

Title: Enactment as Rhetorical Strategy in America's Most Effective Literary Journalism

Student Author: Gabrielle Bates Stahlman

Highlight Text:

This project attempts to discern features that culturally significant works of literary journalism have in common. The process involves conducting rhetorical analyses of three *New Yorker* articles published in the post-WWII era on behalf of victims of injustice. As the genre creative nonfiction becomes increasingly en vogue, the demand for scholarly criticism on creative nonfiction and its subgenres, such as literary journalism, grows as well. My rhetorical analysis of three groundbreaking works of literary journalism contributes to the current dearth of scholarship pertaining to the genre.

The three samples—“Hiroshima” by John Hersey, “Silent Spring” by Rachel Carson, and “A Letter from a Region in my Mind” by James Baldwin—were all published during the *New Yorker*'s “golden age,” during which the subscription rate doubled, New York City became a hub of international cultural leadership, and the educated middle class in America grew immensely. These articles have also endured the test of time; they are cited as being among the most important works of creative nonfiction ever published and remain in circulation today. Locating mid-century World Almanacs allowed me to narrow the scope of my investigation and justify the time period and publication from which I procured my samples.

Borrowing from the rhetoric of inquiry theory exemplified by James Boyd White, I read and annotated each work with a close eye for how language worked to reveal authorial intention. I sought commonalities that could be investigated in other works of literary journalism in the future. Visual mapping allowed me to see overlapping strategies such as enactment, in which the language structures physically reflect the actions and effects being described. Enactment functions within each of the samples at the sentence level and in the pieces' overall structures. By unpacking specific examples of enactment in “Hiroshima,” “Silent Spring,” and “A Letter from a Region in My Mind,” I was able to argue for enactment as a strategy that may contribute to the cultural resonance and rhetorical effectiveness of a literary journalism article.

To make a more definitive case for enactment as a unifying strategy at play among culturally significant works of literary journalism, one would need a much larger sample size. In addition, instances in which the physical structure of a sentence or article contradicts or complicates the author's meaning, rather than enacts it, would provide an important counterpoint for my preliminary investigation. Moving forward, I am interested in the possibility of investigating enactment through the lens of cognitive science, forming an interdisciplinary partnership to research how the physical structures of language affect how the brain processes the semantic meanings of that language. This would open up the topic to apply to all literary arts—including poetry and fiction—and potentially unearth biological roots of how and why certain units of language affect us more strongly than others.

Statement of Research Advisor: Gabby had to read secondary scholarship about American magazine culture and the genre of creative nonfiction in order to design her study with a sample of articles that was appropriate. Though her study was small, it used an established method of analysis appropriately and was able to demonstrate a common rhetorical feature that lays the ground work for further studies and opens new possibilities for linking cognitive processing with rhetorical choices made by authors. – Margaret J. Marshall, English

References

White, James B. (2002). Human Dignity and the Claim of Meaning: Athenian Tragic Drama and Supreme Court Opinions. *Journal of Supreme Court History*, 27 (1): 45-64.

