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Brands in texts:

Attitudinal effects of brand placements in narrative fiction

by

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ABSTRACT

Brand placements have become popular as an alternative brand communication tool for many companies. Previous research on brand placements has mainly considered the communication effects of brands placed in television programmes, films and computer games. To our knowledge, only one recently published paper has looked into brand placements in narrative fiction. Hence, the current paper is among the first papers to study the effects of brand placements in narrative fiction, and among the first papers to investigate consumers' attitudes toward such placements. The basic proposition is that brand prominence (high plot integration vs. low plot integration) is positively related to favourable attitudes toward the brand. Additionally, we propose that plot integration interacts with reader involvement in the text, thereby increasing the importance of visible and dominant brands placed in the text for high-involvement consumers. An experiment manipulating plot integration and reader involvement supports our proposed main and interaction effects.

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INTRODUCTION

Brand placements have evolved into the new and “hot” advertising alternative among brand managers. For example, Procter & Gamble announced in June 2005 that they would spend 25% less on TV advertising, using these resources on brand placements instead. According to the alternative-media research firm PQ Media, the value of brand placements in American television grew by 46%, to a value of \$3.5 billion in 2004. Since the 1930s, brand placement has been used regularly as an alternative advertising strategy (McKechnie and Zhou, 2003). Popular examples are those of Joan Crawford drinking Jack Daniels in the blockbuster *Mildred Pierce* (Brennan, Dubas and Babin, 1999) and Humphrey Bogart as a (Gordon’s) gin-swilling riverboat captain in *The African Queen*. However, brand placements are no longer present only in television and films. Recent examples are Broadway musicals (e.g., *Spamalot*), music (e.g., *Pass the Courvoisier* by Busta Rhymes), computer games (e.g., Mountain Dew in *Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker*) (Glass, 2007; Lee and Faber, 2007), and more interesting for this paper, text and literature (e.g., *The Bulgari Connection* by Fay Weldon). These examples are in line with Russell and Belch’s (2005:74) recent definition of brand placement: “the purposeful incorporation of a brand into an entertainment vehicle”.

There is significant potential for using brand placements in texts. In the United States alone, 172,000 new book titles were published in 2005 (Goldfarb, 2006). An example is the *The Bulgari Connection* by Fay Weldon. In addition to the mention in the title, the diamond firm Bulgari is mentioned 12 times in the book, and apparently, Weldon was paid 18,000 GBP for the placement (*New York Times*, 3. September 2001). Other examples include *Cathy’s Book*, which includes references to Cover Girl make-up products, and the 2004 novel *The Sweetest Taboo*, which includes mention of a Ford Fiesta (Petrecca, 2006, cited in Brennan, 2008). Texts (e.g., novels, short stories, poetry, comics, academic textbooks, non-fiction) can potentially be important “entertainment vehicles” (Russell and Belch, 2005) for

brand placements. Since brands play important roles in people's daily lives, writers can reasonably be expected to increasingly use brands in their narrative texts. Research from the 1980s supports this observation. Friedman (1985) showed that the use of brand names in British and American cultural products increased steadily from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s. Hence, brands can and do play important roles in many narrative texts. For example, brands can add to the reality of scenarios and settings in novels. In *The Da Vinci Code* (by Dan Brown), the main character Robert Langdon rents a room at the Hotel Ritz in Paris and the Hotel Bernini Bristol in Rome, both classic hotels and credible choices in developing the story's plot. The consequence of these choices, as the *New York Times* reports (20 May 2006), was a sharp increase in interest among American tourists to stay at these hotels while touring Europe. Another reason for using brands in narrative texts is that brands can help portray the characters and help consumers to learn how to use different brands. For example, it is hard to imagine the yuppie Patrick Bateman character in *American Psycho* (by Bret Easton Ellis) without his consumption of luxury brands (Park, Jaworski and McInnis, 1986).

Research on brand placements in narrative texts is scarce. To our knowledge, only one paper has investigated the effects of brands placed in novels or other types of texts. Brennan (2008) presents the recall effects of omitting letters from a brand name in a novel. He builds on the generation effect of recall in cognitive psychology and demonstrates that mild fragmentation (the omission of a single letter in a brand name) induces a higher level of recall than do severely fragmented or complete brand names. The present paper focuses on the attitudinal effects of brand placements in narrative texts. Narrative texts (e.g., novels) have so far only to a limited degree been used as a channel for brand communication. Yet, brand managers search for new opportunities to build their brands, and therefore brand placements in narrative texts could be an interesting option. An important contribution of the current paper is therefore to investigate how brand placements can be used as a brand communication

tool. This focus is in line with Russell and Stern (2006), who argue that it is important to extend brand placement research to media contexts other than films and TV. Hence, the current paper's purpose is to investigate the impact on consumers' attitudes toward brands placed in narrative texts. We report the results from an experiment using a text passage from the novel *American Psycho* as stimulus. The fashion brand Ralph Lauren was used as stimulus. In condition A, the brand plays a prominent and active role in the plot line, and in condition B it serves as a passive bystander, only briefly mentioned in the text. In addition, since we theorize that reader involvement can influence the results, the participants' reader involvement (high vs. low) was manipulated.

The paper is organised as follows. In the next section, we present relevant theories and our hypotheses. Then we describe the experimental design and findings. We conclude with a general discussion of the results and a limitations section.

THEORY

In her pioneering study, Russell (2002) tested the attitudinal effects of products placed in a TV sitcom. According to her, brand placements can be characterised according to two different dimensions:

1. Modality of placement – visual or verbal
2. Plot integration – high or low.

Modality of placement can be considered as a perceptual variable. It will activate memory and retrieve meaning according to how the placement is perceived. Visual and verbal channels differ in the amount of meaning they carry. The visual channel creates the context in which the story unfolds, and in which the brand placements can serve as plot devices to make the story line more realistic (Russell and Belch, 2005; Solomon and Englis, 1994). The verbal

channel, on the other hand, carries the script and will therefore be more meaningful for the audience.

Brand placements vary in their level of plot integration. High-plot integrated brands contribute considerably more to the story than do low-plot integrated brands. High levels of plot integration facilitate consumer memory (Russell, 2002) because the placement will carry more meaning when integrated into the narrative structure.

Concerning combining modality and plot integration, Russell (2002) states that there can be either a match or a mismatch between modality and plot. Matches occur when brands are highly integrated into the verbal script and thereby contribute to the narrative structure. In this way brands are meaningful to the audience. Another way of achieving match is to use lowly integrated visual brand placements. The placed brand does not dominate the context, and is thus a natural part of the scene. Match or mismatch between modality and plot affects whether the audience perceives the brand placement to be congruent. Matched or congruent brand placements trigger less cognitive elaboration about the brand (Lee and Schumann, 2004). Mismatched or incongruent placements, on the other hand, trigger the audience to reflect about the reasons for the placements and hence facilitate cognitive elaboration about the brand (Mandler, 1982). Incongruent placements trigger the respondents' awareness that someone is trying to influence them, and they will thus become suspicious about the placement. Research on "persuasion knowledge" (Campbell and Kirmani, 2008; Friestad and Wright, 1994) has shown that when consumers become aware that someone is trying to influence them, this awareness can lead to negative attitudes toward the perceived influencer. Because incongruent brand placements are more likely to evoke consumers' awareness, it is also more likely that the consumers will be aware that the placed brand is intended to influence them (Friestad and Wright, 1994). Next, this awareness will lead to negative attitudes toward the placed brand (Heckler and Childers, 1992, Lee and Mason, 1999).

Russell's (2002) results relate to a TV-sitcom context. An important question in the present paper is to investigate the effects of highly and lowly plot-integrated placements in a completely different modality like a narrative text. Russell (2002) argues that verbal placements carry more meaning and thus are processed more deeply and become more integrated into the receiver's cognitive structure. We argue that texts share these benefits of verbal channels. When children learn to read, they are encouraged to read aloud. As we mature, the spoken words are internalised as our inner voice, and as we read a text we hear the words inside our heads. In this way, text placements and TV script placements could be considered to be similar, and they likely produce the same attitudinal effects toward the placed brand. In addition, Russell (2002) found greater effects on attitudes when verbal placements were highly plot-integrated, that is, when the modality and level of plot integration matched. The main reason is that these placements are more acceptable for the audience and because highly plot-integrated placements contribute considerably more to the narrative plot than do lowly plot-integrated placements. Based on these arguments we can formulate our first hypothesis:

H1: Attitudes towards high plot-integrated brands are more favourable than attitudes towards low plot-integrated brands.

Mandler (1982) argued that little cognitive elaboration takes place when the information is perceived to be congruent. On the other hand, incongruent information triggers elaboration, and the result of the cognitive processing can frequently produce an adverse effect on evaluations (Friedstad and Wright, 1994; Lee and Schumann, 2004). Yet, in a text it can be difficult to produce incongruent brand placements based on lowly plot-integrated placements. For that reason, a more important direct trigger of elaboration than incongruency can be reader involvement (e.g., Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). Highly motivated readers will

tend to be transported into the narrative world – swept up by the plot so completely that they forget the world around them (see Green and Brock (2000) for more on transportation theory). This involvement will lead them to think carefully about all the information presented in the narrative text. Consistent with the congruency literature, these readers will be more likely to be suspicious of incongruent placements (lowly plot-integrated) and to consequently elaborate upon the reasons for the placement. When they consider the author's motives for placing the brands, they will very likely activate persuasion knowledge (Friedstad and Wright, 1994), which in turn will negatively affect their attitudes towards the brand.

On the other hand, people low in reader motivation will tend to think less about the brand placement. The likelihood that these people will be suspicious of incongruent placements is thus also low (e.g., little activation of persuasion knowledge – Friestad and Wright, 1994). Hence; *H2: Attitudes towards high plot-integrated brands will be more favourable than attitudes towards low plot-integrated brands for highly reader-motivated persons. For lowly reader-motivated persons, we expect no differences in attitudes between high plot-integrated and low plot-integrated brands.*

METHODOLOGY

We focus in this paper on brands placed in narrative texts. The study tests the hypothesis that highly plot-integrated text placements favourably influence brand attitudes. We further predict that this main effect is qualified by level of reader involvement among the participants. More specifically, high–reader involvement participants will be more sensitive to the level of plot integration than will be low–reader involvement participants. The study tests the hypotheses using a 2×2 between-subjects experimental design, with two levels of plot integration (high vs. low) and two levels of reader involvement (high vs. low).

Development of stimuli

Three pages from *American Psycho* (by Bret Easton Ellis) were used as stimulus in the experiment. The book is well known for using many brands throughout the text; it is easy to read, and because it is eighteen years old, it is less likely that high school students are very familiar with the book. We used a scene, in which the main character, Patrick Bateman, tries to get his bed linen washed. In addition to the bed linen, his jacket and sunglasses are also mentioned in the text.

Two versions of the text were developed in three steps. First, all brand names were removed and substituted with generic product names (e.g., Gant sunglasses was changed to sunglasses). Second, we manipulated the text so that the jacket played a prominent role in the story (i.e., highly plot-integrated) and the sunglasses played a minor and less prominent part (i.e., lowly plot-integrated). Third, we created two text versions: one in which Ralph Lauren is the brand of the highly plot-integrated jacket, and a second version in which Ralph Lauren is the brand of the lowly-plot-integrated sunglasses. The story takes place in a Chinese dry cleaner, where the main character delivers his blood-stained jacket and the conversation between the characters is about how to clean the jacket. Hence, the story is developed around the jacket as the main object in the text, and the jacket is described as a Ralph Lauren jacket in the highly plot-integrated version of the stimuli. In the lowly plot-integrated version, the jacket is unbranded and the main character is described as using Ralph Lauren sunglasses. However, except for the mention of the brand, the story does not elaborate further on the sunglasses.

Reader involvement was manipulated by using an information text box on the front page of the questionnaire booklet. In the high-involvement conditions, participants were exposed to a text box informing them that they were required to answer at the end of the

booklet a detailed questionnaire about the text. In the low-involvement conditions, no such text box was added.

Pre-test

A pre-test was conducted to test whether the participants evaluated the two text versions (i.e., Ralph Lauren jacket in the high-plot integration condition vs. Ralph Lauren sun glasses in the low-plot integration condition) differently on a measure of plot integration. Eight participants read both text versions before answering three items on a five-point scale with scale anchors disagree/agree. The items were picked from Russell (2002): 1. Ralph Lauren played an important role in the story; 2. Without the mention of Ralph Lauren, the story would have been different; 3. Ralph Lauren was connected to the plot. The results showed that plot integration manipulations worked according to intentions (see Table 1).

Item	Plot integration	N	Mean
Ralph Lauren played an important role in the story.	High	8	4.38
	Low	8	3.12
Without the mention of Ralph Lauren, the story would have been different.	High	8	3.50
	Low	8	2.00
Ralph Lauren was connected to the plot	High	8	3.62
	Low	8	1.75

Table 1: Results from the pre-test

Participants and procedures

One hundred and three high school students (60 females and 43 males, median age 18 years) from two high schools served voluntarily as participants in the study. Analysis showed that

five of the students were older than the normal age of high school students (older than 21 years). Because homogeneity in the sample is important, these participants were removed before further analysis.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions, read the assigned text passage and completed the questionnaire individually in a large lecture hall. Upon arrival students were told that they would participate in a study of how people read and interpret a text. They were given a booklet with the stimuli and the measures. In the high-involvement conditions, participants were told on the front page of the booklet that they were required to answer at the end of the booklet a detailed questionnaire about the text. In the low-involvement conditions no such information was given. Next, participants were exposed to the text stimuli in one of two versions – Ralph Lauren highly or lowly plot-integrated in the text (i.e., Ralph Lauren jacket vs. Ralph Lauren sunglasses). Following exposure to the stimuli, participants were asked questions related to their interpretation of the text and to their reading habits in order to keep to the cover story. Then target questions about brand attitudes toward Ralph Lauren were asked. Finally, participants were asked to guess the study's true purpose. Only two participants guessed the true purpose and were removed from the analysis.

Measurements

The dependent measure *brand attitude* was measured with three seven-point semantic differential scales with instructions and scale anchors: “To what extent did you find Ralph Lauren to be... bad – good, negative – positive, unfavourable – favourable” (see e.g., Haugtvedt and Petty, 1992).

The involvement manipulation check was measured with one seven-point semantic differential scale with instructions and scale anchors: “To what extent did you find the text to

be...not involving – involving”. The plot integration manipulation check was the same as that in the pre-test.

FINDINGS

Manipulation checks

The three plot integration items were all highly interrelated (Chronbach’s Alpha = .72). Thus, they were collapsed into an average summated scale and used as a dependent variable in a one-way between-subjects ANOVA. This analysis gave the expected significant difference between high and low plot integration: $M_{\text{high plot}} = 3.56$ vs. $M_{\text{low plot}} = 3.10$, $F(1, 92) = 6.15$, $p < .05$.

A one-way between-subjects ANOVA on the involvement manipulation gave the expected significant difference between high- and low-involvement conditions: $M_{\text{high involvement}} = 4.27$ vs. $M_{\text{low involvement}} = 3.65$, $F(1, 95) = 4.05$, $p < .05$.

Main findings

The three attitude items were all highly interrelated (Chronbach’s Alpha = .86). Thus, they were collapsed into an average summated scale and used as a dependent variable in a one-way between-subjects ANOVA. The main effect of plot integration on brand attitudes was significant ($F(1, 93) = 4.25$, $P < .05$, $\eta^2 = .04$). Hypothesis 1 stated that highly plot-integrated text placements should produce more favourable brand attitudes than lowly plot-integrated placements. The results showed that brand attitudes were more favourable in the highly plot-integrated conditions than in the lowly plot-integrated conditions ($M_{\text{high plot}} - M_{\text{low plot}} = 4.85 - 4.39 = .46$, $p < .05$). The main effect of reader involvement was not significant ($F(1, 93) = .09$, $p = .77$). These results support hypothesis 1. However, more interestingly, hypothesis 2 predicted that level of reader involvement will moderate the effect of plot integration on brand

attitudes. More specifically, for high-involvement participants, plot integration should matter, whereas in the low-involvement condition we expected no differences in attitudes between high and low plot integration. The interaction effect between level of plot integration and reader involvement was significant ($F(1, 93) = 5.79, p < .05, \eta^2 = .05$). Simple effect tests within the high-involvement condition revealed that differences between high and low plot integration were significant ($M_{\text{high involvement, high plot}} - M_{\text{high involvement, low plot}} = 5.15 - 4.16 = .99, F(1, 43) = 8.31, p < .05$). In the low-involvement condition, the difference between high and low plot integration was not significant ($M_{\text{low involvement, high plot}} - M_{\text{low involvement, low plot}} = 4.55 - 4.63 = -.08, F(1, 50) = .07, p = \text{n.s.}$). These results support hypothesis 2. Figure 1 shows the results graphically.

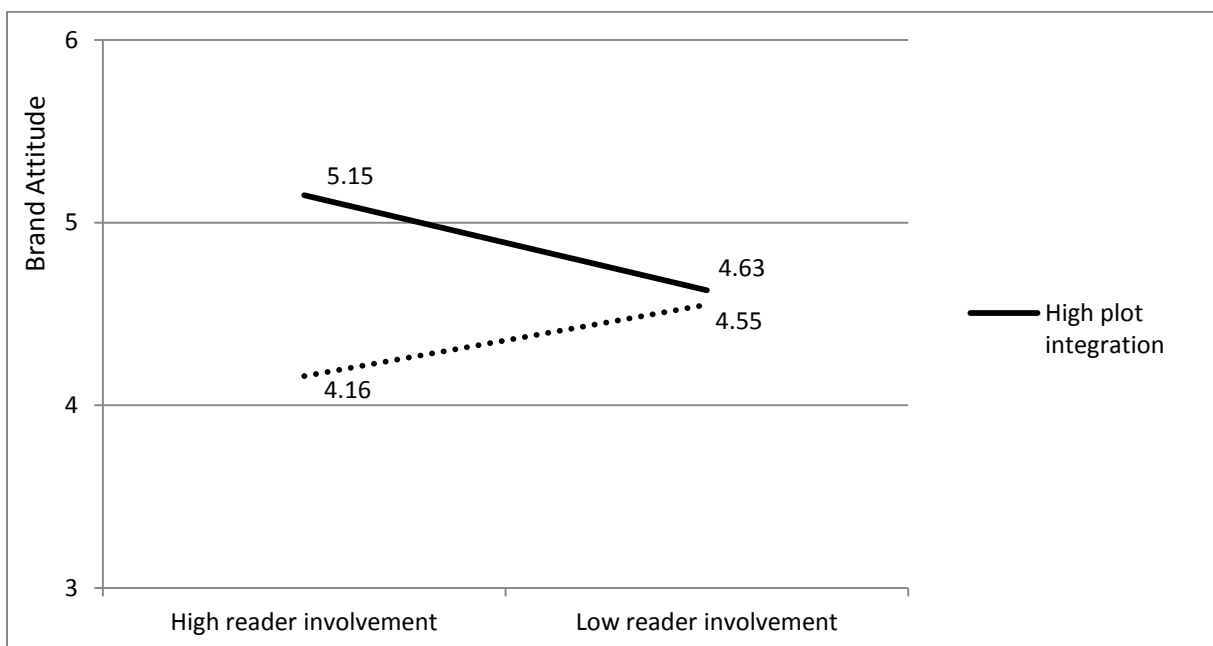


Figure 1: Plot integration x involvement interaction effects

DISCUSSION

The results from the current study show that brands placed differently in narrative texts have different attitudinal effects. We demonstrate that brands that play an important role in the

story (i.e., high plot integration) are more favourably evaluated than less prominently placed brands (i.e., low plot integration). In addition, we show that these results are qualified by the level of reader involvement. Involved readers evaluate highly plot-integrated placed brands more favourably than they do lowly plot-integrated placed brands. On the other hand, less involved readers evaluate the placed brands at the same level of favourability independent of the brand's level of plot integration.

In this paper we have emphasized the importance of plot integration and reader involvement when placing brands in texts. It might be difficult to identify novels and other types of narrative fiction that are open for brand placements. Yet, brand managers should look for manuscripts that the brand's target group are most likely to read. Narrative fiction and other texts can serve important roles as media channels for brands. For example, the use of fictitious literary characters can help in positioning the brand. Furthermore, novels and other narrative fiction can be important contexts to demonstrate a brand's usage areas, and new brands portrayed in popular narrative fiction can increase brand awareness.

The current study is to our knowledge among the first studies to investigate the attitudinal effects of brand placements in narrative texts. Every year a large number of book titles are published, and these titles are increasingly filled with brands. However, so far, narrative fiction as a media channel is not described in the literature as a relevant media channel for brand managers. Certainly, many authors would be very reluctant to commercially include brands in their texts or in other ways to sell space in their fiction to brands. On the other hand, if the brands are included in the novel anyway (e.g., Friedman, 1985), at least some authors would welcome the extra revenues. In any case, there are few reports of brand managers using narrative fiction as a media channel. As the brand placement industry is becoming more professional in using television and films, texts seem so far to have been

forgotten as a relevant research context. The current research is a first step in making salient narrative texts as an alternative brand communication channel.

Limitations

The present paper is not without limitations. The first is that we use two products in the experimental design. Ralph Lauren sunglasses are used in the lowly plot-integrated conditions and Ralph Lauren jackets in the highly plot-integrated conditions. A potential confound in the present study is different attitudes to Ralph Lauren in these categories. However, the Ralph Lauren brand is currently used on a whole range of product categories. We therefore do not expect that the different Ralph Lauren product categories would have caused different attitudes. To test this expectation we conducted a post-test to measure attitudes towards a range of Ralph Lauren product categories. Sunglasses and jackets were included together with several other product categories (e.g., perfume, jeans, bed linen). Twenty three students (17 females and 6 males, median age 19 years) from the same population as that used in the main experiment participated in the post-test and answered one attitude item on a five-point point scale with scale anchors: very negative–very positive. A paired-samples t-test showed that there were no significant differences in attitudes toward Ralph Lauren sunglasses ($M = 3.30$) and Ralph Lauren jackets ($M = 3.26$) ($t = -.327$, $p = .75$).

Second, we did not measure whether participants had read *American Psycho* or seen the film released in 2000. Median age of the participants was 18 years old, and therefore probably few participants have read the book, seen the film or can recall the specific brands used. However, future research should use fictitious brands and unpublished texts to deal with these limitations.

Future research

The current research was exploratory in the sense that it investigated brand placements in a new context. Therefore, many avenues exist for further research. First, researchers should focus on investigating effects of brand placements in media channels other than TV and films. Narrative fiction is one of many new possible media channels for brand placements. We agree with Russell and Stern (2006) and acknowledge the need for more research on brand placements in media channels like blogs, social media (e.g., Facebook), interactive and web-based television programmes, podcasts, iPhone/iPad Apps, computer games etc. New media channels are in many ways different from the traditional ones, for example, by allowing for more interactivity with consumers and by allowing consumers to decide more of the content. Therefore, it is important to investigate brand placements in these new media channels and to test whether the established theories in brand placement research (i.e., those concerning TV and film contexts) can be applied to new contexts. Second, the current paper is one of the first papers to focus on brand placements in narrative fiction. Future research opportunities include looking into different types of texts and investigating which types are better suited for brand placements. One could speculate that fictional stories are a better context for brand placements than are non-fiction texts. However, could suitability depend on the placed products and brands? For example, could symbolic brands (Park et al., 1986) be better suited in narrative fiction and functional brands better suited in non-fiction? Another avenue for research is to investigate the differential effects of placing brands in narrative fiction to those of placing brands in more traditional brand-placement contexts (e.g., TV and films). Perhaps the visual properties of the more traditional contexts increase the effects on brand awareness. On the other hand, narrative fiction could be a better context to teach consumers how a brand is used and who should use it (e.g., match the brand with the brand personality of a fictitious character – see Aaker, 1997).

Third, future research should also focus on the ethical aspect of brand placements in narrative fiction. Brand placement is generally ethically challenging because it can be regarded as hidden advertising, trying to persuade consumers when their cognitive guard is down (see Hackley, Tiwsakul, and Preuss, 2008 for a discussion). In narrative fiction and other new media channels used for brand placements, brand managers should be particularly cautious (see Wenner (2004) for a discussion of branded content). Consumers are not used to advertising and other commercial messages in these contexts. Therefore, these contexts should be attractive for brand managers, but should at the same time increase the managers' ethical awareness. Therefore, we need more research addressing the ethical issues of brand placements; such research can help guide the practise of brand placements in general and of brand placements in narrative fiction in particular.

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