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Language, Style, and Persuasion in Novels: A Rhetorical Approach

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Abstract:

The paper will discuss the novel as a rhetorical genre where readers are persuaded by the coordinated use of linguistic and narrative strategies, not argument. It follows the classical rhetorical tradition of Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian and Longinus and incorporates the modern rhetorical narratology of Wayne Booth and James Phelan to offer a theoretical perspective on the rhetoric of narrative fiction. It investigates the role of diction, syntax, figurative language, point of view, narrative voice, and narrative structure in evoking readers' emotional, moral, and interpretative reactions. Drawing on the ideas of structuralist narratology and pragmatics, it shows how rhetorical strategies are manifested in fictional communication and between the text and its assumed audience. The paper maintains that persuasion in the novel is realised in the interplay between language, plot, and the reader's engagement, bringing rhetorical criticism to the fore in literary research.

Keywords: rhetoric, persuasion, narrative voice, free indirect discourse, narratology, novel.

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Introduction

The novel has been viewed as an aesthetic object, as a means of storytelling primarily devoted to the representation of character, plot, and world. However, this representational surface harbours a recurring rhetorical function: the novel is not simply a representation of experience, but a rhetorical expression that justifies a view of experience. Every option the novelist makes, from the choice of one adjective to the structure of the final pages of the story, is a game of persuading. Readers are not just led from one scene to another in a fictional world; they are guided towards specific sympathies, specific judgments, and they are left, at the end of the book, with opinions that they do not necessarily have at the beginning. The persuasive aspect of fiction is what a rhetorical approach to the novel should aim to address, and it is the language and narrative techniques of fiction itself that should be addressed, rather than an ornamental application of such over a neutral story.

A rhetorical reading of the novel puts literary study into a very old framework of questions, first posed and systematised by Aristotle in his Rhetoric, and brings literary criticism closer to rhetorical criticism and narrative theory, which aims to analyse the ways in which language can create meaning and impact in texts. Contemporary narrative theorists have extended this rhetorical tradition well beyond argumentative prose and oratory into the heart of narrative fiction. James Phelan, perhaps the most prominent contemporary exponent of this view, defines narrative as somebody telling somebody else, on some occasion and for some purpose, that something happened (Copland and Phelan 1), a formulation that places purpose, and therefore persuasion, at the very centre of what a narrative is. To read a novel rhetorically is to ask not only what happens and to whom, but why the telling has been shaped this way, and what the shaping is trying to do to the reader.

This paper will contend that persuasion is happening at both the language level (in diction, syntax, and figurative expression) and the level of the narrative form (in point of view, voice, and progression of the narrative). Practically speaking, these two levels are inseparable; the style of the prose is what brings the technique of narration to the reader. The discussion is not based on one text to be close-read, but is based on a variety of illustrative examples from the canon of the English novel, not as texts to be exhaustively analysed, but as evidence that the mechanisms described are those common to the discourse of the novel.

Objectives

1. To create a theoretical model for the rhetorical analysis of the novel, combining the principles of classic rhetoric, rhetorical narratology, and narrative theory.
2. To examine how diction, syntax, figurative language, point of view and narrative voice function as rhetorical devices influencing readers' interpretation.
3. To examine the role that narrative structure and reader engagement play in the rhetorical effectiveness of the novel, looking at how rhetorical tension develops and resolves and the reader's active role in meaning-making.

Theoretical Framework

In classical rhetoric, rhetoric is the art of discovering ways to persuade anyone in any situation, and Aristotle distinguished three: ethos, the persuasive effect of the speaker's character; pathos, the emotional climate created in the audience; and logos, the logical content of the speech itself (Aristotle 37). Aristotle's three-part division, as he uses it, is for oratory addressed to an audience in the city, but the three categories can be adapted rather easily to the novel, where the speaker is a persona made up of the narrator, the implied author, and the characters, and the audience is the reader reading off the page. A narrator's confiding tone builds ethos; a scene of suffering rendered in unflinching detail builds pathos; a plot's

demonstration that certain actions produce certain consequences builds a logic of cause and moral consequence that the reader is invited to accept as true of the fictional world; as Fahnestock (4) observes, the same proposition rendered in different language can produce markedly different degrees of conviction, which is why the classical account of persuasion cannot be separated from an account of style. Aristotle's successors in the Roman rhetorical tradition extended and complicated this account in ways that remain useful for reading prose narrative.

In the first century BCE, Cicero, in his treatise on the ideal orator, concluded that persuasion requires the combination of wisdom and eloquence, for technical skill in argument alone "has little effect unless the speaker is sufficiently learned to discuss any subject with convincing authority" (Cicero 13). Cicero also recognised three kinds of style: the plain, for instruction; the middle, for pleasing an audience; and the grand, for moving an audience, a style which foreshadows the ability of a narration in a novel to shift register from one to another, depending on the rhetorical purpose it serves at a particular moment. His five canons of rhetoric, invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery, further suggest that persuasion does not occur at any single point during the process of composition, but rather through the interaction of the elements of subject matter, structure, and expression, a suggestion that aligns well with the way a novel's persuasive effect relies on the coordination of subject matter, structure, and prose rather than any one of these elements.

Quintilian (2) refined the classical description of ethos by making the rhetorical power of the speaker a measure of the speaker's character. Within this, he also furthered the concept of decorum, the proper fitting of style to subject, occasion, and audience, a principle he had applied in designing his educational curriculum. He felt that persuasion ought to be adapted to the circumstances rather than be an abstract ideal of eloquence. Quintilian's focus on character-driven ethos precedes the development of the concept of a narrator's authority established in

the reader's mind through his/her honesty and judgment; his rule of decorum, of what is fitting in one part of the narrative, foreshadows the reader's sense of the narrator's manipulation, or misfit, of a shift in diction or register from one part of the narrative to another.

Another, but related line of classical rhetoric is found in the treatise On the Sublime, usually attributed to Longinus and dated to around the first century CE, which redirected focus away from the orator's art of persuading an audience to its capacity to take the reader into a quick, overpowering state of transport (Longinus 4). Longinus found the keys to this high impact in great thoughts, powerful emotions, skilful figures of speech, and noble words and their disposition, all means which have less to do with rational proof than with something akin to imaginative capture of the audience. The account provides the novel with a vocabulary for describing moments when ethos, pathos, and logos are insufficient, when figurative language or the emotional power of a scene goes beyond calculated agreement to taking the reader over.

The classical tradition was largely forgotten as a specific method for writing prose narrative until the twentieth century, when the novel was again the focus of rhetorical analysis with the publication of The Rhetoric of Fiction by Wayne Booth (8). Booth disagreed with the critics of his day who assumed that authorial "showing" was more objective and thus more artistically legitimate than authorial "telling," and said instead that all techniques of narration, no matter how impersonal they seem to be, are rhetorical choices that engage the reader's sympathy and judgment. The idea of the implied author, which is a version of the author reconstructed from the text itself, is different from the real, biographical author and from any narrator the text may make use of, is central to his account. The reliability or unreliability of a narrator is judged by the norms set up by this implied author. Booth further studied the many dimensions of distance (moral, intellectual, temporal, aesthetic) a novel can establish between narrator and character, implied author and reader, and author and reader, and he saw these distances, along with authorial commentary and irony, as the primary tools through which a

novel can rhetorically control its audience. Booth also claimed that this rhetorical relationship has an ethical implication because when a reader accepts the values of a novel as his own, the novel "begins to mold the reader's personality, much as a companion molds the personality that shares it" (Booth 138).

Over the following decades, structuralist narratology has taken this rhetorical legacy to the next level of a systematic description of the narrative form: Chatman (19) made the distinction between the story, the sequence of events that a narrative refers to, and the discourse, the manner and order in which a narrative presents or tells the events it refers to, more precise; Genette (33-35) formalised the description of the different orders, lengths and frequencies in which a narrative may accelerate, delay, repeat, and withhold the events it recounts, as well as the different moods and voices in which it can be presented or told. Although structuralist narratology was initially more concerned with formal description than with rhetorical effect, its analytic vocabulary supplied later rhetorical critics with precise tools for describing exactly how a narrative's sequencing produces the persuasive effects Booth had identified only in general terms.

Building on this foundation, James Phelan has developed Booth's tradition into a rhetorical poetics of narrative, most thoroughly explained in Phelan (7) and further refined in Clark and Phelan (7), where the art of narrating character becomes defined as a communication that follows the same logic of purpose that underlies any rhetorical encounter. The model is central to this, with the concept of authorial audience: the audience the author is writing for, and for whom the strategies of persuasion in the text are tailored; Copland and Phelan (7) have further developed the model by suggesting the "ideal narratee," the audience the narrator imagines he is addressing, and to which the strategies of persuasion are calibrated, sometimes not successfully.

Pragmatics, the study of the role of language in context and use, is another resource; in a study of persuasive and manipulative discourse in a political allegory, Khafaga et al. (474) show persuasive speech acts, rhetorical questions, gap-bridging, and interruption as vehicles for persuading other characters within the story world of the fictional discourse, which is the intradiegetic level of fictional communication. Their analysis distinguishes between pure, manipulative, and coercive persuasion as rhetorical modes at the novelistic level of dialogue, reminding critics that persuasion in a novel is not always undifferentiated—sometimes it is a mode of communication within a novel, and sometimes it is a mode of communication in a novel. Classical rhetoric, rhetorical narratology, and pragmatics provide the analytical terms in this paper to analyse the linguistic and structural aspects of persuasion in the novel.

Diction and Lexical Choice as Persuasive Strategy

The smallest element of the rhetorical effect in prose fiction is the single word, and the choice of words in a competently written novel is rarely of no import. In addition to denotative meaning, diction has connotation and evaluative meaning, and novelists use this excess of meaning to influence reader judgment, seemingly while describing. A character that is "thin" is presented without any implicit narrative, whereas if a character is "gaunt" there is an implicit narrative of deprivation, and if a character is "slender" there is an implicit narrative of grace. None of these words is truer than any other, but each carries an evaluative layer which frames the reader's reception of all that follows.

The register, or degree of formality of a passage, works the same way. A narrator who leans towards Latinate, polysyllabic words establishes an ethos of authority and distance and makes the reader defer to him, while a narrator who leans towards the plain, Anglo-Saxon monosyllables establishes an ethos of directness and unadorned honesty, and makes the reader trust him on a different basis. The second strategy is illustrated in a study of one famous

political allegory, which, according to Muradian (18), is told in "ostensibly simple, accessible language" that is endowed nonetheless with a sophisticated allegorical charge, and which is itself a rhetorical move, as refusing ornate diction allows a narration to claim the status of artless reportage, which paradoxically makes it more persuasive because it seems to deny persuasive intent. Diction also works cumulatively, by repetition of words and semantic field. In a similar political fable, Risdianto et al. (7) demonstrate how the presuppositions of the characters are repeated in ways that assume facts which have never been proven, and are therefore more difficult to disprove on the part of the reader or fellow character. This strategy exists at the lexical and pragmatic level, and may, over time, result in the assumption becoming accepted as fact.

Syntax and Figurative Language as Persuasive Resources

While diction provides the evaluative shading to prose, syntax provides its argumentative structure. The structure of the clauses – the way they are subordinated, coordinated or left paratactically juxtaposed – determines the logical relationships that the reader is able to perceive between ideas, and beyond what the ideas state explicitly. A long series of subordinate clauses, all focused on a single main clause, is syntactically performing the experience of complexity being clarified, while a string of short, paratactic clauses refuses to accord any significance to the particulars of the description and creates the effect of straight, unmediated facts. Sentences with rhetorical figures, schemes of classical rhetoric like anaphora, antithesis, and asyndeton, jump easily from the rhetoric of oratory to the rhetoric of narrative prose, and novelists use them for the ends classical rhetoricians worked for: anaphora gives momentum through repetition, antithesis makes moral oppositions explicit by imposing them on coordinate sentences, and asyndeton packs a list of coordinate impressions into a rush. The fact that these types of devices are effective when planted in the interior voice of a fictional character suggests

how deeply the business of persuasion has infiltrated written English prose, regardless of rhetorical genre.

The logic behind figurative language is not exactly the same, but similar, because it requires the reader to move meaning, and sometimes evaluative judgment, from one field of experience to another in the form of a metaphor, simile, or symbol. In a cognitive analysis of metaphor and metonymy in prose fiction, Lu and Ma (139) maintain that these figures are not just ornamental alternatives to literal statements but active tools for meaning-making that can shape the way readers think about character and event, as the reader, by default, rather than consciously deliberating, fills in an evaluative judgment that the text does not explicitly make. Allegory carries over this figurative logic into a whole story. As Muradian (18) explains, such vivid figurative imagery makes abstract political betrayal newly perceptible and emotionally legible: In the case of allegory, correspondence with the reader is what makes this figurative mode so persuasive, as it allows the reader to acknowledge and perceive patterns of political manipulation which he might not have been ready to accept if represented in the form of a historical narrative. Symbol works with a more fluid logic; it piles up meaning over the course of a text, and by the end of a novel an image that is repeated in a few sentences can be called up with little explanation and evoke the full impact of its build-up of significance.

Point of View and Narrative Voice as Rhetorical Positioning

The novel's most persuasive rhetorical device is its mastery of point of view—the vantage from which events in the story are experienced and communicated to the reader. Point of view is not just about what information the reader gets; what information the reader gets is also coloured by the effect of that information, and the point of view of the narrator of the first person is coloured not only by the thing itself, but by the interiority of the person who speaks; that is, the perspectives of different characters are presented and can move among one another

in ways that implicitly rank one character's interiority in demand for extended sympathy. The selection of the "voice" of the story, then, is never simply a technical choice, but it is also a rhetorical act, because each act of the narrative is an act of someone, for some purpose, to some audience, and the voice of the story – and who it is and how reliable – radically determines its persuasive potential.

Because of the interpretive ambiguity it creates, the technique that combines both a character's thoughts and idiom with the grammar of third-person narration, without the quotation marks that would explicitly mark the passage as the character's own, is one of the novel's most sophisticated rhetorical devices (Fludernik 227). It combines both narratorial and characterial voice but fails to clearly distinguish where one voice is and where the other is, which lets a novelist use a potentially biased character's point of view and still give the reader's sense of “he said” or “she said” enough narratorial authority to seem to endorse the character's judgment, even though the text might not have won the reader's explicit admiration by arguing to him or her. In a study of a courtship novel of manners, Neumann (365) illustrates the extent to which this technique may help to organise a novel's persuasive strategy, and shows that in this novel the free indirect discourse operates by the "double voice" of these verbs, leading the reader into the evaluations of the characters he or she is studying, and inviting him or her to accept those evaluations as the given truth of the narrated world. This persuasive mechanism is an empirical phenomenon that Bray (40) tested, and she found that readers do tend to perceive a blended or "dual" voice in such passages, and that surrounding context, both preceding and following the ambiguous passage, influences which voice, narratorial or characterial, readers may attribute a given judgment to.

Unreliable narration is a related, but separate, strategy, where the difference between what the narrator says is true and what the implied author signals is true is used as the novel's

"persuasive project." In cases where simple narration is effective at convincing the reader through a direct connection between the narration and the reader's judgment, the use of unreliable narration is more indirect and instead requires the reader to recognize that the narration is misleading in order to arrive at the one he or she ultimately believes in, the judgment the novel actually upholds. In his study of teaching unreliable narration, Hanafi (2) demonstrates that readers who are encouraged to see a narrator's departure from a more reliable norm often come to a more self-sustaining interpretive conclusion than readers who are given reliable narration. This is because readers who sense a lack of reliability believe this judgment to be their own, which in turn creates a depth of conviction that more explicit narration may not be able to replicate.

Narrative Structure and the Reader as Rhetorical Audience

Persuasion in the novel is not only at sentence and passage level, but also at the level of the entire architecture of narrative progression, the sequence in which information and revelation is delivered to the reader. Phelan's rhetorical poetics emphasises this structural aspect, which involves examining the kinds of instabilities and tensions within the story situation and the ways they are sequenced, and the kinds of instabilities and tensions between the story's telling and the audience's expectations, and arguing that the sequencing of these instabilities comprises much of a narrative's persuasive design (Clark and Phelan 20). Often, a novel that presents an ill-revealed piece of information at the end guides the reader through the steps of his or her interpretation: first a judgment is made under incomplete information, and this is then furthered by a second judgment made after gaining the remaining information. A judgment revised in light of new evidence often feels more earned than a judgment complete from the start. The management of closure does a similar job: endings which resolve the central instabilities of a novel based on the values it has fostered are a sort of structural peroration that

gathers up emotional and argumentative work already done, and endings that defer resolution perpetuate the novel's persuasive power in the reader's post-reading awareness.

An examination of persuasion in the novel would not be complete without mention of the reader, for rhetoric does not exist without an audience. This aspect is well described by Phelan's model of the author's audience, which involves an audience that is constructed and assumed to have shared knowledge, shared values, and a capacity that the author expects the novel to present and meet. Last but not least, the reader's contribution to a novelistic persuasion remains always active. A considerable portion of the persuasive effectiveness of a well-constructed rhetorical novel is due to the way so much of its persuasive work goes on through implication and a pattern of structure rather than through direct assertion; it is the reader who is continually called on as an active collaborator in the construction of the very meanings that the novel seems to simply reveal to them, and conclusions which the reader feels that he has “reasoned out” for himself are kept with a fidelity that is ordinarily not achieved by externally imposed assertions.

Illustrative Discussion across the Novel Tradition

That these mechanisms can operate in any period of novelistic practice is made clear by briefly discussing how they are encountered in a number of recurring patterns. Often in novels of social manners, the free indirect discourse is the main tool of a sustained rhetorical enterprise of social criticism: the narrator's voice inhabits the character's voice so closely that he or she becomes sympathetically legible to the reader, yet, by ironic modulation, is simultaneously signalling his or her distance from the character's voice, and therefore his or her awareness of the limitations of the discourse (Neumann 365). In political fables and allegories, by contrast, it is often the very simplicity of the language, allied with a fictional structure that obscures a political argument by transferring it to a fictional setting, as Khafaga et al. (474) and Risdianto et al. (7) prove, that makes such texts more effective at dramatising the mechanisms of political

manipulation than conventional historical arguments. Another variation of this is seen in first-person retrospective narratives, when the writer may convince the reader of a judgment about another character largely by the management of narratorial ethos, by the careful presentation of an image of himself as a very careful but not entirely infallible interpreter, which, in some degree and to some extent, conditions how much interpretive trust the reader extends to his later judgments. This condition is the object of careful rhetorical management in such narratives, an instance of the gap between stated judgment and fuller evidence which is the object of rhetorical poetics as developed by Phelan (7), and which was first made available to criticism by Booth (8). In these patterns, over a wide range of periods and modes, that same logic is repeated: persuasion is effected by the careful arrangement of diction, syntax, figurative language, and narrative voice to "lead" a constructed audience to specific sympathies, even if the text reads as a straightforward story.

Conclusion

Drawing on the classical rhetorical tradition, as it developed from Aristotle through Cicero to Quintilian and Longinus, as well as recent work in the fields of pragmatics and narrative theory, the discussion has shown that these rhetorical devices operate in the connotative freight of word choice, the argumentative work of syntax and figurative language, the positioning of reader sympathy through point of view and free indirect discourse, and the larger structural persuasion created by reader-centred narration, using illustrations from commonalities across the novel tradition, rather than demonstrating that they are idiosyncratic features of any particular author or historical moment. A rhetorical approach demonstrates that linguistic choices and narrative techniques are not merely aesthetic devices but persuasive resources that shape readers' interpretation. It implies that the reader's sense of being moved or persuaded by a novel, which is a response that readers often articulate, can be analysed with the same critical

rigour (often felt but not adequately described) that has traditionally been applied to the rhetoric of oratory or argument, without thereby compromising the aesthetic distinctiveness of literary narrative.

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