

Research Article

The Problem of Hermeneutic Decomposition and Failure of Interpretive Negotiation: Analysing Kitamura's *Audition* in Light of Bruner's Theory of Narrative Construction

Instr. Ahmed Wais Hachim

English Language – Literature – Novel

Al-Iraqia University College of Arts

ahmed_w_mohammed@aliraqia.edu.iq

Abstract

Kitamura's experimental fictional piece titled *Audition* appears to topple the conventional theorisations about narrative construction and meaning-making. Primarily, it defies the musings of Jerome Bruner, who etched out his painstaking theory of hermeneutic composability, hermeneutic negotiation, character intentionality, and a narrative's predictive function, which primarily state that all narratives must be the sum total of their individual units, and their interpretation is a two-sided affair between the text and the reader. The analysis shows how the 2025 novel *Audition* resists these categorisations by dismantling the possibility of negotiating interpretation through a decomposition of hermeneutics within the novel that results from completely disjointed parts that the novel comprise of. In this way, the study calls for a revisiting of the concepts of narrative construction and meaning-making in light of contemporary experimental fiction.

Keywords: character intentionality hermeneutic composability hermeneutic negotiation Jerome Bruner narrative construction

معضلة الانحلال التأويلي وإخفاق التفاوض التفسيري: دراسة رواية "الاختبار" لـ كيتامورا على ضوء

نظرية برونر في بناء السرد

م. أحمد ويس حاجم

الجامعة العراقية / كلية الآداب

الملخص:

يبدو أن العمل الروائي التجريبي لـ كيتامورا المعنون بـ "الاختبار" يقوّض التفسيرات التقليدية حول بناء السرد وإنتاج المعنى. فهو يتحدى في المقام الأول تأملات جيروم برونر، الذي صاغ نظريته الدقيقة حول قابلية التركيب الهرمنيوطيقي، والتفاوض الهرمنيوطيقي، وقصدية الشخصية، والوظيفة التنبؤية للسرد، والتي تنص أساساً على أن جميع السرديات يجب أن تكون المجموع الكلي لوحدها الفردية، وأن تأويلها هو عملية ثنائية الجانب بين النص والقارئ. يُظهر التحليل كيف تقاوم رواية "الاختبار" الصادرة عام ٢٠٢٥ هذه التصنيفات من خلال تفكيك إمكانية التفاوض على التأويل عبر تحلل الهرمنيوطيقا داخل الرواية الناتج عن أجزاء منفصلة تماماً تتكون منها الرواية. وبهذه الطريقة، تدعو الدراسة إلى إعادة النظر في مفاهيم بناء السرد وإنتاج المعنى في ضوء الرواية التجريبية المعاصرة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: قصدية الشخصية، قابلية التركيب الهرمنيوطيقي، التفاوض الهرمنيوطيقي، جيروم برونر، بناء السرد

Introduction

At the core of all processes that pertain to understanding the world remains the art of narrative construction. Narrative is what solidifies, while negotiating at the same time, our collective cultural experience, meaning-making and interpretation of reality. One of the most renowned theories on the art of narrative construction was proposed by Jerome Bruner, according to whom, narratives are more than simply a literary device. They serve a largely cognitive function that enables people to organise events and associate meanings with them. This idea was propounded by Bruner in his work titled *Acts of Meaning*, which states that narratives situate events in culturally recognisable frameworks using culture-specific conventions and encompassing the intentionality, causality and temporality in stories (Bruner, 1990, p. 67). The shaping of interpretation, however, is something that is negotiated between the storyteller and the listener and is based on the shared narrative corpus of said people.

Bruner's greatest achievements with regard to his theory of narrative construction were his concepts of hermeneutic composability, hermeneutic negotiation, character intentionality, and the predictive nature of narrative. Taken together, these concepts are central to understanding how narratives can shape meaning and interpretations. By hermeneutic composability, Bruner means that every narrative is a sum total of its individual parts or units. These units comprise the events, characters and the actions performed by them. The composability, however, is dependent on patterns that are culturally shared and recognised and is vital because it can guide readers towards narrative resolutions and meaning-making in the absence of information (Bruner, 1990, p. 77). Bruner also speaks of hermeneutic negotiation by which he means that storytelling is a naturally negotiable process between the narrator and the audience, or between the text and the reader. In other words, meaning in a narrative is not fixed but is largely contingent on interpretation and contextual understanding (Bruner, 1991, p. 11).

The contextual understanding, in turn, is developed by character intentionality, another important component of narrative construction. Narratives derive meaning when narrators ascribe intentions, beliefs and desires to characters in mostly logical and non-contradictory ways. Instead of relying on chronological links between two different events in a narrative, the text, as well as the reader, draws psychological causality by assessing the intentionality of the characters behind actions performed and judges the implications of the results in that light (Bruner, 1990, p. 51). All of this allows narratives to embody what Bruner calls the predictive nature of narratives. According to Bruner, the established patterns outlined in the shared narrative corpus of a culture and the constant hermeneutic negotiation help narratives to generate certain predictive outcomes. It is in light of these expected outcomes that readers assess the actual resolutions of narratives and account for any deviations (Bruner, 1991, p. 15).

While Bruner's analysis of narrative construction and meaning-making is widely applicable across various genres of storywriting, contemporary literature appears to be putting chinks in this theoretical assessment through constant subversions or deviations from what Bruner defines as the fundamental components of narratives. Kitamura's 2025 publication *Audition* is one such case in point. It is a novel that appears to be written with the sole purpose of throwing the reader's interpretive ability into an existential quagmire. This exposes the limitations of conventional narrative theory and highlights the need for a contemporary revisiting of how narratives are constructed and the increasingly complicated role that the reader must play in sustaining coherence and meaning.

The greatest challenge posed by Kitamura's *Audition* is the gradual breakdown and then the eventual impossibility of hermeneutic negotiation. According to Bruner, narrative meaning-making is a collaborative process; however, Kitamura's experimental work puts this collaborative process into an indeterminate state because the novel undermines hermeneutic composability through fragmented and contradictory individual units that resist a coherent resolution. This forces the readers into acknowledging the possibility that meaning-making can be irreducibly unstable.

Another important inversion that takes place in the novel is that of character intentionality. It stems from the contradictory and often opaque motivations of the characters. In the absence of clear intentional states, the actions of the characters disrupt the causal logic, which, according to Bruner, is more important than the sequential linking of events. In this way, the novel completely discards conventional frameworks for understanding the story and, in turn, frustrates its predictive functionality. Plot developments fail to uphold expectations even with the application of traditional cues, which, in fact, do more to mislead the reader and create further ambiguity than answer questions.

This way, Kitamura's *Audition* serves as a challenge not just to Bruner's meticulous theoretical model but also to contemporary understanding of what it means to create a narrative. Without its interpretive, predictive and coherent functionality, the question of storytelling becomes an existential concern of essence. In addition, it also forces the reader to discard the complacent garb of passive interpretation and becomes a more active party in the hermeneutic negotiation for meaning making, thereby drawing parallels with the corpus on post-structuralism and reader-response theories from earlier centuries.

Framework of the Study

This qualitative study uses Bruner's theory of narrative construction as its primary framework to discuss how contemporary experimental fiction generates coherence or meaning-making in narratives, with a special focus on his musings about hermeneutic composition, hermeneutic negotiation, character intentionality, and narrative's predictive nature.

While Bruner's theories serve as the baseline against which the novel *Audition*, penned by Katie Kitamura and published in 2025, is analysed, instead of simply illustrating the theory, the study shows how contemporary fiction can invert these principles about narratives. In this way, the study serves as an investigation of not just the text but also the viability of Bruner's theory about conventional narrative practices and its tense relations with contemporary experimental writing.

Significance of the Study

The chief significance of this study lies in its contribution to the current corpus on narrative construction as well as the textual analysis of contemporary novels. In this regard, the study takes the application of Bruner's theory beyond traditional narrative conventions to challenge it with contemporary experimental practices with writings that are there to specifically undermine traditional narrative conventions. This way, the study will reveal both the strengths and limitations of Bruner's theory about narrative-construction and meaning-making.

In addition, the study also contributes to understanding how contemporary writers make it possible to not simply challenge the conventional narrative techniques but even invert them. This study reveals how the novel *Audition* does more than just undermine conventions of writing and meaning-generation; it highlights an increasing trend in modern and contemporary literature to invert reader's expectations and the general assumptions underlying storytelling. The research, therefore, may contribute to understanding how and why new theories must be developed with the increasingly expanding narrative conventions of our time.

This study also highlights the transforming role of the reader in narrative interpretation. Since the novel resists its interpretive deconstruction into reducible and meaningfully stable units, it voices the need to revise traditional interpretive conventions in favour of ones that are equally experimental.

Research Questions

This study probes the following research questions:

1. How does Kitamura's *Audition* undermine Jerome Bruner's concepts of narrative construction, specifically his ideas about hermeneutic composability, hermeneutic negotiation, character intentionality, and the predictive nature of narrative?
2. What kind of interpretive challenges arise from this kind of inversion, and how can readers sustain meaning-making in the face of such intentional disruption of narrative conventions?
3. To what extent do narrative disruptions such as the one exemplified by the novel *Audition* limit the application of Bruner's theory when applied beyond conventional narrative practices?

Literature Review

Narratives play a fundamental role in shaping human cognition, structuring the formation of meaning as well as identity, and driving social action. However, narratives are not always curated in formal settings; they are part of our daily conversations, our organisational communication and the everyday way of the world. Jerome Bruner came up with revolutionary ideas about how narratives are not simply stylistic devices but serve as a unique and cognitive mode of thought and meaning that allow humans to make sense of this world (Bruner, 1990, pp. 1–5). The following review will analyse Bruner's contributions to the concept of narrative construction and meaning-making in order to better inform the framework utilised by this research to dissect Kitamura's *Audition*.

Jerome Bruner's primary focus was on unveiling how humans have come to understand the way this world operates. According to him, this understanding takes place through two distinctive yet complementary modes of thinking: the logico-scientific mode and the narrative mode. The primary difference between the two is that the former relies on comprehending human experience through abstract reasoning, whereas the latter relies on understanding the operations of this world as well as the events in terms of particulars, intentions, meaning and temporality (Bruner, 1986, pp. 11–13; Bruner, 1990, pp. 9–11). Narratives for Bruner cannot simply be reduced to their empirical units alone. Instead, narratives that are so essential to understanding how this world works are comprised of invisible yet important components that this research is going to dissect (Bruner, 1991, pp. 5–7).

Emerging from his seminal work, *Acts of Meaning*, Jerome Bruner's ideas of hermeneutic composability and hermeneutic negotiation are important ideas that challenged traditional notions of looking at meanings as fixed within text (Bruner, 1990, pp. 56–57). Bruner instead proposed that meaning is an ontological process that involves not just the storyteller but also the reader who takes the characters, events, and action of the study and, using the broader cultural and contextual frameworks, then interprets them in the way that makes the most coherent sense (Bruner, 1990, pp. 11–13). Human understanding, therefore, for

Bruner, is contingent on the text, the context that generates the individual components of this text, as well as the reader.

The concept of hermeneutic composability suggests that the holistic and coherent interpretation of a story is actively constructed from its constituent parts. The term hermeneutic refers to interpretation, and composability means that something is created from its individual components. According to Bruner, characters rarely receive a story in a state of complete passivity, sticking to one sole interpretation of it. Instead, after encountering a story, readers interpret the various elements, such as characters' actions and motives and the resulting events, into one coherent whole (Bruner, 1990, pp. 56–57). For this reason, it is possible for one singular story to generate multiple meanings, and interpretation becomes a fluid and derivative process, contingent on not just the units forming the story but also on the broader cultural framework that serves as the context for both the storyteller and the audience.

This idea of understanding a story in terms of the cultural and contextual background is rooted in his musings on cultural psychology. According to Bruner, narratives cannot be interpreted in isolation, nor can readers of any text ever possibly engage with texts in such a way. Instead, they have to draw their understanding of events in a story from the cultural frameworks, values and beliefs that shape their systems. This process is what Bruner terms hermeneutic negotiation (Bruner, 1990, pp. 11–13). It is these cultural contexts and frameworks that guide the interpretation of any action, for example, as heroic or villainous.

Another aspect of harmony and composability is Bruner's argument that human cognition is primarily narrative in nature. According to Bruner, human beings are prone to compose their experiences in the past in the form of stories, and the cognitive operational mode of remembering these stories involves identifying a beginning, a middle and an end. In this way, human beings are able to understand and remember complex or ambiguous events since they arrange them into familiar patterns that are easily interpreted by other people around them who understand them due to cultural and contextual familiarity (Bruner, 1991, pp. 4–6).

In his essay titled "Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life", Bruner underscores the importance of hermeneutic composability, which functions across multiple domains of everyday life. For example, he suggests how individuals sometimes choose to construct a narrative by deliberately omitting certain details, including others, and arranging them in order to reach certain desirable conclusions during legal reasoning in courts (Bruner, 2002, pp. 15–18).

It is because of hermeneutic composability, as well as hermeneutic negotiation, that narratives acquire a predictive function. That is, using the cultural context and the common organisational frameworks employed to understand and interpret stories, readers can expect certain responses on the part of the characters as well as resolutions for the nature of conflict discussed in the narrative (Bruner, 1990, pp. 67–69). Being able to develop predictions and expectations about the progress of a story and then comparing it with the expected or unexpected outcomes is important in the larger cultural framework of narrative interpretation and meaning-making, since this is primarily what enables people to shape their understanding of how systems work as well as the people and other entities that are supposed to support that system.

These concepts of Bruner had far-reaching effects since their first appearance because they challenge the traditional notions of an objective or singular truth, while suggesting that it is possible for multiple interpretations to coexist (Bruner, 1990, pp. 122–125). Bruner's emphasis on the active role played by the interpreter in constructing the meaning from a narrative and understanding how the parts of a story can combine together to generate a coherent whole as well as the cultural influence serve together to redefine narrative as a dynamic and ontological process instead of an epistemological one.

For these reasons, Bruner terms character intentionality as an important component of narratives. Characters, for Bruner, must be driven by explicable and predictably consistent goals and motivations for readers to make informed interpretations of narratives and their resolutions. This, in turn, makes narratives predictive in nature. That is, readers can engage with narratives with certain expectations about the conflict and its resolution. Once again, these expectations are grounded in cultural, social and political contexts from which the text emerges. A recent research by Prashant Vishera, Gavin and Deb Roy in 2023 titled "Modelling Narrative Structure in Short Personal Narratives" also uses protagonists' mental representations to offer relevant insight in this regard. Primarily, the research speaks about how certain narrative elements such as the climax and resolution emerge chiefly from the protagonist's mental state, thereby bridging cognitive modelling with narrative structure (Vishera et al., 2023, pp. 4–7). This mirrors Bruner's emphasis on the character's intentions as well as mental states as essential to a narrative comprehension (Bruner, 1991, pp. 8–9). And while it does not speak of the audience on the receiving end of this narrative corpus it is self-evident that a nebulous mental state on the part

of the protagonist can create stories that may not be fully comprehensible to the audience and that questionable and hazy state mental states of the protagonists can lead to a distortion of hermeneutic negotiation (Bruner, 1990, pp. 24–25). Since narratives are chiefly based on the agent's intentions as well as a very similitude across the narrative corpus, every time there is a suspicion around the intention of the agent or doubts around the mental state of the protagonists it automatically dampens the veracity as well as comprehension of the narrative on the part of the receiver which is exactly what occurs with Kitamura's *Audition*.

While Bruner's ideas around narrative construction first came about almost two decades ago, recent scholarship has continued to conform with Bruner's ideas around how narratives are formed and meaning is constructed. For example, in their research article titled "Narrative as active inference: an integrative account of cognitive and social functions in adaptation", researchers Bois Green et al claim that narratives perform a productive role in which they help individuals both build as well as anticipate future events (Boise Green et al., 2020, pp. 3–6). This the narrative does through its adaptive, cognitive, and social functions. Like Bruner, Boise Green establishes that narratives are not isolated events and should not always be reduced to their empirical components; rather, they are mechanisms through which people can organise their memories, coordinate socially and simulate future Events (Boise Green et al., 2020, pp. 7–9). In this way, narratives help to create meaning and serve as future-directed corpus of social events even if they are reconstructing past actions.

Bruner's ideas on the social adaptive role of narratives are mirrored in a recent study titled "Heartfelt Narratives: Tracing empathy and narrative style in personal stories". In this research, the authors presented how narrative style actually features empathy as a quantifiable part of its taxonomy (Shen et al., 2021, pp. 2–5). Narratives come with a social convention through their emotional depth and plot structure, which is meant to engage with audiences on an empathetic level. However, while Bruner believes that this quality of a narrative is mostly qualitative in nature, Shen's research projects it as more of a quantifiable quality (Shen et al., 2021, pp. 6–8).

Analysis

Kitamura's *Audition* is a rigorous and experimental exercise in unravelling the mystery of narrative construction and meaning-making. Since Aristotle's musings in *The Poetics*, philosophers have always found the question of what makes a narrative credible or contradictory interesting, with insights that often reveal more about the world on which they are contingent than the art of narrative writing itself.

Audition is one such example of what happens when the traditional notions of what makes a narrative comprehensive, believable, and a coherent whole are unabashedly inverted. If, according to Bruner, hermeneutic composability, the coherence of a narrative's individual parts, its shared status as a collective corpus of a nation's cultural and social political status, and its predictive functioning are some of the defining characteristics of a narrative, then Kitamura's *Audition* should almost fail to be characterised as one. The novel *Audition* is divided into two parts involving the same characters and setting, but which somehow fail to coherently merge with one another. With narration that is paradoxical, self-contradictory, and unreliable, and the complete inability of the novel to project any of the outcomes for its plot, along with any reliable resolution, Kitamura's *Audition* lends itself nicely to an examination of how writers of the 21st century are starting to challenge the traditional notions of what makes a proper narrative. Specifically, the following analysis will show how Kitamura challenges Bruner's insistence that a narrative must be comprised of a hermeneutic composability where the individual components of the essay must gel together to form a coherent whole.

The Challenge of Hermeneutic Decomposition in Audition

According to Bruner, for a coherent narrative, its individual units must be the sum total of its holistic outcome. In other words, the individual units of a story must naturally and seamlessly merge with one another in order for the plot to progress forward in a comprehensive, logical and reliable manner. As far as *Audition* is concerned, this is exactly where the readers begin encountering the first anomaly. *Audition* is about an unnamed middle-aged actress who is past her acting prime but still yearns to make her mark in the world of theatre. She is married to her husband Tomas, an unsuspecting and supportive artist whose marriage with the unnamed stage actress has descended into what can be described as a complacent and yet somehow detached relationship that, at least towards the beginning of the novel, appears to be at risk of deteriorating. The unnamed actress is reflective, and her sometimes intensely observant persona is the chief catalyst that drives the plot of the story forward.

The narrator's self-reflective, yet contradictory accounts mirror the structure of the novel itself in a classic metaphysical fashion. Just as her observations are paradoxical and contradictory, so are the two halves

of the novel. In the first half of the novel, we are introduced to the character of Xavier as posing a potential threat to the relationship between the narrator and her husband. And while the narrator firmly asserts her indifference towards Xavier, her poignant remarks about Xavier's attitudes, gestures, and possible motivations suggest otherwise. In fact, towards the end of the first half, Xavier is very much posed as a viable threat to her relationship with Thomas. However, the novel comes to a sudden, and a prompt ending of the first part and the readers are transported into a completely different world inhabited by the actress, where the characters, the setting, and the temporality are the same, but the relationships have undergone a massive shift. No longer the love interest of Xavier, the actress actually becomes his mother. There is no explanation for how the shift occurred: whether the couple decided to suddenly adopt the adult Xavier and make him officially part of their family since they were devoid of children, whether it was all a lucid dream she was dreaming, or whether this was a play that she was performing. This lack of explanation is primarily what poses the problem of hermeneutic negotiation between the storyteller and the listener.

One can almost infer that if it were not for the volatile and reflective thought processes of the protagonist, there might actually be no story whatsoever. The characters of *Audition*, in fact, pose another problem to Bruner's characterisations of narratives as supposedly embodying characters with firm and intentional mental states. The characters in *Audition* are extremely nebulous when it comes to intentionality. In fact, not only is the novel's narrator unable to map out her own goals, aspirations, and expectations for her future, but she is equally inept when it comes to understanding the motivations and aspirations of the characters around her. As a result, we are acquainted with an innocuous husband figure whose persona is subdued by the shadows of his own wife's nebulous and hazy intentional state, almost castrated in terms of his inability to demand clarifications for her actions, and an even more perplexing character of Xavier, who seems to change his emotional and intentional states all the time. One of the reasons why this happens is the lack of a reliable third-person omniscient narrator. The story is told through the eyes of the unnamed stage performer, whose compulsive habit of attaching meanings to things that may or may not in fact be taking place results in creating scenarios that may purely be a figment of her imagination instead of taking place in actuality.

Hence, the audience encountered the first problem in hermeneutic coposability with their inability to fully comprehend character intentionality. Is Tomas genuinely concerned about the possible infidelity of his wife, and does the idea of losing her affections and loyalty to the advances of a much younger and handsome rival rattle him as much as should be expected of a loyal and devoted husband? Does Xavier actually believe that the unnamed stage performer is his mother, and if so, what could be the root of his conviction, and how does this conviction place itself in the later revelation that he already possesses a mother? In addition, how does the same conviction of possibly being the unnamed actress's son merge with his later show of affections towards the former? And finally, to what extent can the audience trust the narrator's observations, considering that she keeps revisiting her judgments about the people around her, but especially Xavier. The reason why the narrator of *Audition* cannot be trusted is because of the innumerable contradictions that occur in her description of Xavier and what she believes are his motives for coming into her life. Almost every encounter with Xavier results in the creation of a new person to the point where the contrasting information can no longer become part of a coherent whole. In her own words, Xavier was bound to be successful "not simply because he was exceptionally mutable but because that mutability did not seem to cost him very much" (Kitamura, 2005, pg. 77). This perturbing lack of coherent descriptions reaches its peak in the second part of the novel, where all of a sudden Xavier actually becomes the unnamed actress's son. And hence we get two completely distinctive units in the narrative that are so disjointed and malleable that the storyline completely shatters and the audience is left grappling with their own attempts to make sense of this story.

This is where the second dilemma regarding the construction of *Audition*'s narrative comes into play: the problem of hermeneutic negotiation. In a way, Kitamura challenges her readers to negotiate some sense out of a story that seems to be an outlier to the typical corpus of fiction involving multidimensional relationships. A man, who is originally depicted as a potential lover, suddenly assumes the garb of a loyal son until he does not anymore, only to in fact become her son in the second half of the story. As one can see, there is absolutely no glue between the individual units of the story, and therefore, they completely fail to merge together for a holistic and logical final resolution. More importantly, as stated earlier, the real challenge the story presents is for the reader. What do we make of the waning, transforming, and nebulous states of the characters presented in the novel; specially when it is obvious that the narrator's accounts are not to be trusted, when it is obvious that the unnamed actress reveals the sequence of events from her stream of consciousness without any compunction for reliability for the reader whatsoever? One example is the scene sketched in the

second unit of the novel where she abandons her walk in the street when she notices that the bedroom light of her apartment has been turned on. As she walks into her room, she describes a disturbing sight of Xavier as well as her own husband Tomasvie for the attention of the girl who is supposed to be Xavier's girlfriend.

At the sound of her screaming, Xavier turned to look at Hana and then at Tomas. Together, we watched as she wrapped her arms around Tomas, the two of them in that obscene embrace. From where I stood, I could see Xavier begin to tremble, his shoulders hunching forward, and I understood that he was now in distress. He turned, with a wandering movement of the head, and I knew that he was looking for me. His gaze found me and for a long moment we stared at each other. There was a demand in his face, the demand of a child, asking his mother to make an intolerable situation better. (Kitamura, 2025, pg. 144)

One must bear in mind that in the second half of the story, Xavier is supposed to be her and Thomas's actual son. The scene ends with her pushing the girlfriend, whose presence in the house appeared to be increasingly threatening her place, out of the house. As readers, while her contradictory observations set up alarms about the dubious nature of her narration from the very beginning, this still somehow failed to prepare the audience for what is to come as the novel reaches its crescendo in the latter half. And this is where the reader is posed with the problem of hermeneutic disengagement. Throughout the second part of the play, the unnamed narrator continues to ascribe several meanings and suggestions to every little movement, gesture, and expression worn by her husband Thomas, her son Xavier and his girlfriend. There is, especially, a largely unnamed feeling of malcontent directed at the girlfriend for being the direct object of both Xavier's and Tomas's affections. She admits, "I felt something I could not admit, even to myself" (Kitamura, 2025, p. 131).

The more the narrator voices her dislike for the girlfriend, the more her own credibility as Xavier's mother is put to the test. Moreover, she continues to misapprehend and misjudge her husband's intentionality towards Xavier's girlfriend. Her accounts, once again, fail to accurately sketch the scene for the reader about whether Tomas has any kind of designs towards his son Xavier's girlfriend, as is often implied although most of these remain scenes that "she cannot fully comprehend, yet could not look away from" (Kitamura, 2025, p. 118). However, if Tomas appeared to hold these designs towards Xavier's girlfriend, then there is the problem of consistency, as both in the first half of the story as well as the beginning of the second half, Tomas has been characterised as a man of loyalty, responsibility, and dignity. The readers are therefore once again stuck in a quagmire about the veracity of the narration and, more importantly, its implications for the final climax and the resolution of the story. Since the readers are in doubt about Tomas's intentions as well as the narrator's observations, the final scenes in the novel understandably fail to evoke a satisfying resolution to the primary conflict of nebulous relationships that the narrator appears to be experiencing. In other words, the novel ends with almost a complete Hermeneutic decomposition. As a result, the narrative turns out to be no narrative at all.

The Failure of Hermeneutic Negotiation

A number of theories have been proposed about how and why the individual units of *Audition* can merge to create a holistic narrative. The most common idea is that one of the two accounts is actually a play that is being performed, however, the following analysis will suggest why it is more plausible to believe that the novel *Audition* is not meant to be understood as a coherent whole, and as such, the theories will remain just that: a hypothesis or a guess for the reader's own satisfaction.

There are few instances in which works of literature pose such a massive range of viable interpretations for a singular work. Moreover, there is no single interpretation that completely resolves all of the paradoxes that appear in the novel. If one must read the novel in its most literal terms, then the final words of the first half where the theatre director, Anne, walks up on the stage and, after clapping to draw the actors' attention, says the words, "now we start" imply that the second half is likely a play being performed by the all the characters of the first half. Another piece of evidence to support this theory is that out of the various intentions that were associated with Xavier in the first half by the unnamed actress, one was ambition on the part of Xavier to procure some kind of place in the theatre industry. If this were the case and Xavier actually had ambitions to become a theatre actor, then his playing the part of the actress's son in the second play is not far-fetched. However, once again, there are a number of logistical issues that impede the validity of this interpretation. For example, her actual husband, Tomas, and her theatre director, Anne (who are not actors), performing the play that is supposed to be partially about them, completely defies logical and causal flow within the two halves, and thus the interpretation falls through.

Another interpretation is that it is, in fact, the first half of the novel which is a play written by Xavier himself. In the second part of the novel, we see that Xavier has ambitions to become a playwright and is, in

fact, working on a play. In addition, Xavier becomes increasingly conscious as well as disturbed by the conflicting feelings of the actress towards him. He seems to be cognizant of the fact that the actress who is supposed to be his mother feels threatened by the presence of his girlfriend and has an inexplicable attachment to him. Towards the end, when he finishes his play and hands over the copy of it to his mother, he describes the play as being about a woman who seems to no longer remember who she is.

When read this way, there are definitely instances in the first half that appear to make more sense. That is, if the second part of the novel is supposed to be the actual life of the unnamed actress and it is, in fact, the first half which is the play by her son Xavier himself then the actress's insistence towards Xavier in the first half that she does not remember ever bearing a child and other contradictory accounts as well as her obviously conflicting feelings towards Xavier might actually be biographical play-writing by Xavier. However, if that is the case, then there is the problem of the sequencing of the two parts. If the first part is the play and the second part is the actual life of the actress, then it does not make sense for the two parts to appear in reverse. There is also a problem of character intentionality and dubious accounts.

The evidence around Xavier being a playwright is extremely controversial, since the actress continues to contradict herself when she describes Xavier's uncluttered desk and lazy mannerisms.

I looked over at the desk beneath the windows... and I realized that I had been wrong about one thing at least, all that time it had not been Hana who had been working, but Xavier. Despite all appearances to the contrary, Xavier lying on the sofa, on the floor, Xavier flipping idly through a book or magazine... I knew that it was Xavier's work alone, all of it, every last word. (Kitaura, 2025, pg. 153).

This is another instance of waning character intentionality that appears to hinder hermeneutic negotiations for the reader. Did Xavier write the play or his girlfriend Hana? All this time, she kept seeing Hana writing away at her desk, and suddenly, without much plausible evidence, she ascribes the work to her son. For this reason, the second interpretation also fails to successfully merge the individual units of the play for a logical, causal resolution.

A more experimental interpretation that seeks to merge the two halves of the story looks at the latter half as a projection of her unnamed desires and feelings towards the people around her. One must bear in mind that while the first half of the novel is definitely inhabited with contradictory and even paradoxical statements, it is, for the most part, logical and follows a linear progression. The coherence of the novel only begins dissolving with the start of the second half, where the readers are gradually introduced to an Xavier who is no longer a rival but in fact the actress's actual son. As far as the first part is concerned, the story can be seen as a complete tale of one woman's inability to come to terms with desires that have obviously been suppressed and feelings that have apparently never been accounted for. Read this way, the second-half of the novel then becomes a manifestation of all of those unresolved feelings, desires and aspirations.

For starters, the actress's main struggle with the performance in the first half of the story was with regard to her inability to act out a certain scene from the play that appeared completely misaligned with the story and served as a coherence impediment. However, in the second half of the play, not only is she able to perfect the scene with the precision of an extremely trained actress, but she loves performing it more than ever and starts believing that the scene is, in fact, something that brings together the entire play in a way that makes the act something of an unprecedentedly transformative experience. This sudden and extreme shift in the way she felt towards the scene of the play in the two parts of the story suggests that it might be a whimsical desire on her part to break through the actor's block she keeps experiencing and realise the role in its complete essence for the audience. Since she is unable to do so in the first half, the second half, which is a projection of her desires, renders it true for her, even if only in fantasy.

Similarly, the actress's ambiguity towards Xavier as someone who believed himself to be her son and someone who could potentially be seen as a rival to her husband, compounded with the elusive manner in which the actress speaks of her decision to never carry a son, while all the time knowing that the husband Tomas had secretly and perhaps even fervently hoped for a child, makes it all too convenient that in the second part of the play Xavier actually does become the son that they never had, since it resolves too many emotional crises that the actress appears to be consumed with in the first half. As her son, Xavier no longer poses as a threat to her husband; fulfils a possible emptiness in her life by imbuing it with the purpose of motherhood, but most importantly, allows the narrator to lend her affections to him in a way that is socially acceptable. Her increasing jealousy in the second part of the play towards her son's girlfriend is also reflective of her ambiguous feelings towards Xavier in the first half reinforcing the idea that Xavier is not really her son and that she is only imagining him to be one and since there is no little biological relation between herself and Xavier, her

affections for him assume a garb of possessiveness that wish to shield him from the advances of another woman.

Also, her insinuation that Tomas has conflicting feelings towards Xavier's girlfriend seems to be a projection. Just as there appears to be an unspoken, abstract transgression of boundaries in the ambiguous nature of affections that the narrator has towards her son Xavier in the second part of the novel, she sees a similar transgression of boundaries in the way her husband Tomas interacts with Xavier's girlfriend. There are signs of abject humiliation as well as unresolved, perverted desires that the actress attributes to Tomas, which have no substantial grounding. Since the narrator constantly revises her accounts of events and actions, motives and aspirations, there is no guarantee that her portrayal of Tomas is one that is accurate or even real in the first place. The projection could be her own way of isolating the guilt that she feels for having a son or wanting one, and also knowing that she might accrue attachment issues with him in a way that is inappropriate between a mother and a son.

While this interpretation does give room to make sense of the sudden shift in the storyline as well as the complete revisioning of certain relationships between the characters in the novel, it still somehow fails to completely satisfy the transition between the two storylines as well as the ending where Xavier hands her a copy of a play about a woman who doesn't remember who she is anymore, implying the woman to be her. If the second part of the play is just a figment of her imagination of a life that could have been, then she cannot be described as a woman who no longer remembers who she is. In fact, she then becomes a woman who is all too in tune with her deepest and perhaps even inexplicable desires and aspirations, along with fears of everything that could have gone wrong had she taken the road that she never did.

All three possible interpretations run into the problem of hermeneutic composability, or to be more precise, hermeneutic decomposition; that is, the individual units of the play fail to compose a coherent whole, with a logical beginning, middle and resolution. What the story does through this fragmentation of narrative that refuses to connect in a logical manner is challenge the readers to question their own desires, motivations and expectations of cultural norms, beliefs, and acceptable attitudes that people must engage in while being in relationships. This impossibility of hermeneutic negotiation and the fragmentation that readers find themselves challenged with serves as a reminder that certain narratives absolutely refuse to follow a reducible, epistemological resolution or interpretation. In a way, this calls for a revisionist theory that draws on Bruner's work but is expanded to fit those narratives that follow an unconventional framework of recounting events into coherent systems.

Conclusion

The study set out to examine the depth and applicability of Bruner's popular theory on narrative construction, specifically his ideas on hermeneutic negotiation and hermeneutic composability. More importantly, it set out to exemplify how modern experimental fiction appears to be intentional exercises in challenging traditional theoretical conventions, specifically regarding how narratives construct meaning and the role of the reader in gauging interpretation.

The analysis shows how contemporary experimental writings deliberately defy narrative conventions typically used by writers to create coherence, and challenge the applicability of Bruner's theorisations about narrative construction. It shows how it is possible to not just undermine but completely invert the concepts of hermeneutic composability, hermeneutic negotiation, character intentionality and the novel's predictive ability. The result of such an inversion is the impossibility of breaking down narrative units into stable and epistemologically meaningful segments.

The analysis also reveals how this inversion results in abjectly transforming the role of the reader from a passive recipient in the storytelling process to a much more active performer. In the wake of an existential impossibility to reduce the meaning of a story into its epistemological units, the likely aftermath is an endless series of plausible interpretations of not just the story's resolutions but of the entire structure and its credibility. This kind of endless interpretive functionality in narrative is, in fact, quite rare. While narratives with open endings are abundant, and readers are used to negotiating differing and contrasting interpretations, most often these are limited to predictions about the future. In the case of Kitamura's "Audition", however, this seemingly endless possible interpretation applies to each hermeneutical unit in the novel from start to finish, and it is this contrasting interpretive profundity that both challenges the limitations of Bruner's theory as well as calls for a more active engagement in meaning-making on the part of the reader.

Finally, this study posits certain questions for further research. By writing two completely incommensurate accounts told from the point of view of the unnamed narrator and her relationships with the

characters around her, Kitamura appears to be challenging the readers about the principles of a viable narrative and asking important questions: since the two halves of the novel are completely lacking parity and are unable to lead towards a logical resolution, then by Bruner's account, should *Audition* even be considered a narrative? Or if the readers are somehow able to derive a plausible explanation of the two inverted halves of the story, leading to a plausible resolution, then does this suggest that all narratives, regardless of how incongruent their individual units, retain the ability for the negotiation of meaning? These are questions that must be probed into via further research into experimental writings of contemporary times.

References

- Bouizegarene, N., Ramstead, M. J. D., Constant, A., Friston, K. J., & Kirmayer, L. J. (2024). **Narrative as active inference: An integrative account of cognitive and social functions in adaptation.** *Frontiers in Psychology, 15*, 1345480.
- Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning.* Harvard University Press.
- Bruner, J. S. (1991). **The narrative construction of reality.** *Critical Inquiry, 18*(1), 1–21.
- Esposito, C. M., & Stanghellini, G. (2026). **Narrative identity development in adolescents and young adults: A scoping review.** *Cognitive and Behavioral Sciences Journal.*
- Farrell, M. E. (2025). **Narrative explanation in the evolution of human cognition.** *UC Research Repository.*
- Fisher, W. R. (1984). **Narrative paradigm** (communication theory). In *Narrative Paradigm* (concept overview).
- Gnerre, M. (2025). **Uncovering ChatGPT's narrative identity through a psycholinguistic perspective.** *Current Psychology.*
- Guidano, V. (2016). **Narrative identity implications.** *Clinical Psychotherapy Review.*
- Jahn, M. (2026). **Narratology 3.01: A guide to the theory of narrative** (Guide).
- Kitamura, K. (2025). *Audition.* Riverhead Books.
- Olson, D. R. (2010). **Literacy, literature, and mind: Jerome Bruner and the narrative turn in cognition.** *Japanese Association of Qualitative Psychology Journal.*
- Shen, J., Mire, J., Park, H. W., Breazeal, C., & Sap, M. (2024). **HEART-felt narratives: Tracing empathy and narrative style in personal stories with LLMs.** *arXiv.*
- Tang, S. (2024). **Self-generated narratives enhance associative inference** (Unpublished manuscript).
- Vijayaraghavan, P., & Roy, D. (2023). **M-SENSE: Modeling narrative structure in short personal narratives using protagonist's mental representations.** *arXiv.*
- Xu, L., Li, J., Yu, M., & Zhou, J. (2024). **Fine-grained modeling of narrative context: A coherence perspective via retrospective questions.** *arXiv.*
- Esposito, C. M., & Stanghellini, G. (2026). **Narrative identity development in adolescents and young adults: A scoping review.** *Neuroscience and Behavioral Review.*