A recent survey is (Gendler and Liao 2016). I focus on what Weatherson calls the imaginative puzzle, and set aside other phenomena that go under the name "imaginative resistance," including what Weatherson calls the

In killing her baby, Giselda did the right thing; after all, it was a girl.
(Walton 1994, 37)

The narrator of this story says that Giselda did the right thing, and the story is on the narrator's side; it endorses the narrator's point of view. But readers refuse to go along. Why? A standard and plausible first diagnosis is that readers refuse because the story's judgment is a moral judgment that the reader disagrees with, and, in general, a reader will not go along with a story's moral judgments if that reader disagrees with them. They will "resist." Philosophers debate how broad the phenomenon is: they debate what else, if anything, besides moral judgments, triggers resistance.⁴ But that moral judgements trigger it, they agree. Yet this principle is falsified by readers' responses to Sam's father's behavior. Some of the novel's judgments about him, like the judgment that it was morally okay for his father to leave Sam to his own devices in the wilderness for months, including dangerous winter months, are moral judgments; readers disagree; but readers do not resist. The question of why readers of *My Side of the Mountain* go along with this judgment, then, is not just intrinsically interesting; an answer to it can show how the general principle about resistance it falsifies should be restricted.

It might seem obvious why most readers of *My Side of the Mountain* go along with its judgments about Sam's father: because their disagreement with those judgments is not in the front of their minds as they read. But this answer immediately raises more questions: why isn't it at the front of their mind? And, what can this difference between cases where a story's moral judgment does, and does not, prompt resistance tell us about stories, reading, and criticism?

Before I take up these questions I should clarify my vague talk about "going (or not going) along with" a story's attitudes and judgments. I said: when I read *My Side of the Mountain* as an adult, I thought that Sam's father was a bad parent (in some respects at least). This is a claim about thoughts I really did have.

alethic puzzle and Walton (2006) calls the fictionality puzzle.

⁴For example, Yablo (2002) claims a story will trigger resistance when it asks us to imagine deviant applications of "response-enabled" concepts; Weatherson (2004), building on Walton (1994), claims a story will trigger resistance when it asks us to imagine violations of actual dependence relations.

But sometimes the claim about Walton's story is a claim about imagined thoughts: readers imagine thinking that Giselda did the wrong thing; and imagining thinking this is different from actually thinking it. The debate over whether readers really think about, or approve of, etc., fictional characters, or only imagine that they do, is orthogonal to my argument in this paper.⁵ My talk of responses to fiction may be interpreted either way.

2 Why is resistance missing?

Bringing oneself to share the Giselda story's attitude toward the killing is hard, if it is possible at all. But with *My Side of the Mountain* it is the other way around; it is failing to share the story's attitude that is hard, or at least rare. Why?

When I read *My Side of the Mountain* to my children, I wasn't looking to disagree with any of the novel's judgments about its characters or events. I wasn't looking for a fight. So why did I end up disagreeing? I think it was because, as a parent, the question of whether Sam's father was a bad parent was salient to me, and (again) once you think about this question for a minute, it is obvious that the story is wrong to say that he isn't. This account of why I disagreed suggests an account of why disagreement is rare: it is rare because this question is rarely salient.

The question could fail to be salient for a variety of reasons, but two stand out. First, the intended audience, namely kids about Sam's age, are unlikely to think much about whether Sam's father did as he should. Second, readers, whether young or old, generally take their cues about which questions to ask while reading from the story itself. Stories make some questions salient and keep others in the background, and the backgrounded questions will not stand out to readers not primed to notice them. In *My Side of the Mountain*, questions about Sam's father's parenting are backgrounded.

This diagnosis of this case suggests a generalization: in many cases at least, readers resist imagining sharing a story's a moral judgment when (i) the question of whether that moral judgment is correct is salient to them, and (ii) it is clear to them

⁵The parties to this debate are too many to list. Among them, Walton (1990) holds that our responses are merely imagined, while Gaut (2007) holds that they are real.

that the answer is no.⁶ And readers will not resist if (i) the question is not salient, or (ii) it is clear to them that the answer is yes.⁷

This is not meant as a universal claim, covering all cases of (failures of) resistance; but I do think it accounts for a great many. (I will discuss another suggested diagnosis of some cases of failure in the next section.) I think, for example, that it explains why resisting the Giselda story's judgment about her behavior is common. It's because the question of whether she did the right thing is almost always salient.

This might be doubted. There are many ways a question can become salient in a story. The narrator, or a character, might ask the question explicitly. Or making sense of the events in the story might turn on the answer to the question, so that the reader cannot help but want to know the answer. The Giselda story does not make the question of whether Giselda's act was right salient in any of these ways. The only thing in the story relevant to the question is the narrator's asserting their answer to it—that Giselda did the right thing. And the narrator does not assert this as an answer to the question—the question itself is never mentioned.

While the Giselda story does not make the question of whether she acted rightly salient in either of the two ways I described, it does make it salient, in a roundabout way. The assertion that Giselda did the right thing comes out of the blue, a propos of nothing. Context-free assertions like that are apt to cause one's audience to think that there must be some reason to doubt what is asserted, which the assertion is meant to dispel. (This is true whether one is telling a story or engaged in an ordinary conversation.) The narrator has protested too much; the assertion backfires, and instead of settling the question of whether Giselda did the right thing, it makes readers wonder whether she did. And once they wonder they quickly conclude that she did not.

In *My Side of the Mountain* and the Giselda story what determines whether a reader resists is the salience, to the reader, of the question of whether the story's

⁶I am using the phrase "That moral judgment is correct" as a device for generalization; it takes "wide scope" and does not appear in the instances. The salient question in one case might be "Was Sam's father a good parent?", and in another case "Was Mr Darcy a good man?"

⁷Or, maybe: they are uncertain what they answer is; see (Mahtani 2012).

judgment is right. Only salience matters because, for most readers of these stories, once they entertain the question, they quickly and easily conclude that the answer is no. But of course resistance requires both steps—raising the question, then answering no—and so can be blocked at either step. If the question of whether the story’s judgment is right is salient, but the audience after asking it decides that the story’s judgment is right, they will go ahead and imagine making that judgment themselves.⁸

Here are two more examples that, I think, fit my account.

The Lion King is a story about betrayal, and murder, and mercy, and deserved fate. It is also a story about an hereditary monarchy, and the preservation of that monarchy. At the beginning Mufasa is king. Next in the line of succession is his son Simba, and then his brother Scar. Scar murders Mufasa and, with Simba presumed dead, declares himself king. No animal in the prideland challenges Scar’s claim. This is a sign that, from the story’s perspective, the only legitimate challenge to Scar’s rule can come from a person (or animal) who, according to the rules of succession, has a greater claim to the throne. The song “The Circle of Life” may appear to be about maintaining a balanced ecosystem, but really it is about maintaining this political system. When in a vision Mufasa urges Simba to take his place in the circle, he’s not urging him to become dirt for the grass to grow in (Mufasa’s opening—and disingenuous—speech about the circle of life notwithstanding), he’s urging him to challenge Scar and take his “rightful” place as king. I have never watched this movie with anyone who got upset about any of this. We rooted for Simba, and never thought about how rooting for Simba is in part rooting for a dictatorship. But think about it now: yes, Scar shouldn’t be king . . . *because nobody should be king*. What we should really root for is a mass uprising where the rest of the prideland deposes Scar and abolishes the monarchy in favor of democracy, maybe a parliamentary system where members are chosen according to a scheme of proportional representation. You can find opinions like these about the movie tucked into some reviews, and on the internet (in fact it’s now on the movie’s Wikipedia page). But it is rare for viewers not primed to ask about the political system in a children’s movie

⁸Or possibly—I actually prefer this version—deciding that the story’s judgment is right is the same act as imagining making that judgment themselves.

to think these thoughts. And that is because the question of the correctness of the movie's political system (which is a moral question, at least broadly speaking), is not salient to them as they watch.

Second example: Molly Ringwald, star of *The Breakfast Club*, wrote an essay about the film in *The New Yorker* (Ringwald 2018). She observed that while the character Bender sexually harasses her character Claire throughout, the movie's attitude is that there is nothing seriously morally wrong with his behavior. This is partly signaled by the fact that Bender "gets the girl"—Claire—at the end, even though he never apologizes or repents (the movie is also in many other ways on Bender's side). But it took Ringwald—and many of us—years to see the movie this way. Why? Because the question of whether Bender's behavior was okay, and the more specific question of whether it was sexual harassment, was for too long not salient when we watched.

3 Alternative Explanations?

In the examples I have discussed the propositions that we resist imagining are not explicitly stated in the stories. No narrator says that Sam's father's actions, or Bender's harassment, were permissible. In this they differ from canonical examples of resistance, like the Giselda story. Might the fact that these propositions are not explicit explain the absence of resistance?

I think the answer is yes, but that this explanation does not rival my own. It is true both that resistance is missing because the propositions are not explicit, and that resistance is missing because questions about whether those propositions are true are not salient. These can both be true because, in these cases, the propositions' not being explicit is part of why the corresponding questions are not salient.

Another alternative explanation of absent resistance in *My Side of the Mountain* is that Sam's father's behavior, while bad, isn't that bad, and that we are less prone to resist when a story's judges merely mildly bad behavior to be okay (Giselda's behavior, by contrast, provokes resistance and is very bad).⁹ But I am not sure that, in fact, most people would judge that Sam's father's behavior was not

⁹A referee suggested this alternative.

that bad. And anyway, this kind of explanation does not work for *The Breakfast Club*: it's false that sexual harassment is not that bad.

Some have argued that whether readers resist imagining some proposition while reading depends on the story-context in which that proposition occurs (e.g., Todd 2009; Liao et al 2014). My proposal is a version of this idea, since whether a certain question is salient as one reads is a feature of the story-context, broadly construed.

In another version of this idea, Liao et al suggest that the genre of a story can prevent imaginative resistance. An ancient myth, or Sunday morning cartoon, that contains a moral judgment that we disagree with will not prompt resistance, or at least prompt less (Liao et al 2014). I believe that this view and mine are compatible. There are many independent factors that can block imaginative resistance. In some cases, genre might be the relevant factor; in other cases, the salience of the question.

It might be suggested that facts about genre alone can explain the absence of resistance in my examples.¹⁰ Then there is no reason to think question-salience matters. *The Lion King*, after all, is an animated children's movie; maybe that, and not the non-salience of the question of the justice of monarchy, is why we don't resist. But even if genre does explain why we don't resist when we watch *The Lion King*, I don't think it explains why we don't resist when we read *My Side of the Mountain*, or watch *The Breakfast Club*. Neither belongs to a genre that should dampen resistance. Broadly speaking, both are examples of realism. True, *My Side of the Mountain* is not meant for adults, but it is not meant for children either; it is young adult literature.

Also, I am not convinced that the appeal to genre in the case of *The Lion King* crowds out my appeal to the salience of a question. I strongly suspect that genre plays a role only insofar as it influences which questions are salient: being a piece of children's entertainment tends to lower the salience of the question of whether what is happening is morally right. If so, then facts about genre and facts about question-salience collaborate to explain the failure of resistance.¹¹ As a test, note that even

¹⁰This was suggested by a referee.

¹¹My claim is about these cases only. For all I have said, facts about genre may influence resistance independently of question-salience in other cases, such as

in a piece of children's entertainment a question about the moral status of an act or institution can become salient. A new version of *The Lion King* could contain a voice-over narrator saying, "while absolute monarchy is of course unjust for us, it is okay for other animals with human-level intelligence and emotions." This odd intrusion would be a Giselda-like moment: we would all stop following the story, and ask whether we agreed, and we would think, wait a minute, that's not right. Similar tests, I think, show that my explanation for the absence of resistance in the other examples is the right one: imagine the stories changed just a little, so that the question of the rightness of Sam's father's, or Bender's, behavior is salient, say by being explicitly asked by a character, or in voice-over. Now, I think, everyone will resist imagining that those behaviors were okay.

4 Resisting Readers

Philosophical discussions of imaginative resistance focus on cases where we find ourselves resisting, without knowing it was coming. When I—and I suspect most others—first read the Giselda story, I wasn't looking for things to object to or disagree with. But it doesn't have to be this way. One might read a story with the intention of resisting it, in a variety of ways; and one might try to become someone who does this as a rule or habit: a resisting reader.

The term "resistant reading" cover many reading strategies, which have in common an attitude of opposition, or an intent to read against the grain. Deliberately asking whether a story's moral or political judgments are correct, even when these questions are not salient, and then disagreeing with the story's answers, is one form of resistant reading, but it is not the only form. Another form, for example, might be to look for interpretations that diverge from the accepted one; arguing that the true hero of the Harry Potter novels is Hermione might be an example. A third way to read resistantly is to refuse to identify with a story's protagonist, even when the story encourages this identification. *A Farewell to Arms* encourages readers to identify with Lieutenant Frederic Henry; *My Side of the Mountain* encourages readers to identify with the boy who lives in the mountains. (Those discussed in Liao et al (2014)). But, again, what is important for my argument is that question-salience is sometimes relevant, not that facts about genre are never (independently) relevant.

ers to identify with Sam. One variety of resisting reader keeps her distance, and sees these characters through a more critical eye. But I want focus on the first form of resistant reading. What I've said about *My Side of the Mountain* sheds some light on whether and when this kind of reading is appropriate.

Asking questions, especially moral questions, that a story backgrounds is prominent in many critical traditions, including feminism—Judith Fetterley titled her 1978 manifesto *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*—, Marxist criticism, post-structuralist criticism, and others. Feminists look for non-salient questions about, for example, the relative power of women and men in the world of the story, or about the differences in the social norms the two genders are expected to adhere to, and about the story's attitude towards these differences. Marxists look for non-salient questions about class structure and economic power in the story. One often hears critics talk of “interrogating” the text, and that is literally what this is: bringing questions to it.

Interrogating a story might be part of some other varieties of resistance. Fetterley, for example, says that part of being a resisting reader is resisting the effects that stories tend to have on more naive readers (Fetterley 1978). Such effects might include the enforcing, or reinforcing, of patriarchal social norms. It is controversial whether, and if so how, stories reinforce such norms, but here is one possible mechanism. A story approves of something a character does that conforms to the norms—deferring to a man simply because he is a man, for example; in doing this the story invites the reader to imagine approving of it; the reader does so; and their doing so over and over tends to produce in the reader a general disposition to imagine approving of that kind of behavior. And this disposition to imagine approving tends to blur into a disposition to actually approve. A similar process could cause dispositions to disapprove of norm-violating behavior. There are certainly a lot of potentially weak links in this causal chain; I make no claim about how strong it is (but see Gendler 2006 for discussion of ways in which what we imagine bleeds over into what we think and do). But the chain is broken in a resistant reader. She asks whether the story is right in judging this behavior worthy of approval, answers no, and so does not imagine approving; and so a disposition to actually approve is not created or reinforced. A resisting reader can also try to make imaginative resistance

to stories like this wide spread. While these acts of imaginative resistance are not intrinsically political, they do constitute a way to mobilize imaginative resistance for political ends.

Whatever its political virtues, resisting a story by focusing on things, in this case questions, not foregrounded in the story is often said to be an incorrect way of reading. John Ellis, for example, holds that someone reads a text appropriately only when “they respond to what the text says, not measure it against race-gender-class expectations” (1999, 235n). As Felski interprets him, Ellis accuses feminists of “impos[ing] their own obsessions on the text” (2003, 9). Translated to the topic of questions we ask as we read, the claims are that (i) some questions one might ask are “internal” to the story, and others external, that (ii) if you ask external questions you fail to correctly appreciate the story, and that (iii) resisting readers ask external questions.

Although I want to clear resisting readers of the charge of (always) appreciating incorrectly, I should note that some critics do not care. Their goal was never to appreciate the stories they discuss as stories. Their aim is to appreciate them as cultural artifacts. They are interrogating stories in order to learn about the culture that produced them, or to uncover ways in which features of that culture (its sexism, for example, or imperialism) manifest themselves in the stories. In its moderate version, this position admits that there is such a thing as appreciating a story as a work of literature, which others might pursue. In its radical version, this position denies that there is any such thing; works of literature are not interestingly different from other products of culture.¹² My claim is that these are not the only options; the charge that resistant reading is incorrect can be met head on.

Last preliminary: my claim is that resisting is a permissible form of appreciation, not that it is required. Reading resistantly is incompatible with other forms of reading that are also, from an aesthetic point of view, good ways of reading. This does not show that resistant reading is not a good way to read, only that not all good things are compatible, and so one must choose. (See chapter 1 of Felski (2003) for a nuanced discussion of this dilemma.)

¹²These ideas may be found in lots of literary criticism and theory; they are debated in, for example, Patai and Corral (2005).

Two notions were important in the accusation against resistant reading: the distinction between questions internal to, and questions external to, a story, and the notion of correctly appreciating a story as a story. Start with the second. I don't have a definition of correct appreciation, but I take it we know what we are talking about without one. If I note how good *Mrs Dalloway* is at putting my dog to sleep when read out loud, then I am in a way appreciating the novel, but this is not an act of correctly appreciating it as a novel. My appreciation is incorrect because it focuses on the wrong features of the novel (its effects on my dog). But an act of appreciation can be incorrect even if it focuses on the right features, if it is an incorrect response to those features, as when someone laughs at a tragic death in a story (when the tragic death is portrayed as a tragedy, rather than played for laughs).

What about the distinction between questions internal to a story, and those external to it? The labels suggest some paradigms: wondering whether Huck will succeed in helping Jim find freedom while reading *Huck Finn* is asking a question internal to the novel, while wondering who (in the world of the play) is the king of Spain while watching *Macbeth* is asking a question external to the play. Let us say that a question is internal to a story iff it is a question that the story itself, in some way, takes up, and external otherwise. This is vague, but not uselessly so.

The kind of resistant reader I am focused on deliberately asks, while reading, a question that is not in the foreground of the story, as I did when I thought about whether Sam's father was a good parent. I grant claims (i) and (ii) in the argument above against resistant reading: asking external questions makes for incorrect appreciation. But claim (iii) is not automatically true of a resistant reader. Questions that are not in the foreground are not thereby always external to the story. So resistant reading can be a form of correct appreciation. This is because a story can raise, or address, or answer a question even if that question is not salient. *My Side of the Mountain* does not foreground the question about Sam's father, but it does (I have claimed) answer it; the story, again, approves of his behavior. This question, therefore, is internal, and so—as far as this argument is concerned—asking it while one reads can be part of correct appreciation.

It might be replied that asking internal questions that are not salient, or in the foreground of the story, is also a form of incorrect appreciation. This backup

premise is on much shakier ground than (iii), and is also refuted by the *My Side of the Mountain* example. Judging Sam's father's behavior does not constitute incorrect appreciation, even though the (internal) question of whether that behavior is right is not salient. A related, but even shakier, backup premise is that asking internal questions that the author does not intend readers to ask is a form of incorrect appreciation. Whatever the merits of (actual) intentionalist theories of interpretation generally, the idea that only intended responses to a story are correct is absurd. It can be right to laugh at a death scene so ineptly described that it is funny, even if the author intended to provoke tears.¹³

My Side of the Mountain does not foreground the question of how good a parent Sam's father is, but it does not actively steer readers away from the question either. Other stories may do this: actively suppress certain questions they address, thematizing them while also working to keep them in the background. That this happens is a presupposition of criticism belonging to the "hermeneutics of suspicion"; Felski's characterization is useful:

What drives such a hermeneutic is the conviction that appearances are deceptive, that texts do not gracefully relinquish their meanings, that manifest content shrouds darker, more unpalatable truths. ... [This way of reading] adopts an adversarial sensibility to probe for concealed, repressed, or disavowed meanings. (Felski 2011, 216)

Felski talks of the meaning of a story but these remarks apply also to the questions a story addresses. An example might be Edward Said's claim that Jane Austin's novels address questions about power and empire while also pushing them to the background (Said 1993).

I believe that plenty of instances of the hermeneutics of suspicion mistake certain external questions for internal ones, and so constitute incorrect appreciation;

¹³I allude here to the comment, attributed to Oscar Wilde, that "one must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell [in Dickens' *The Old Curiosity Shop*] without laughing." The literature on intention and interpretation is, of course, huge. Worth mentioning is Stock (2017), perhaps the best defense of an extreme version of an actual intentionalist theory of truth in fiction: even she does not claim that author's intentions determine all aspects of correct appreciation.

instead of unearthing hidden meanings, they conjure meanings that are not there. It is not my goal to vindicate all criticism that goes under this heading. Instead, my claim is that asking questions of a story that are important to you but not upfront in the story, as you read, is not automatically wrong; those questions might still be internal to the story, just backgrounded, or actively hidden.

5 Conclusion

I have argued that readers resist imagining sharing a story's moral judgment only when the question of whether that judgment is correct is salient. Authors have some control over what questions are salient, and try to exercise that control, but do not always succeed. Sometimes a question that the story tries to skate over is salient to the reader. And this mis-match is not always a defect in the reader: non-salient questions can still be internal to the story, and so attending to backgrounded questions as one reads can be correct, not just morally or politically, but when one's goal is correctly appreciating the story as a story.¹⁴

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