

Nelson Algren ABC

by DOUGLAS COWIE on 15 MARCH 2012

My essay, "Narrative Proximity in the Work of Nelson Algren," appears in Volume 17 of the journal [*American, British and Canadian Studies*](#). You can read the abstract by [following this link](#). Volume 17 contains a number of other interesting essays, [including one written by Matthew R. Turner](#) about one of my favorite films of all time, *Blazing Saddles*.

In the process of editing the article I cut a long section that discusses Algren's first novel, *Somebody in Boots*. I've reproduced that section below. The full article is available in the journal (obviously), and discusses *The Man with the Golden Arm* and *Never Come Morning*.

In both *Somebody in Boots* and *The Man with the Golden Arm*, he uses the technique both to control the narrative tension of key scenes. In the scene that introduces Cass and Norah in his first novel, *Somebody in Boots*, the importance of narrative proximity is twofold; it creates tension in the scene, and in so doing, establishes quickly and effectively the relationship between the two characters. This second point is vital, because these two protagonists are only introduced to each other approximately three-quarters of the way into the novel, and Norah herself has only recently been introduced into the plot.

The scene begins with Cass getting drunk alone in a speakeasy following the robbery of a butcher shop, and, as the narration follows the drunken dislocation of Cass's thoughts and perceptions, narrative proximity is used primarily for its comedic potential:

After four straight shots, a sour and a solid stein, Cass decided he ought to lean against something. Against something close, right away. After he had leaned against something close for quite some time he became aware, with a slow and blinking awareness, that he was leaning against something close inside an L station. Somehow, this did not seem quite fair; somehow it seemed just a trifle improper. (180)

The narration clings tightly to Cass's perspective, with the more detached authorial tone only creeping in to provide necessary clarity. The rhythm of the sentences also reflects the drunk's point-of-view—his moment of overly deliberate self-rectification—through the use of repetition—the four instances of “lean against something” and, in the final sentence, of “somehow”—as well as the variation in sentence length and structure, from the choppy fragment, “Against something close,” through the meandering, repetitive “leaning against something” sentence to the final sentence, bisected by a semicolon. The drunkenness and the amusement continue as Cass tries to work out how to buy an El ticket from a peanut machine while thinking about the monkey house at Lincoln Park Zoo.

When the perspective shifts to Norah Egan, the hay-bag whore watching Cass's antics from across the street, the slapstick trails off and the tension and desperation that define her life also dictate the action. This scene is the first in which Algren shows Norah as a prostitute. Before her narrative breaks off in favor of Cass's and Nubby's robbery, the narrator presents her as “Norah Egan, free, white, female and twenty-one, alumna of Cicero high-school class of ‘thirty-one, Norah wasn't thinking now that just because she was hungry she might go downstairs and stroll slowly past strangers” (166). Now, “Little Norah Egan” (181) is doing just that, and Algren dictates the tone and tension of the scene through his insistence on keeping the narrative close to her perspective.

When Norah takes hold of Cass's arm the narrative proximity begins to change. For one last burst, the perspective stays with Cass as he attempts drunkenly to make sure that Norah doesn't get offended that he doesn't recognize her (they've never met). After this paragraph, however, the narration pulls back to an omniscient viewpoint in order to show Norah and Cass in their setting as they cross the street at State and Eighteenth, and a cab driver laughs as the crooked cop Gerahty looks the other way for the long time that it takes her, supporting a stumbling drunk, to cross. The cabbie's laughter signals the shift to a narrative perspective centered on Norah. It begins by a simple shift in point-of-view: “She heard men laughing, and she wanted to run. The drunk on her arm said, ‘Did ah get me *ta-tooed?*’” (181). The important point here is that Cass is referred to as “the drunk on her arm.” For the remainder of the scene he is “the drunk”—not Cass. The

narrative position has overlapped with Norah's perspective, and she doesn't know him by name.

Norah's perspective is important both to the drama of the scene and to the establishment of their relationship, which will provide the emotional center for the rest of the novel. Narrative proximity allows a sympathy to take hold and develop. It works primarily through the contrast of Norah's shifting wariness about Cass and the knowledge—not shared by Norah—that Cass is not much more than a naïve drunk. To Norah he is another trick picked up off the street, and therefore to be regarded with caution, no matter how drunk. All depictions of “the drunk” come from Norah's limited understanding of him, with the third person narrator providing no judgement or comment to embellish her perspective. Thus, “On the staircase up to her room the drunk took a notion that she was going to thrash him; he kept telling her that he'd pay her this time, that he wouldn't try to heel out. With every step he paused to assure her of this; that made it hard, he was such a big lout” (181). Narrative proximity here serves to characterize Norah and Cass simultaneously; the words are essentially hers, and the matter-of-factness reflects her wariness and shrewdness, while the fact that she's describing Cass serves to characterize him further, from a subjective point-of-view that does not belong to Cass—the protagonist of the novel—but that doesn't necessarily belong to the narrator, either. In this scene it is reasonable to read from the narrator an implicit approval of Norah's opinion of the drunk; but as will be seen, this isn't always the case. Approval or disapproval is secondary anyway; allowing the character's viewpoint to determine—to have control—not of the situation, but of its telling—to allow the otherwise voiceless character a voice—is the primary objective.

It becomes clear that this objective is vital when Gerahty reasserts himself onto the scene. The crooked cop is a de facto pimp to the brothel where Norah lives, but rather than state this matter-of-factly, Algren dramatizes it by using Norah's experience and words.

Once she'd told Gerahty to go to hell, and he'd hit her between the eyes. It had served her right for talking back, and the Dago girl on the second floor had laughed with Gerahty at night on the stairs. Gerahty'd take it out in trade with that dirty Dago, but never with herself. He said he didn't like blondes was why. He'd said his wife was a blonde was why. On the night that they laughed, they'd laughed at her. (182)

This passage comes when she's just getting the drunk into the room, and after she's explicitly thought that she's got to hurry up and roll him because Gerahty saw her. The diction and syntax here are both Norah's. Her rival prostitute isn't named, nor is she “the Italian girl,” rather, she's “the Dago

girl” and “that dirty Dago”. Rather than saying that Norah is the bottom rung of the whorehouse ladder (although a short discourse on hay-bags, girls who pick up drunks, has already been offered), Norah’s words imply it: “but never with herself.” Norah is the whore who must always pay in cash and beatings.

Again repetition underpins the technique. “Dago” is repeated twice. Gerahty’s reason for never taking it in trade with Norah is split between two sentences that are almost identical. And Gerahty’s and the Dago’s laughter echoes from the second sentence of the paragraph to the last, in which “laughed” is repeated twice. The repetition helps to depict, rather than simply to describe, Norah’s claustrophobic life. She labors—she whores—under the weight of the Dago, of Gerahty, of the laughter that targets her. The repeating laughter also indicates that beatings and money alone are not the only issue at stake here, but also shame and status. Norah’s use of “he’d said” (again, repeated) raises a complication to both technique and its effect in this paragraph; she repeats to herself the things that Gerahty has offered as excuses, in effect answering the unspoken question, “why?”. Furthermore, like the laughter, *her* repetition of *his* words reinforce her status and confirm the shame she feels.

When Gerahty arrives in the room to take the five dollar bill she’s just stolen from the drunk, he holds “out his hand with a black kid glove on it,” and in a short paragraph Algren writes, “Norah didn’t have any black tight gloves like that” (182). Here narrative proximity allows a moment of abject self-pity without allowing it to spill into mawkish pathos. In this passage the technique also works in the manner identified by Giles, calling the middle-class position—represented by Gerahty—into question: Algren juxtaposes cruel, glove-handed, married Gerahty against the helpless and hopeless perspective of Norah, rolling a drunk and fearing the cop, but he has also shown the influence that the glove-handed cop’s excuses hold in positioning Norah’s own thinking about herself. Gerahty’s middle-class perspective is only given voice through Norah—through the object of its gaze. The oppressed therefore voices the oppressor’s position, which not only illustrates the extent to which Norah has internalized that oppression, but also demonstrates the gulf of both power and circumstance between the entitled and dispossessed characters: Norah is living a sub-human existence, to the amusement of someone whose job it is, among other things, to protect her from the same crimes he perpetrates against her.

While the drunk lies passed out on the bed, Norah rocks herself to sleep, huddled in a chair and wrapped in his jacket. When she awakes in the morning to his footsteps, narrative proximity shifts—with Norah—from self-pity and loneliness back to the sharp wariness that defines the other half of her thinking. She of course knows nothing of who this guy is; she picked him

up when he was incoherently drunk. So when she awakes to find him skittish and pale and staring out the window, she is understandably “a little afraid” (183). As with Cass’s drunk scene, Algren keeps the narration close to Norah’s viewpoint, neither wavering over to that of Cass—which would immediately diffuse the narrative tension, if not Norah’s—nor providing any outside narration that strays beyond her point-of-view. The exclusive focus on Norah, however, does result in Cass—already well established throughout the novel as a character who acts without much consideration for the consequences—becoming anyone, capable of just about anything in this little room, and acting strangely. To Norah each of his actions carries the potential for violence, and Algren does nothing to dispel this implication from an omniscient perspective, thus implicitly corroborating her view. The effect here is complicated: the reader has spent more than 150 pages with Cass, and knows him well; Norah, on the other hand, knows him not at all. The narrative proximity to Norah functions as a filter, not only for the scene itself, as described above, but also for Giles’s “middle-class perspective”: the filter allows one to see the gap between being able to afford to see Cass as he is, and not having that luxury.

So in the dim morning light Norah narrates, “No use getting him sore though, or he might sock her. He wouldn’t have been the first and he looked pretty tough. But he didn’t look as though he knew many tricks” (183). This description is in fact fairly accurate, but Norah doesn’t know that, and so her speculation continues throughout the scene. Each time he does or says something, the narrative commentary on it comes from her. The narrative proximity lends irony to the scene, because nothing she thinks about him is unfounded, but nor is much of it particularly accurate, beyond the initial judgement that he doesn’t look as though he knows many tricks. The irony is robbed of much comic potential—unlike elsewhere in Algren’s work—because Cass is in fact unpredictable, and as Norah fears, he is certainly capable of becoming a Gerahty, who refuses to take anything in trade, and prefers punching her in the face. Furthermore, as already established, Norah lives a life in which she has no choice but to expect the worst, and to accept—at least partially—the excuses that make “the worst” her fault. Thus, while Norah can’t quite work out “why he was standing that way with his head cocked off to one side and looking like a down-in-the-mouth hound” (183), each time she braces herself against the possibility that “he might sock her”—five times in just over two pages—the menace is real.

However, this scene is also a perverse courtship, and the narrative proximity allows her attitude towards him to soften gradually, even if it only breaks—if it does at all—when he produces his wad of cash. The courtship cannot really be called a courtship after all, because even if some affection develops between them—and it does—the relationship is always primarily based on

money. But Norah's narration, in the form of her unspoken reactions to everything he does and says, guides the rest of the scene, and simultaneously reveals her intelligence and vulnerability. When he calls her "hay-bag," the defensive self-pity flashes again: "Hay-bag whore. Everyone hated a hay-bag. She was in for it now, kikes had hot tempers" (184).^[1] But her attitude changes when he calls her Blondie in a friendly tone. In fact, her complex reaction demonstrates the importance of narrative proximity, and I will quote it in its entirety before discussing it:

He was calling her "Blondie" now, but he'd called her Hay-Bag at first. So he wasn't so hard, he was kind of soft. He was kind of soft and kind of nasty; and the soft-nasty ones were the ones she feared most. They were the smartest and the meanest, both at once. But she wondered whether he'd called her Blondie more for her eyes than for her skin, or for her hair more than both eyes and skin put together. She looked in the mirror, but she couldn't tell for certain. (184-185)

Once again repetition is important to the technique, because repetition allows the approximation of a logical thought process to take hold. Here she is trying to talk herself back into a fear that has dissipated in the face of what is in fact Cass's naïve and fearful earnestness, but which she must force herself to regard as a lout's cunning, and as potentially lethal. By giving Norah's position the full benefit of the doubt, Algren can also subtly convey her essential humanness; that tender word, "Blondie", catches in her mind, and she begins to overcomplicate the reasoning behind his choice. From what one knows about his character by this point in the novel, one assumes that it is highly unlikely that Cass has given it any thought, but Norah reveals herself, behind the toughness, to be as insecure, and needing of compliments, needing of compassion, as any other person. Norah reveals this aspect of her nature, but not to any character. If narrative proximity allows one to laugh at the triumph of technique, it is also the triumph of technique that produces understanding of and empathy for Algren's most debased characters. As we will see, further implications of this aspect of narrative proximity become clear in *Never Come Morning*, which I will discuss later.

The understanding of and empathy for Norah develop through the narrative proximity that drives the scene. The sentimentality of a girl looking in a mirror vanishes as the scene hurtles to a close. It will end with the two making a half-spoken deal: that Cass can stay, for a price. But first Norah must move back to the hyper-defensive. The drunk charges towards her and she must assume she's under attack. She mentally prepares herself for a beating, giving to herself the reasons for it by repeating the same thoughts she's already had: "The soft-nasty ones were the kind that socked you. Sometimes they were the worst. He was coming up to her pulling up his

shirt. What the hell. And he'd walked a straight line" (185). A girl's confusion over why she might be pretty drops in favor of straight fear and preparation for a beating. But it breaks when he removes his spitball of money from his bellybutton: "When he unrolled it she saw enough there to keep a man with a woman for almost as long as just about any man ever feels like keeping any woman around" (185). Here Norah exhibits a twofold cynicism in her thinking. First, she can use the lunk who she was about to toss onto the street for his cash; this is the cynicism of any prostitute in her position. But she also shows a world-weary cynicism that has little to do with the money, for she recognizes in this same thought that neither this lunk, nor any other man she's ever met, is one who will stick around for ever. The Cicero high school class of '31 shop girl is no more. Nowhere has the omniscient narrative voice commented upon any of this; instead, the characters' own perspectives have dramatized it. In a few short pages, Algren's use of narrative proximity has accomplished the feat of creating a potential menace of a harmless drunk, and most importantly, dramatizing the violent and degraded world of Norah's life as a prostitute, while also introducing to each other the two protagonists whose interacting lives will govern both the plot and the emotional center of the remainder of the novel.

[\[i\]](#) It's worth noting here that she refers to him as a kike—she'd decided previously that he "talked like some kind of kike"; another attribute of narrative proximity, which will be discussed later, is that Algren allows his characters to repeat their inaccurate or just plain wrong thoughts, as long as they believe them.