ACCESSING THE PERFORMATIVE THROUGH GENRE:
GENRE THEORY AND LITERARY TEXTS

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ABSTRACT: Rhetorical genre theory, with its emphasis on the interaction between speaker, audience and context in the creation of genre, offers a powerful approach to the study of literature by calling attention to performative elements in literary works, even those not specifically designated as “dramatic.” Such an approach perceives a literary work as active and experiential, providing readers with rhetorically embodies knowledge that highlights the interrelationship between literary texts and human activity. This emphasis on rhetoric and performance in the construction of a literary work can create a sense of presence that accentuates connections between orality and literature. In addition, rhetorical genre theory has the potential to yield insights beyond those addressed in critical approaches more usually applied to literature, because it offers a broader spectrum of interpretative options.

KEYWORDS: Genre, Rhetoric, Performative, Dramatism

1. Introduction

The word, “genre,” both in published work and in everyday conversation, usually means “category,” a classificatory concept meant primarily to distinguish various types of literary work. Some genres are classified according to conventions, such as the gothic novel, the detective story, or the romance novel; others are defined in terms of formal structural features, as with sonnets or epistolary novels. In classifying genres in these ways, the presumption is that the form of a genre incorporates particular qualities that enables a text to be what it is, to be viewed as a member of one category or another, and is capable of being evaluated in the context of that category. As Freedman and Medway (1994) note, the traditional view has been that genres are “(a) primarily literary, (b) entirely defined by textual regularities in form and content, (c) fixed and immutable, and (d) classifiable into neat and mutually exclusive categories and subcategories” (p. 1).

In the last thirty years, however, the word “genre” has been used outside of literary study, most significantly in the field of Rhetoric, Composition, and Linguistics, to refer to everyday texts of everyday people, and it now refers to more encompassing elements of texts than simply its formal features. This new view conceives of genre more broadly in terms of function and rhetoric and resists the idea that genres contain texts. Rejecting this “container” model, this new view maintains that genres interact in dynamic social contexts (or rhetorical situations) to both “organize and generate our social actions by rhetorically constituting the way we recognize the situations within which we function” (BAWARSHI, 2003, pp. 24-25). Derived from ideas associated with Kenneth Burke, Carolyn Miller, John Swales, M.A.K. Halliday, and Kathleen Jamieson, among others, current rhetorical genre theory explains that “genre” is much more than a series of categories, but is rather a typified rhetorical response to a recurrent situation within a community. Genres are defined not in terms of formal characteristics, but in terms of function, and they develop “because they respond appropriately to situations that writers encounter repeatedly” (DEVITT, 1993, p. 576). “Genres are not just forms. Genres are forms of life, ways of being. They are frames for social action” (BAZERMAN, 1997, p. 19).

This reconceptualized view of genre has been used to examine a number of real world, non-literary texts—jury instructions, medical forms, State of the Union addresses, writing assignments—to name only a few. Recently, however, the question has arisen about the potential of rhetorical genre theory for investigating literary texts. The current emphasis on
ideology, in particular, which, as Devitt notes, has been increasingly privileged in literary study, has led to a reconsideration of genre that is in many ways compatible with recreated views of rhetorical genres. To what extent, then, can rhetorical genre theory be used to examine a literary text? This essay will argue that rhetorical genre theory, with its emphasis on the interaction between speaker and audience and context in the creation of genre, offers a useful heuristic for studying literature by calling attention to performative elements in literary works, even those not specifically designated as “dramatic.” Moreover, it will further suggest that rhetorical genre theory has the potential to yield insights beyond those addressed in critical approaches more usually applied to literature, because it offers a broader spectrum of interpretative options.

2. Rhetorical and Literary Theories of Genre

Literary genres have been a subject of scholarly interest at least since Aristotle, who discussed the subject at length in The Poetics. For Aristotle, genre was a way of classifying, and, to a certain extent, ranking various text types, and it is this concept of genre that has persisted until only fairly recently, when the concept was redefined in terms of rhetoric and functionality. The rhetorical concept of genre redefines the concept as “typified social action that responds to a recurring situation, that is, “that people use genres to do things in the world (social action and purpose) and that these ways of acting become typified through occurring under what is perceived as recurring circumstances” (DEVITT, 2000, p. 698). Miller's article titled, “Genre as Social Action,” redefined genre by building on earlier work in twentieth century rhetorical theory, incorporating Kenneth Burke’s discussion of rhetorical acts in terms of responding to particular situations and then referring specifically to Lloyd Bitzer’s definition of the rhetorical situation as a “complex of persons, events, objects, and relations” presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence” (COVINO AND JOLLIFFE, 1995, p. 304). This reconceptualized view extended notions of genres beyond their association with a relatively stable set of discourse conventions. By defining genres in terms of exigence, purpose, action, and perceived recurring situation, this perspective provided a framework for understanding text as a typical rhetorical interaction that is situated within a social context.

For most literary theorists, however, the word “genre” retains its association with formal categories and is viewed as a minor issue, “at best as a category, a transparent lens for looking at and organizing texts that presumably function independently of it, and at worst as an imposition on the text and its author” (BAWARSHI, 2000, p. 26). In fact, as Bawarshi notes, some structuralist literary scholars reject the concept of genre, because it constructs artificial similarities within texts, and poststructuralists view genre as “an arbitrary and conservative attempt to impose order on what is ultimately indeterminate” (BAWARSHI, 2000, p. 172n).

Another potentially problematic issue when considering possible connections between rhetorical and literary concepts of genre is the recognition that genres change over time to meet changing situational exigencies. Devitt, in her book, Writing Genres, traces the development of the business memorandum, noting that this genre was reinvented in the nineteenth century in response to changing business needs. Whereas memoranda were once used primarily to communicate over long distances in order to apprise recipients of an occurrence, they metamorphosed from a purely communicative tool into one that served to document managerial actions. Such a change reflected the evolution of the business environment from small, family owned enterprises into larger corporate enterprises with quite different needs. Rhetorical genres, then, are “richly enmeshed in historical circumstance and particularity as they adapted to their times” (DEVITT, 2000, p. 701).
However, as Skinnell contends,

Just as rhetorical (non-literary) genres have changed in response to an evolving context of genres, so too have literary ones. For example, William Carlos Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow” is a poem (in the genre “poetry”) to contemporary readers, but it would not likely have been seen as fulfilling the needs of the “poetry” genre to Aristotle, or Shakespeare or even Whitman. (SKINNELL, 2007, p. 14).

Skinnell’s observation that both non-literary and literary genres evolve complicates the issue of how or if rhetorical genre theory can be used effectively to study literature, because in examining non-literary genres such as the memorandum or Freshman essay, one can trace changes over time in the genre itself, whereas a literary work remains unchanged, even though the way it is perceived is likely to change. As Skinnell notes,

Whereas memoranda can be studied to locate some of the textual changes they undertook over a forty year period in response to a developing context of genres, the process of studying change in a novel such as Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* is different because the text has remained principally unchanged since its publication. (SKINNELL, 2007, p. 15).

Thus, although the text itself hasn’t changed, the perception of the genre itself has. Whereas Defoe was presumably writing a contemporary novel in 1722, *Moll Flanders* can now be categorized as an eighteenth century novel, which, itself, partakes of other genres of which Defoe may not have been aware. It can easily be established that the genre of the memorandum has changed in response to a changing rhetorical situation, but how can that perspective to applied to a novel or a poem which has not changed in several hundred or even a thousand years? Does the fact that a Shakespeare play can resonate with a twenty-first century audience and is recognized as a “drama” mean that it is responding to human elements that transcend time, place, and culture? Matthew Arnold or E.D. Hirsch might readily agree that it does, but other literary theorists probably would not.

Nevertheless, despite these complexities, one can note several commonalities between the recreated notion of rhetorical genres and current recreated views of literary genres. Devitt discusses several parallels between rhetorical genre theory and current views of literature, “especially those deriving from new historicism and cultural studies” (DEVITT, 2000, p. 699). Citing Rosmarin, Cohen, and Perloff, Devitt notes the recognition, by both rhetorical and literary theorists, that texts are not “objective and static, but rather dynamic and created through the interaction of writer, reader and context (p. 700). Genres, then, “are historical assumptions constructed by authors, audiences and critics in order to serve communicative and aesthetic purposes” (COHEN, 1986, p. 210) and cannot be defined simply in terms of formalistic notions of what exists within a text. Moreover, both literary and rhetorical theorists acknowledge the importance of context and culture in the construction of texts. Although, as Devitt points out, “literary theorists tend to emphasize the relationship of the reader and the text while compositionists tend to emphasize the relationship of the writer and the text, all acknowledge the interactive nature of textual meaning, the rhetorical triangulation of writer-reader-text, and the embeddedness of those relationships within context or culture” (DEVITT, 2004, p. 165). Echoing Beebee’s notion of “use-value,” Devitt argues that both literary and non-literary texts are situated, functional, and ideological, qualities that suggest the potential usefulness of rhetorical genre theory for gaining insight into a literary work.
3. Genre and Performance

If genre is a form of social “action,” it is an action that must be performed, a term that is often associated with the idea of drama. Suzanne Langer, in “The Dramatic Illusion,” uses the term “act” to refer not simply to the divisions within a play but to any sort of human response, physical or mental. “All reactions are acts, visible or invisible,” Langer asserts, and “an act, whether instinctive or deliberate, is normally oriented toward the future. Drama, though it implies past actions (‘the situation’), moves not toward the present, as narrative does, but toward something beyond; it deals essentially with commitments and consequences” (LANGER, 1984, p. 4). Langer maintains that persons in drama are agents, and that an act “gives importance to the motives from which the act arises and the situation in which they develop” (p.4). On the stage, one can feel the “tension between past and future,” and it is this tension that provides the peculiar intensity known as “dramatic quality.”

Viewing a literary work in terms of rhetorical genre theory enables it to be perceived as active and experiential, set within a culturally constructed scene, thereby providing readers with enhanced insight into the interrelationship between literary texts and human activity. This emphasis on rhetoric and performance in the construction of a literary work can create a sense of presence that accentuates connections between a work of literature, the experience it seeks to convey, and the context from which it is derived. This perspective corresponds to and extends Bawarshi’s notion that “genres are implicated in the way we experience and enact a great many of our discursive realities (BAWARSHI, 2000, p. 339), “constitutive of the identities we assume within and in relation to discourse” (p. 343).


The interconnection between the work, the context, and the performative experience can be illustrated in the analysis of a non-literary genre that has already been examined through the lens of rhetorical genre theory—the introduction to a research article in the social sciences. In his book, Genre Analysis, John Swales discusses the importance of “moves” in academic texts as a way of understanding how a text proceeds in its purpose of affecting its intended audience. Using this idea of “moves,” Swales examined many social science research articles and concluded that most introductions in research articles adhere to a model he designated CARS: Create a Research Space. The moves within this model are as follows: 1) Establish a territory, 2) Establish a niche, 3) Occupy the niche. Although not every research article introduction is structured exactly in this way, and although research article introductions vary according to discipline, the model is used with sufficient regularity so as to be easily recognized.

Looking at the genre of the social science research article introduction, what can one ask about this genre that will enable a reader to experience it more fully? I suggest the following mode of inquiry that can serve as a heuristic to achieve this purpose:

1. Is this genre rhetorical?
2. What is the purpose of this genre?
3. How does its structure help it to fulfill its purpose?
4. What community or scene is it intended to serve?
5. Is there a performative element involved in this genre?
6. What power structures inform this scene?
7. On what assumptions is this scene grounded?
This heuristic, derived from rhetorical genre theory, can be used to examine the introduction to a social science research article and ultimately to experience it more completely. In response to the first question, “Is this genre rhetorical?” the response is obviously in the affirmative. The introduction to a research article is written in order to have an impact on scholars in the field who are involved with the topic. In response to the second question, “What is its purpose?” the straightforward answer is “to persuade the intended audience that the problem or issue was worth addressing, that the experimental design or approach was properly executed, and that the method led to the conclusion.” In response to the third question, “How does its structure help it to fulfill its purpose?” an appropriate response might be that the structure or moves within a social science research article introduction establishes the field, situates the research within that field, and provides relatively easy access to the main direction of the intended research. This is a concept that many students have difficulty understanding, a lack of awareness that affects not only their ability to write, but also their ability to undertake scholarly reading with sufficient engagement.

The fourth question, “What community or scene is it intended to serve?” initially yields the obvious response that the research article is oriented toward a particular academic field or, sometimes, only a few people within that field. But beyond that, the question leads to the more encompassing realization that the genre is intended for a much wider community, one that believes in the value of research, one that understands the importance, indeed, necessity, of sharing research findings—in other words, the whole enlightenment based world view on which our concept of research is based.

Is there a performative element involved in this genre (question #5)? This question is of particular importance for the central purpose of this article, in that it highlights the dramatistic elements implicit in what is usually perceived as a non-dramatic text. To respond affirmatively to this question implies the recognition that an introduction to a social science research article is embedded in a situation that recurs within a particular community or scene, and that this community or scene has generated the act that the genre embodies. The term, “scene,” calls to mind the idea of a past action and a performer who acts upon that scene, in order, as Langer phrases it, to create “the tension between past and future.” Engaging in research and writing a research article can thus be considered a performance, and the genre of the research article introduction enables us to “see” that performance. To some extent, the way in which we “see,” engage with, or experience that performance is dependent on other similar performances we have seen and on the knowledge we have obtained from those experiences, and this relationship between antecedent “viewings” pertains to actual dramatic performances as well. Someone who is familiar with Shakespearean drama and has seen performances of Hamlet on other occasions will experience a production of Hamlet quite differently from someone without background knowledge and who has not had antecedent experiences. Correspondingly, someone who is directly involved in social science research and understands its role in a particular academic scene will see a different performance than someone without such involvement. Nevertheless, the genre will generate the idea of a performance with its inherent tensions between past and future in anyone who has at least some understanding of the scene.

What power structures inform this scene (question #6). The introduction to a research article in the social sciences is a genre which confers power within an academic discipline and is intended for those who wield that power—editors of journals who will decide whether or not to publish the article, readers of the article, such as professors or researchers who will value or dismiss the findings, institutions that might fund research, students who seek admission to the academic community. On what assumptions is this scene grounded (question #7)? The genre of the research article introduction embodies a set of values that constitute a powerful ideology, one that privileges ideas of disciplinarity, of the dissemination of ideas, and of the progress of human understanding. Looking at this text from the perspective of rhetorical genre theory thus
enables us to pose questions that help us experience it as an action, not simply to view it as a set of prescribed formal features, but to understand how these formal features function to fulfill its purpose and reflect the power structures that inform the scene in which it occurs. In this way, we are able to engage with it more completely, as we might with a dramatic action.

5. Are Literary Texts Rhetorical?

In applying the heuristic discussed above to the genre of the introduction to a social science research article, the first question was “Is this genre rhetorical?” Therefore, in looking at a “literary” text, the first question to consider is whether literary texts can be viewed as rhetorical or whether rhetorical and literary texts are inherently different. In The Rhetoric of Fiction, Wayne Booth seems to avoid directly addressing this issue when he maintains that “All great literature has in fact made use of rhetoric” and that “the most admired literature is in fact radically contaminated with rhetoric” (BOOTH, 1983, pp. 98-99). Booth’s statement implies that literature may make use of rhetoric while not actually being rhetorical, a qualified position with implications for whether rhetorical genre theory can have a role in examining a literary work. The term “use” in Booth’s statement calls to mind the work of Thomas Beebee, who argues that generic differences are grounded in what he refers to as the “use-value” of a discourse, rather than its content, formal features, or its rules of production. For Beebee, the concept of genre can be understood as a set of “handles” on texts that enable us to situate a text both from within and without, from before and after, as an isolated entity (author, style, form, voice) and as part of a system which encompasses various audiences, communities, and influences.

Beebee’s view of “use-value” in the context of genre suggests that all “texts” are discourse that is influenced by author, reader, and context, and, as Bawarshi maintains, “readers consume text, but they also infuse a text with meaning, because readers are “in positions of interpretaton” (BAWARSHI, 2003, p. 28). In that context, discourse can be viewed as both a response to the world and an involvement in it, a position that is succinctly presented by Skinnell:

Readers produce to consume, and writers consume to produce, which points genre theorists to the notion that all texts are taking part in one or many discussions. And by virtue of defining all texts as naturally discursive, Rhetorical Genre theorists can conclude that all texts are also fundamentally rhetorical. (SKINNELL, 2007, p. 9)

If we view all text as discourse, and all discourse as rhetorical, it then follows that all text, both literary and non-literary, can be considered rhetorical, situational, responding to users’ needs, and evaluated in terms of “use-value.” Beebee’s notion of “use-value” suggests that users of discourse, both non-literary and literary, perceive the value of a generic classification if it fulfills a particular need. Although one may postulate a “rhetorical continuum,” since some texts are more obviously rhetorical than are others, “use-value” serves as a helpful indicator of the rhetorical nature of literature because it emphasizes the interconnections between situation, writer, and audience.

6. Applying the Rhetorical Genre Heuristic to a Work of Literature

Assuming that literary texts may be considered rhetorical, we can now take a look at a particular “literary” text to determine the extent to which the questions posed above about the social science research article introduction will yield useful insights. I use as my example George Orwell’s well-known and often anthologized work, “Shooting an Elephant,” written in 1936, which is a first person narrative, complete with all of the literary elements that are
associated with that genre—narration, description, suspense, reflection, and we can view the progression of the piece as a set of “moves.” As is the case in many short narratives, the text begins by providing a context for the action that will follow:

In Moulmein, in lower Burma, I was hated by large numbers of people—the only time in my life that I have been important enough for this to happen to me. I was a sub-divisional police officer of the town, and in an aimless, petty kind of way, anti-European feeling was very bitter.

The next paragraph makes the position of the narrator quite clear: He states, “I had already made up my mind that imperialism was an evil thing and the sooner I chucked up my job and got out of it the better. Theoretically—and secretly, of course—I was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British.” After elaborating on his hatred for both the British and the people who make his life miserable on a daily basis, in the fourth paragraph, the text reads “One day something happened which in a roundabout way was enlightening. It was a tiny incident in itself, but it gave me a better glimpse than I had had before of the real nature of imperialism—the real motives for which despotic governments act.”

Then comes the action of the narrative—an elephant was ravaging the bazaar and it was the policeman’s job to do something about it. The policemen sets out to see what is going on and discovers that the elephant had killed a man and that the people, forming a crowd behind him, are expecting him to kill it. Coming upon the elephant, he sees it peacefully eating grass, knows that its fit is passed and that he really should not kill it. It was, after all, a working animal and was unlikely to be a further danger to anyone. The crowd, however, has other ideas, and the narrator, at that moment, realizes

the hollowness, the futility, of the white man’s dominion in the East. Here was I, the white man with his gun standing in front of the unarmed native crowd—seemingly the leading actor of the piece; but in reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those faces behind. I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant, it is his own freedom that he destroys.

Finally, readers are confronted with the gruesomely vivid scene in which the protagonist attempts to shoot the elephant—its slow agonized death, the excitement of the people who are watching the performance, eager for the elephant meat. And then the final line, in which the narrator reiterates his point—on reflection, he realizes that his motive was simply “to avoid looking a fool.”

Is this text rhetorical and does it have a discernible purpose (questions 1 and 2)? There is no question that these questions must yield affirmative responses. “Shooting an Elephant” is an obviously anti-colonial text, made more immediate through the use of first person narrative. How does its structure help it to fulfill its purpose (question 3)? Examination of how the text is structured reveals particular narrative “moves” that are recognizable in terms of the short story or the personal essay. Such moves enable the text to impact readers because it fulfills the expectations of a genre with which so many readers are familiar: This is the way it was. This is how I was involved. This is what happened. This is the insight I gained from what happened. Although it is not structured exactly like a typical first person narrative essay, many of its elements are the same, and it is this similarity that makes “Shooting an Elephant” so well-suited for first year writing assignments that incorporate narrative and explains the frequency with which it is anthologized in Freshman Writing textbooks.

Is it set within a particular community or scene (question 4)? Certainly it is—its meaning is constructed in the context of British imperialism as it was manifested in the early twentieth century, but the scene itself and the power structures (question 6) embodied within it, still pertain. Within that scene, the performative elements embodied in the text are highlighted:
the protagonist acting within a particular scene, a scene that embodies a cultural and political ideology that has long historical roots and which embody assumptions about power structures (question 7) which still inform our world. Readers are able to understand both the social science research article introduction and Orwell’s text because they are familiar with the scenes in which these texts are intended to function. The genre enables readers to view both texts as a performance—to feel the tension between past and future, thereby creating dramatic intensity.

Of course, it must be acknowledged that at least some of the insights obtained by looking at a work of literature through the lens of the rhetorical genre heuristic defined and applied above could also be obtained by critical methods such as New Historicism or Cultural Studies. However, an important advantage provided by rhetorical genre theory is that it focuses more broadly than either of these approaches and is likely to yield more encompassing insights. The focus in New Historicism is primarily on the historical context in which a particular literary text is created. New Historicism examines texts within a historical context in order to highlight the oppressive power structures that inform those texts, an approach that is similar to that of cultural studies, which analyze texts to highlight cultural influences. Both of these methods focus on the historical or cultural context that generated the creation of a text as a means of enabling readers to gain additional insight into the conditions under which the texts were created and the way in which these texts reflect those conditions.

For example, examining “Shooting an Elephant” through the lens of new historicism would focus on historical exigencies of the time period, highlighting historical-cultural elements, and showing how the text reflects the period during which Orwell was writing. Rhetorical genre theory would yield similar information; however, it would also yield additional insights about why Orwell chose to use generic features associated with “the personal essay, short story, diary entry, news report, and police report (SKINNELL, p. 43), among others, and would also to trace antecedent genres and situational exigencies that generated Orwell’s text. It would also focus on the text itself, highlighting the rhetorical moves that propel the narrative, showing how the text responds to and influences the society in which it was written and how it functions, thematically and structurally, as a typified response to a recurrent situation.

Rhetorical genre theory thus opens up possibilities for looking at Literature with a greater breadth and depth than do other critical methods. It is a more inclusive method, in that it makes use of critical concepts such as text-as-discourse, the use-value of a text, and the historical/cultural context in which the text was written. In addition, rhetorical genre theory enables texts to be viewed in a performative context, thereby enabling readers to view a text and the recurring situation to which it responds as a lived experience.

References


