

## THE RHETORIC OF EMOTION, WITH A NOTE ON WHAT MAKES GREAT LITERATURE GREAT

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### ABSTRACT

Art and literature appeal to the emotions as well as to the intellect. The nature of that appeal, is not well understood; this is due, in part, to the fact that the emotions themselves are not well understood. Great literature, it is sometimes suggested, appeals to emotions that are basic to human nature. An alternative suggestion is that great literature refines, stretches, and ultimately transforms the emotions. These suggestions reflect two very different views of emotion: according to the first view, emotions—at least the so-called “basic” emotions—are innate responses that “in essence” remain invariant across time and culture; according to the second view, emotions are subject to creative change—fundamentally, not just in their outward expression. In this article, I present arguments in favor of the second view, and I propose that great literature challenges us to be creative in the emotional as in the intellectual domain—indeed, that these two domains of creativity are not distinct. Several sources of data attest to the ability of people to be emotionally creative; the present analysis focuses on the on-line construction (microgenesis) of emotional episodes, drawing on insights from the study of rhetoric.

What makes great literature great? I do not pretend to have an answer to this question—even to ask the question strikes me as a bit pretentious. In fact, I assume there is no single answer. Intellectual factors (e.g., increased knowledge) undoubtedly play a role; so, too, does the aesthetics of a work (e.g., the beauty of the composition). But whatever else is involved, many writers agree that great literature appeals to the emotions.

By great literature, I mean literature that has universal appeal—across time and culture. Some critics may doubt that any literature fits this definition. “Great” literature, according to these critics, is simply what is christened such by those in power, thus reinforcing the extant social structure. However that may be, I assume for the sake of argument that some literature does have universal appeal. I also assume that what Wordsworth (1805/1985) said about poetry—namely, that it “is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings . . . recollected in tranquillity”—could also be said about great literature as conceived of here. Expanding on his characterization of poetry, Wordsworth added that “the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind” (pp. 81-82).

Wordsworth’s formulation provides a starting point for analysis; it is, however, fraught with ambiguities. Are all emotions equal in their literary appeal? And why, in the case of aversive emotions such as fear, sorrow, and anger, is the recollected emotion experienced as pleasurable? To say that the recollected emotion is “kindred” to the original is not very informative.

Some of the ways that literature may be related to the emotions are depicted in Figure 1. For example, literature may achieve greatness—universality—by appealing to emotions that are basic to human nature (arrow “a” in Figure 1). Following Aristotle, it might also be asserted that great literature affords the catharsis of emotion (arrow “b”). These two answers are logically distinct: the first refers to the content of certain emotions (i.e., those that are basic and presumably universal); the second refers to a process (catharsis) that is also universal, but that might apply to any emotion, basic or not. In spite of their logical independence, these two answers may be combined in the proposition that great literature allows the catharsis of basic emotions (arrow “c”).

There are, however, several problems with this last proposition, as indicated by question marks on arrows “a” and “c” in Figure 1. Most notably, the notion of basic emotions is highly questionable. What is considered basic in one culture at one point in time may not even be recognized as an emotion in another culture or at another point in time in the same culture. A direct link between a literary work and catharsis (arrow “b”) is less problematic in this regard, for it focuses on a presumably universal process, namely, catharsis. But the notion of catharsis is not without difficulties of its own. Over a hundred years ago, John Morley (1886) observed that: “The immense controversy, carried on in books, pamphlets, sheets and flying articles, mostly German, as to what it was that Aristotle really meant by [catharsis] is one of the disgraces of the human intelligence, a grotesque monument to sterility” (p. 340).

The controversy continues, seemingly without end. This suggests that Aristotle was on the right track—it is simply not clear where the track leads. On one interpretation, catharsis leads to a purgation or release of emotional tension. To use Freud’s (1895/1955) graphic metaphor, catharsis is like opening a wound,

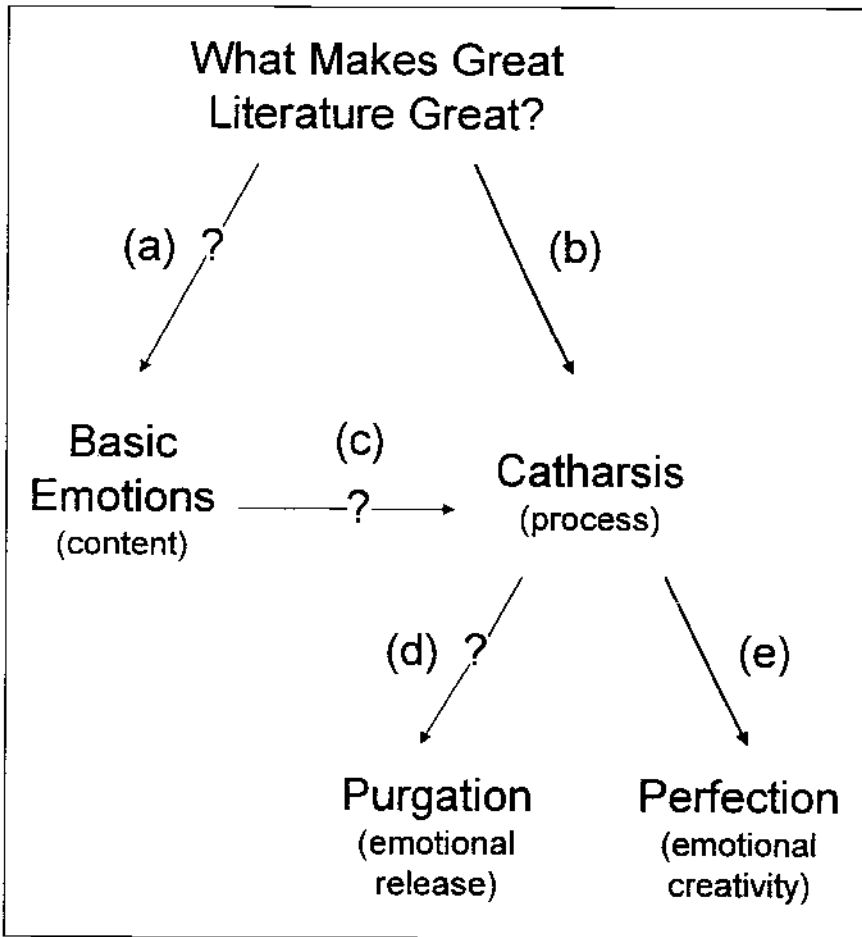


Figure 1. Some answers to the question, What makes great literature great? The question marks on links (a), (c), and (d) suggest that basic emotions and catharsis as purgation provide inadequate answers.

releasing a flow of pus. Emotional release undoubtedly occurs on occasion, on reading literature as well as during psychotherapy, and when it occurs, the results can be beneficial. However, the generality of catharsis in the sense of purgation is open to question (arrow "d," Figure 1). More often than not, witnessing or reading about an emotionally arousing event increases rather than decreases the probability of subsequent occurrences of the same emotion, often with undesirable consequences (most notably in the case of anger and aggression).

A more defensible interpretation of catharsis is indicated by arrow "e" in Figure 1, namely, catharsis leads to a perfection or refinement of the emotions. This is the interpretation that Morley seemed to favor, and the one that is favored by many contemporary writers on the topic (e.g., Oatley, 1999). But the notion of catharsis as perfection is not without difficulties of its own. Did Picasso perfect his painting, *Guernica*; Beethoven, the *Ninth Symphony*; or Shakespeare, *Hamlet*? To the extent that these works underwent successive revision, they were in a sense "perfected." But more was involved in their formulation and revision than simply bringing to perfection something that pre-existed: A work of art or literature is, first and foremost, an act of creation. Similarly, I want to argue that great literature—to the extent that it appeals to the emotions—achieves universality, not simply through the perfection or betterment of preformed emotions, but rather by allowing the reader to participate in an act of emotional creativity.

The phrase "emotional creativity" might seem like an oxymoron. Consider the following two propositions, both of which are commonly held. First, creativity is a predominantly human (late evolutionary) development, among the highest of the "higher" thought processes. Second, emotions are biologically primitive responses, remnants of our biological past. If these two propositions were correct, emotions and creativity would be distinct—even incompatible—phenomena.

### Emotional Creativity

Actually, a good deal of evidence suggests that emotional creativity is not only possible, but ubiquitous; hence, one of the above propositions must be incorrect. I will argue that it is the second, namely, that emotions are biologically primitive responses. Failure to recognize the creative aspects of emotional experience stems from deeply held cultural prejudices, dating back at least to the ancient Greeks, in which emotions have often been contrasted unfavorably with rationality, the presumed hallmark of humankind (Averill, 1974). Evidence for emotional creativity stems from three main sources.

1. *Cultural variation in emotional syndromes.* Emotions differ greatly from one culture to another. Although such differences are widely recognized, they are often dismissed as mere patina on more basic emotions, a corrosion of the pure emotional ore. But that interpretation already assumes the conclusion it is designed to demonstrate, namely, that the pure ore actually exists, masked by cultural display rules. Arguments against such a position have been presented elsewhere and need not be repeated here (Averill, 1980, 1984). Rather, let us take cultural differences in emotions at face value and ask, How did such difference arise? The answer, in brief, is that cultural difference are the product of emotional creativity on the individual level (Averill, 1999a).

2. *Individual differences in emotional creativity.* Not all people are equally creative in the emotional any more than in the intellectual domain. Hence, another

way to demonstrate emotional creativity is by examining individual differences in the ability to experience and express emotions that are novel yet adaptive. To this end, an Emotional Creativity Inventory has been constructed and its correlates explored. Again, the interested reader is referred elsewhere for details (Averill, 1999b). In the present paper, I pursue a third kind of evidence for emotional creativity, namely, the on-line construction—microgenesis—of emotional episodes.

3. *The microgenesis of emotional episodes.* An emotion does not spring fully formed from the head of a person, like Minerva from the head of Zeus, no matter how creative a person might be. Emotional episodes develop over time. Borrowing a term from cognitive psychology, we may call this process *microgenesis* (Arieti, 1962; Hanlon, 1991). The microgenesis of emotional episodes, I argue, is an on-line constructive process, subject to creative change as the situation demands. In making this argument, I draw on similarities between emotional and rhetorical episodes.<sup>1</sup>

Oatley (1999) suggests that literature—and I am counting rhetoric as a form of literature—can simulate vicissitudes of an emotion on the human brain, much like a computer program can simulate the course of an approaching storm on a computer. To the extent that is true, we have much to learn about the emotions from a study of literature, including rhetoric. But the reverse is also true, namely, our understanding of literature can profit from the study of emotion. This dialectic between theories of literature and emotion informs the analysis that follows. Later I return to the question, What makes great literature great?

A critic might object to counting rhetoric as a form of literature. Rhetoric is often viewed negatively, as glib or flamboyant speech intended to manipulate rather than inform. But similar comments can be—and have been—made by detractors of all forms of art. At its best, rhetoric has aesthetic and creative qualities comparable to literature; conversely, literature often has didactic or persuasive qualities comparable to rhetoric. In this respect it is instructive to compare two recent texts, *Contemporary Literary Theory* (Atkins & Morrow, 1989) and *Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric* (Foss, Foss, & Trapp, 1991); although they differ in format and emphasis, the two texts overlap considerably in content.

I draw on rhetoric not only by way of analogy (or simulation) to help clarify the nature of emotional creativity and its possible relation to literature. I am also engaging in a rhetorical argument to further demonstrate how emotions are, in

<sup>1</sup> The emotions represent a heterogeneous category. No single approach is applicable to all emotions equally. A rhetorical approach is most applicable to interpersonal episodes (as opposed, say, to fear engendered by physical threats or to such "objectless" emotions as endogenous depression). That, however, is not a great limitation. Most emotional episodes, even most fears and sorrows, involve interpersonal relationships.

fact, subject to creative change. In making a rhetorical argument, it is helpful to have a foil to argue against.<sup>2</sup>

### Preformism

The foil for my argument is the idea that emotions exist preformed in the mind or brain of an individual, and that emotional expression is an outward manifestation of this internal state. Stated in this fashion, preformism may seem like an eminently reasonable thesis. Therefore, let me begin with a nonpsychological example—one that also seemed eminently reasonable at one time.

Sometime around 1690, Nicolas Hartsoeker peered through a recently invented microscope at human spermatozoa. What he thought he saw is depicted in Figure 2—a small but fully formed human being encapsulated in the head of a sperm (Pinto-Correia, 1997). Later growth and development of the person was presumably an enlargement or unfolding of this preexisting being. Of course, being preformed, the miniature sperm-person had gonads of its own and, if male, spermatozoa which contained even more, microminiature beings, and so on back to the origins of the human race. This idea was not limited to naive observers captivated by a strange, microscopic world suddenly made visible. The philosopher and mathematician Leibnitz (1646-1716) cited Hartsoeker “and other able men” in support of his own idea that animals, including humans, exist preformed and wholly alive “in miniature in germs before conception” and that these “spermatic animals” have within their germs even more miniature animacules, and so on *ad infinitum* (see Leibnitz, 1951, pp. 109, 195 f., 526 f.).

I mention the above anecdote, not to demonstrate how observation can be biased by preconceived ideas, nor to illustrate how brilliant people can hold seemingly preposterous notions. Rather, I mention them to illustrate preformism, the appeal of which remains influential today, at least with regard to some types of developmental sequences. Stated most simply, preformism holds that development involves the actualization of a preexisting condition. The alternative to preformism has no single name; briefly, it is the thesis that elements of a developmental sequence are given unity—or continuity—by overlapping features, what Wittgenstein called “family resemblances.” To illustrate, imagine a rope the length of which is measured in time rather than physical distance. No single thread (“essence”) runs

<sup>2</sup> Others (e.g., Sarbin, 1995) have drawn attention to the similarities between emotional and rhetorical episodes. My own interest in a rhetorical analysis stems from collaboration with Pano Rodis, a former teacher of rhetoric (Averill & Rodis, 1998). Needless to say, rhetoric is not the only model that can be used to investigate the microgenesis of emotional responses; for example, Scheff (1997) has used a botanical metaphor to describe a “part-whole” analysis of emotional episodes, including episodes drawn from literature. Perhaps the most detailed program of research on the microgenesis of behavioral episodes is by Cronen and Pearce, two communication theorists (for a brief introduction, see Cronen, 1994). Their approach—the Coordinate Management of Meaning (CMM)—is both a theory of communication and a procedure for behavioral change; its application to emotion is well illustrated by Jia’s (2001) study of “face practices” in China.

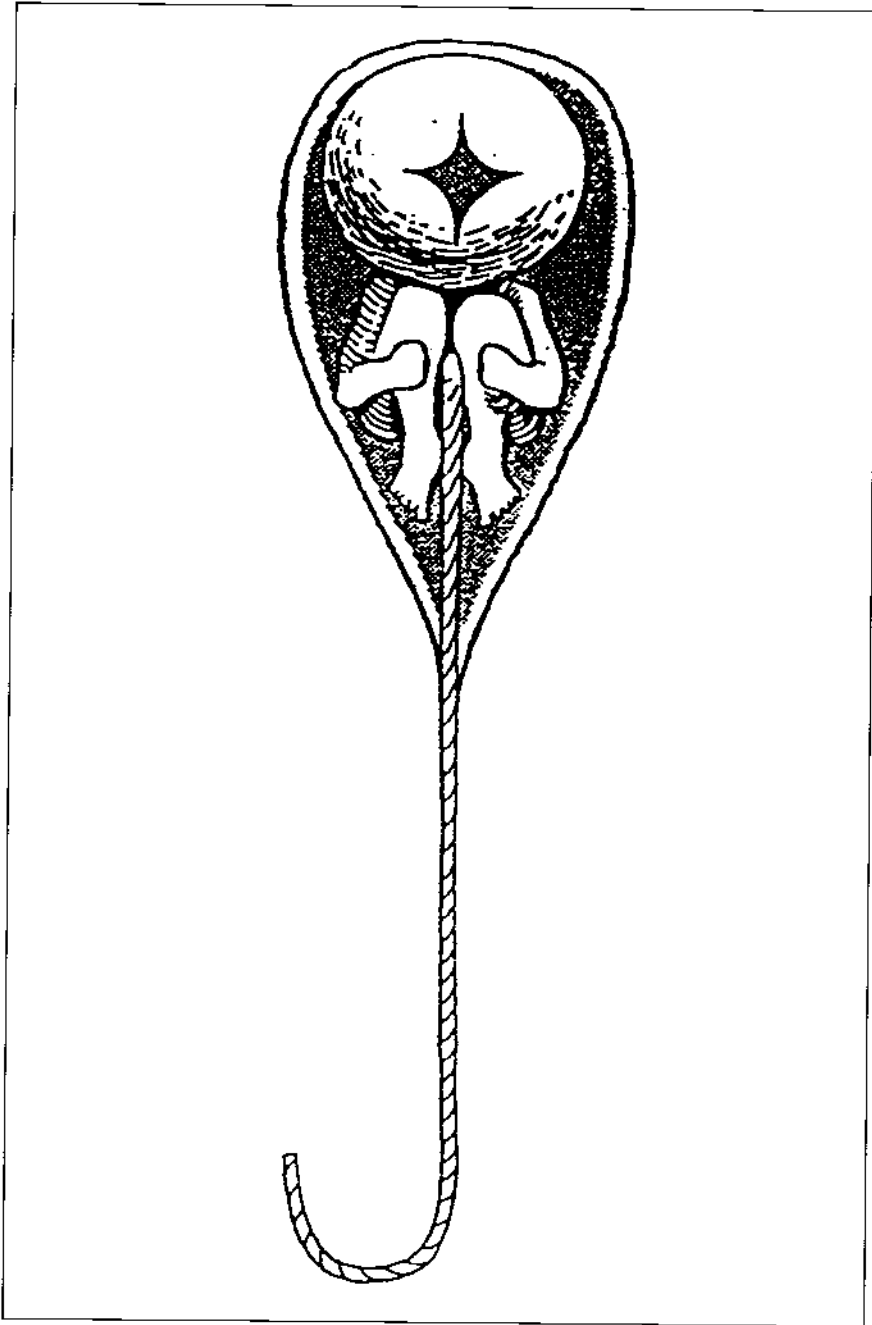


Figure 2. Hartdoeker's homunculus encased in the head of a sperm.

through the entire rope; rather a series of overlapping threads lends strength and unity to the entire sequence.

The rope analogy is too static to capture the dynamic changes that characterize the development of most emotional episodes. An oration or improvisational speech provides a better analogy. A speech may be read from a script, in which case its development is "performed." A good orator, however, may have only a goal in mind (the message) and a set of general guidelines on how to proceed. The actual speech is improvised and subject to change depending on feedback from the audience.

## TOWARD A RHETORIC OF EMOTION

The following anecdote by Frederick Douglas, ex-slave and abolitionist, illustrates the potential relation between rhetoric and emotion. On reading of a slave who argued so eloquently for his freedom that it was granted, Douglas decided to immerse himself in the writings of the great British orators of the 18th century—Pitt, Sheridan, Burke, and Fox. "The reading of their speeches," Douglas relates, "added much to my limited stock of language, and enabled me to give tongue to many interesting thoughts, which had recently flashed through my soul, and died away for lack of utterance" (quoted by Lasch, 1996, p. 186). I suggest that it was not only interesting thoughts, but also feelings that flashed through Douglas's soul, only to die away for lack of utterance.

### Historical Background

The first work on rhetoric, no longer in existence, was written by Corax of Syracuse in the 5th century B.C. Subsequently, the practice of rhetoric was taught by the Sophists, condemned by Plato, and systematized by Aristotle (ca. 334 B.C./1941), whose analysis continues to inspire discussion (Rorty, 1996). Aristotle clearly recognized that effective rhetoric presumes a theory of emotion, at least implicitly. The reverse is also true, I will argue shortly. That is, effective emotional expression presumes a theory (largely implicit) of rhetoric. But before getting to that, let me continue with this brief historical sketch of rhetorical theory.

Among the Romans, rhetoric became central to civic life (Cicero being a prime example), and it presumed the entire range of knowledge as well as ethics. Quintilian, whose *Institutes of Oratory* (A.D. 95, in Murphy, 1987) remained influential throughout much of the middle ages, described the ideal orator as "truly wise," "blameless in morals," and "accomplished also in science" (p. 8). Training in rhetoric, Quintilian advised, was to begin in infancy and continue throughout life. In medieval universities, rhetoric comprised one of the three major liberal arts (the trivium), along with logic and grammar. However, with the rise of modern science in the 17th century, the study of rhetoric began to lose much of its content and rationale to other disciplines. If the validity of an argument can be



proved conclusively by scientific means, the role of rhetoric is reduced to “mere” persuasion. And even the study of persuasion has been largely taken over by other disciplines, particularly psychology and communication studies.

The history of rhetoric is thus, in the words of Ricoeur (1996), “an ironic tale of diminishing returns” (p. 324). Ricoeur goes on to note that “in reducing itself thus to one of its parts, rhetoric simultaneously lost the nexus that bound it through dialectic to philosophy; and once this link was lost, rhetoric became an erratic and futile discipline” (p. 324). Ricoeur is, I believe, overstating the case. Rhetoric has expanded as well as contracted; it is no longer limited to the study of oral presentations, but includes literature and art as well. Thus, theories of—or, perhaps more accurately, approaches to—rhetoric are not only flourishing, they are multiplying in bewildering number, but under different rubrics: semiotics, structuralism, hermeneutics, deconstruction, and dialogics, to name but a few.

Contemporary approaches to rhetoric thus cast a wide net—wide enough to include the emotions. In speaking of emotions as a form of rhetoric, I am nevertheless speaking metaphorically. As in all metaphors, the question is, Can we apply what we know about the source (rhetoric) to the target (emotion)? The answer to this question is yes, if the source is analogous to the target—but not too analogous, if new insights are to be gained.

### **Some Analogies between Rhetoric and Emotion**

Perhaps the primary point of comparison is that both rhetoric and emotions have similar goals, namely, persuasion. Rhetoric has traditionally been defined as “the art of persuasion” and, as Aristotle well recognized, emotions are part of that art. Through emotions we cajole, assert dominance, offer praise, seek succorance, reproach misdeeds, warn of danger, cast aspersions, and many other things besides.

A less obvious similarity is that both rhetoric and emotions are occasioned by similar circumstances. As traditionally conceived, rhetoric is a means of approaching truth in situations where certainty is not possible, and yet where decision or action is called for. A legal dispute is a paradigm case. Logical argument and empirical evidence are of primary importance in such cases. But if logic and evidence were conclusive, there would be no real grounds for dispute, and hence no need for rhetoric. Where logic and evidence are inconclusive or yield conflicting results, other kinds of appeals must be made.

Oatley (1992) has persuasively argued that emotions are also occasioned by situations that call for action when knowledge is incomplete or goals conflict. Inverting the old theme that emotions are the animal in human nature, Oatley suggests that emotions are primarily human phenomena. Unlike infrahuman animals, we humans have few built-in modes of coping; instead, we have superior intelligence. But human intelligence is limited. We don’t always know what we want, nor how to achieve what we want, particularly when our goals conflict;

moreover, we must coordinate our actions with the often competing goals of others. To help compensate for our inadequate knowledge and competing ends, Oatley contends, we have emotions to guide our decisions and actions.

In short, rhetoric and emotion share two important features—namely, both are persuasive acts and both are occasioned by similar conditions. To these two we may add a third similarity—namely, both rhetoric and emotion are inextricably linked to values. According to Bryant (1953), “Rhetoric aims at what is *worth* doing, what is *worth* trying. It is concerned with *values*, and values are established with the aid of imaginative realization, not through rational determination alone; they gain their force through emotional animation” (p. 415, italics in original). Something similar could be said about the emotions. States such as anger, fear, love, guilt, and the myriad of other emotions recognized in ordinary language, are infused with value—they aim at what is worth doing or preserving. This link between emotions and values is so well recognized that it requires no further elaboration here. Suffice it to say that their common association with values helps distinguish both rhetoric and emotion from ostensibly more objective (rational) forms of persuasion.

### An Apparent Disanalogy

Rhetoric is concerned primarily with symbolic, especially verbal, activity. Oratory is the prime example, although other symbolic forms—visual art, for example, and poetry—are sometimes included within its domain. By contrast, as traditionally conceived, the expression of emotion (a grimace, say) is a sign of an internal state (the emotion proper), much as a symptom (a high temperature, say) is a sign of an internal state (the disease proper). Signs are not symbols; they are too closely tied to the event signified, and hence they play only an ancillary role in rhetoric. This fact might seem to limit any analogy between rhetoric and emotion.

To evaluate this objection, we must consider briefly the relation between emotion and language. One theme that runs through the history of rhetorical theory is the notion that reality is, in some sense, created through language. This was the position of the sophists of ancient Greece (which brought on them the ridicule and ire of Plato); it was also a theme revived by the humanists of the Renaissance, culminating in the work Giambattista Vico (1744/1948), and it is a thesis espoused by many contemporary theorists, especially those of a postmodern persuasion. Although this theme can be much overplayed, it is not entirely without warrant, especially with regard to our psychological reality: the way we think, feel, and behave is determined to a significant degree by the way we and others conceive of ourselves, a process that is closely associated with language.

Elsewhere (e.g., Averill, 1984), I have explored the formative influence of language on emotion, especially during ontogenesis. My concern now is with the microgenesis of emotional episodes. To keep this discussion brief, I will draw on Parkinson's (1995) “communicative” theory of emotion. Emotions are a form of

communication. On that point, most theorists agree. But communication of what sort? All social animals communicate by means of signs—bees dance, birds sing, cats purr, dogs wag their tails, etc. Humans communicate in ways similar to other animals, for example, by bodily movements, tone of voice, and facial expression. But humans also communicate symbolically, by means of language. Is emotional communication more like that of infrahuman animals, or does it share some of the same characteristics of human language (even when it is nonverbal)? Parkinson does not address this question directly, but his comprehensive analysis leaves little doubt about the answer.

Parkinson likens an emotional episode to a conversation. Not only does an emotional episode develop over time, as does a conversation, but how an emotion is expressed during an episode varies as a function of the intended message, the target, and the setting. What remains constant, if anything, is the message being conveyed. In general, the message conveyed is the way a situation is being evaluated, and what actions, if any, might ensue. For example, love communicates a desire for an intimate relationship; anger communicates blame and a desire for retribution; fear communicates a sense of danger; and so forth.

In a conversation, the same message can be conveyed in very different words, sometimes with triteness and banality, but sometimes with style and grace. And, of course, nonverbal expressions are an important part of any conversation; they help set the context and qualify the meanings of the words.

Emotions, too, can be expressed (both verbally and nonverbally) with banality or grace, and hence with varying degrees of effectiveness. Put differently, the expression of emotion is not simply a set of signs, elicited automatically like the symptoms of a disease; rather, emotions are symbolic forms that share many features in common with language, even when the emotional expression is primarily nonverbal.

### IMPLICATIONS OF RHETORIC FOR THE ANALYSIS OF EMOTIONAL EPISODES

From the wealth of historical and contemporary approaches to rhetoric, I will focus on a few threads that seem particularly applicable to the analysis of emotional as well as rhetorical episodes. These are illustrated in Figure 3.

Looking first at the bottom portion of Figure 3, a rhetorical episode consists of a speaker (the rhetor), one or more persons spoken to (the target), the message conveyed, and the mode of expression. Typically, the target is another person, but the target may also be the rhetor's own self, as when a person tries to convince himself of the truth of a proposition he does not wish to accept, or of the appropriateness of an action she does not wish to take.

For a message to be conveyed effectively, the mode of expression needs to be forceful, creative, and aesthetically appealing. A speech that is feebly spoken, laced with clichés, and inharmonious is unlikely to be convincing, no matter its

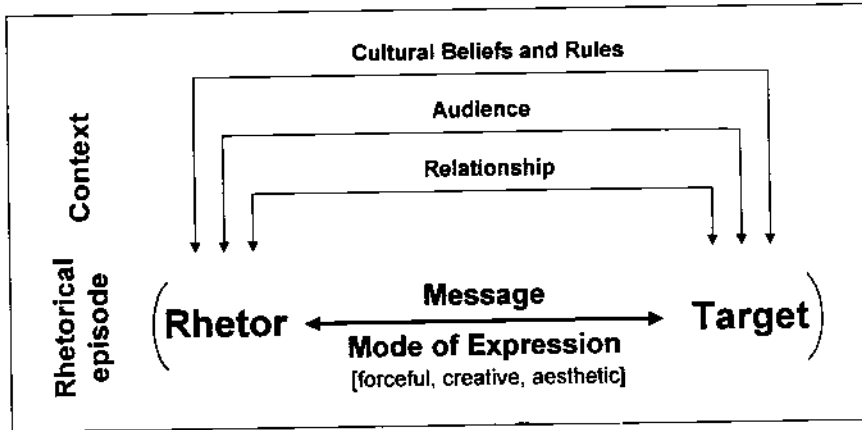


Figure 3. A rhetorical episode and three contextual layers. Substitute "Emoter" for "Rhetor" and "Emotee" for "Target" and the same diagram can be used to depict an emotional episode.

message. The mode of expression has thus received great attention from teachers of rhetoric. In the final analysis, however, it is the message—not its expression—that lends meaning to an utterance.

A rhetorical episode does not occur in a vacuum; it requires a context, three aspects of which are depicted in the upper portion of Figure 3. The first contextual layer is the relation between the rhetor and the target—what Bryant (1953) has called the "internal rhetoric" of an episode. As described earlier, rhetoric (as traditionally conceived) involves a search for the truth. But, as Thoreau (1849/1980) observed: "It takes two to tell the truth, one to speak and another to hear." Continuing, Thoreau observed that "only lovers know the value and magnanimity of truth" (p. 267). A bit of hyperbole, clearly, but the point should be well-taken: the more intimate the relation between the rhetor and the target, the more likely the message will be heard.

The second contextual layer depicted in Figure 3 is the audience to the episode, or what Bryant (1953) has called the "external rhetoric"—an appeal to a third party. To illustrate, in a politically charged trial, the attorneys may be trying to convince the jury (the target) of the defendants' guilt or innocence (internal rhetoric); at the same time, they may be attempting to influence the wider public of the rightness of their positions (external rhetoric).

The audience need not include specific persons, but may involve the "generalized other," in which case we may speak of the beliefs and norms of society, the third contextual layer depicted in Figure 3. Outside of a shared cultural context, a rhetorical episode, no matter how eloquently expressed, is unlikely to be understood by a target or audience.

## The Rhetoric of Emotion

With only two changes, Figure 3 can be used to describe emotional rather than rhetorical episodes: in place of the rhetor we have the *emoter*, and in place of the target we have the *emotee*. The introduction of the latter term (*emotee*) serves to emphasize the fact that emotions cannot be conceived of simply as intrapsychic phenomena (feelings, neural affect programs) located in the mind or brain of the individual; rather, emotions exist "out there" in the interaction between the *emoter* and *emotee*.

To say that an emotion exists "out there" does not mean that it is experienced the same way by all participants in an episode. Like any event, the emotion may feel different depending on the perspective from which it is perceived. For example, anger may feel different from the first-person perspective (the *I* who is angry) than from the second-person perspective (the *You* at whom I am angry), and different still from a third-person perspective (the *He, She, or They* who are audience to the episode).

As is true of rhetoric, an emotion may be expressed forcefully or feebly, creatively or mundanely, and aesthetically or crassly. There are Don Juans of anger, grief, and fear, just as there was a Don Juan of love. Because the mode of expression is such an important part of any emotional episode, it has tended to distract attention from the message being conveyed, namely, how the situation is being appraised and what action might ensue. The so-called cognitive revolution in the study of emotion has served to correct this imbalance, but only partially. A disproportionate amount of research and theory is still focused on expressive reactions, particularly facial expression.

Turning to the context in which an emotional episode occurs, the first contextual layer (see Figure 3) refers to the relation between the *emoter* and *emotee*, that is, to the "internal rhetoric" of the episode. To be effective, the *emoter* must be able to identify with, or enter into the world of, the *emotee*; and, conversely, to be affected the *emotee* must identify with the *emoter*. Take anger. People are less likely to become angry at strangers, with whom they have no ongoing relationship, than with friends and loved ones (Averill, 1982). Yet most psychological research and theory on anger is based on laboratory studies involving strangers. The result is a limited, if not distorted, picture of the typical angry episode.<sup>3</sup>

Many emotional episodes also have an "external rhetoric," that is, an appeal to a third party or audience (the second contextual layer depicted in Figure 3). The effect of an audience on emotional episodes has been frequently noted. For example, people seldom laugh as uproariously or cry as copiously when alone as in the presence of others. The audience need not actually be there; the well socialized

<sup>3</sup> At the risk of stating the obvious, it is important to note that the *emoter* can on occasion also be the *emotee*, as when a person becomes angry at his or her own self. This is the emotional analogue of talking to oneself.

individual is always in the presence of others, if only implicitly, and even presumably "hard-wired" emotional expressions (e.g., grimaces, frowns, smiles, etc.) may vary according to the imagined audience (Fridlund, 1994).

The third contextual layer is the cultural matrix in which the emotional episode occurs. The emotions are often treated as though they were divorced from culture, mere remnants of our animal heritage. Nevertheless, the influence of culture is pervasive; so pervasive, in fact, that it is easy to overlook. Note, however, for a person to be assimilated into a culture it is not sufficient to know the ideology of the people—a good anthropologist might achieve that level of understanding; rather, a fully assimilated person must be able to experience the emotions considered basic to the culture. To paraphrase what Bryant (1953, p. 415) said about rhetoric, it is through "emotional animation," not through rational determination, that cultural beliefs and values gain force.

Generally, the three contextual layers tend to reinforce one another, thus lending an emotional episode an unambiguous meaning. However, when emotional responses are expressed out of context, they are notoriously subject to misunderstanding. Disjunctions can also occur between contextual levels, as when the emotion conveys one message to the emotee and another to the audience. Satirists often capitalize on such disjunctions, as the maxims of La Rochefoucauld (1665/1959) presented in Table 1 illustrate.

### Rhetoric and the Poetics of Emotion

Rhetoric is long on history but short on theory. That is due, in part, to the fact that rhetoric has always been concerned with practice—for example, the invention of persuasive arguments, or even more broadly, the education of an orator. But there is another, more fundamental reason. Theory deals with abstractions, with universals. Rhetoric, by contrast, focuses on concrete human actions within particular contexts. In this respect, rhetoric has less in common with theory than with poetry.

By poetry, I do not mean only the writings ordained as such by literary critics; rather, poetry, as here conceived, is a play of the imagination that finds expression in symbolic form. Emotions can be poetic in this sense; the fact that they seldom are, is perhaps more a commentary on our lack of imagination (and education) than it is on the nature of emotion.

Poetry, even when conceived in the narrow (literary) sense, is closely allied not only to rhetoric, but also to the emotions. Earlier, I quoted Wordsworth (1805/1985) to the effect that poetry is the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings . . . recollected in tranquility" (p. 84). Recollection, whether tranquil or not, is only part of the story. Poetry is also present and future oriented. Collingwood (1938/1955) has captured this aspect: "Until a man has expressed his emotions, he does not yet know what emotion it is. The act of expressing it is therefore an exploration of his own emotions. He is trying to find out what these

Table 1. Selected Maxims of La Rochefoucauld, Illustrating a Disjunction between the Internal and External Rhetoric of Emotional Episodes

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The clemency of princes is often nothing but policy to gain popular affection. (#15).

People with a high opinion of their own merit make it a point of honour to be unhappy so as to convince others as well as themselves that they are worthy victims of the buffetings of fate. (#50)

Sincerity . . . is found in very few, and what is usually seen is subtle dissimulation designed to draw the confidence of others. (#62)

Most men's gratitude is but a covert desire to receive greater gifts. (#298)

We own up to minor failings, but only so as to convince others that we have no major ones. (#327)

Most women bewail the death of their lovers not so much because they loved them as in order to appear worthy of being loved. (#362)

There is often more pride than kindness in our pity for the misfortunes of our enemies, for we make a display of sympathy in order to impress them with our own superiority. (#463)

We only blame ourselves in order to be praised. (#554)

Consolation for unhappiness can often be found in a certain satisfaction we get from looking unhappy. (#573)

If we ever admit our shortcomings it is through vanity. (#609)

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emotions are" (p. 111). Using the 9th century poet/critic Ssu-k'ung T'u, as an example, Sundararajan (1998) has illustrated how crude affective experiences can be refined and even transformed through poetry. Ssu-k'ung T'u may have been exceptional in this regard, but he was not an exception. Everyone has the talent to be poetic, at least to a limited degree.

Needless to say, emotions are not free to vary without constraint. The general form of our emotions is contoured by biological predispositions (phylogenesis), fashioned by the beliefs and values of society (sociogenesis), and further molded by individual experience (ontogenesis). But none of these genetic influences implies preformism. Emotions remain sufficiently open-ended to allow for imaginative play during the course of an episode (microgenesis).

What about those emotional episodes that are not poetic (imaginative, creative), or are only minimally so? Is rhetoric irrelevant to their analysis? Foss, Foss, and Trapp (1991) define rhetoric as a perspective as well as a practice. They further divide rhetorical practices into paradigm cases (e.g., a lawyer arguing before a jury) and peripheral cases (e.g., a journalist whose reporting, perhaps unintentionally, leads others to change their views). As will be illustrated shortly, some emotional episodes are paradigmatically rhetorical; most are only peripherally so. But in either case, a rhetorical perspective can be applied to their analysis.

A rhetorical perspective is a set of principles derived from rhetorical practices, however those principles might be applied. The following is a summary: First, since rhetorical practices occur in situations that are inherently problematic and potentially controversial, a rhetorical perspective recognizes the uncertainty and indeterminacy of a response. Second, persuasion implies a receiver as well as a sender of a message; hence, a rhetorical perspective focuses on the target as well as the initiator of a response. Third, with its emphasis on persuasion, a rhetorical perspective accentuates the forcefulness, creativity, and aesthetics of behavior. Fourth, the mode of expression is, however, subsidiary to the message, that is, to the symbolic significance or meaning of the response. And, finally, since the meaning of behavior is often hidden under layers of rationalizations (on the individual level) and ideologies (on the social level), a rhetorical perspective invites an examination of established beliefs and norms.

### ILLUSTRATIVE APPLICATIONS

Viktor Frankl (1984) recounts the following incident that occurred while he was a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp. A semi-starved inmate had stolen a few pounds of potatoes. As punishment for refusing to reveal the name of the inmate (which would have meant his immediate death), others in the camp were deprived for a day of their already meager rations. On the evening of the day of enforced fasting, the inmates were "in a very low mood"; then, when electricity failed and the lights suddenly went out, "tempers reached their lowest ebb." At that point, Frankl, himself "cold and hungry, irritable and tired," was asked by the senior block warden (also a prisoner) to speak to the men in an attempt to forestall suicides, which had become frequent of late. Frankl began by asking his fellow inmates to remember their pre-war successes and happiness, for as he said, no one can take from a person his memories. Frankl then spoke of the ways that hardship can make a person stronger:

I told my comrades (who lay motionless, although occasionally a sigh could be heard) that human life, under any circumstances, never ceases to have a meaning, and that this infinite meaning of life includes suffering and dying, privation and death. I asked the poor creatures who listened to me attentively in the darkness of the hut to face up to the seriousness of our position. They



must not lose hope but should keep their courage in the certainty that the hopelessness of our struggle did not detract from its dignity and its meaning. I said that someone looks down on each of us in difficult hours—a friend, a wife, somebody alive or dead, or a God—and he would not expect us to disappoint him. He would hope to find us suffering proudly—not miserably—knowing how to die (Frankl, 1984, p. 104).

Pano Rodis (personal communication) offered an analysis of this episode on which I freely draw. Perhaps the first thing to note about the episode is also the most obvious—it was a highly emotional occasion; Frankl was not delivering a disinterested speech, but neither were the emotions conveyed those that one might expect in a situation so dire (e.g., fear, anger, despair).

At the beginning of the episode, Frankl reminds his fellow sufferers that life “never ceases to have meaning.” He does not say what that meaning is, only that it is “infinite.” He does not have to be more specific, for both he and his fellow inmates come from the same cultural background, and they share many of the same implicit assumptions about life. The main thing from a rhetorical perspective is that Frankl’s reference to “meaning” has a positive, future-oriented connotation. Frankl thus recontextualizes the experience; the men can begin to respond differently, for they now stand in relation to something far better than the camps.

Next, Frankl acknowledges the seriousness of the situation. Had he simply reminded his listeners of life the way it was before the war, or the way it perhaps might be in heaven, he would have taken them along the path of escapism, a path so at odds with their present reality that it ultimately would have led nowhere. By forcing a meeting between positive emotions evoked by the thought of a meaningful life and negative emotions evoked by the prospect of a senseless death, he set the stage for a new synthesis that was realistic yet hopeful; a synthesis, moreover, that the men could draw on in the future to help them cope in their day-to-day struggles.

The third rhetorical move that Frankl makes is to introduce shame into the flux of emotion. He does this by invoking the names of those to whom the prisoners might feel a sense of loyalty based on love and affiliation. To give up hope would be to “disappoint” these loved ones. This gentle shaming process suggests that the prisoners *must* adopt a positive outlook; to do otherwise would constitute moral error, a betrayal of their own selves. By directing the prisoners’ attention to their moral obligation to loved ones, Frankl diminishes the power of the situation to dictate the emotions.

Finally, Frankl redefines personal competence by suggesting that the prisoners should show that they “know how to die.” Ordinarily, a person’s competence is measured by what he or she accomplishes in life; but in the camps, life allowed few accomplishments beyond simple survival from one day to the next. Frankl therefore proposes a new ethic, a new kind of accomplishment, one suitable to the realities of the camps. The challenge to face death proudly, for those who could

accept it, provided a sense of control that could not help but have a powerful influence on the emotional state of the inmates.

Frankl's intent in this episode was explicitly rhetorical; that is, he sought to persuade his fellow inmates to feel and respond differently to their plight. We should not assume, however, that Frankl's own emotional experience was any less intense or sincere on that account. Nor should we assume that, before the episode began, the complex of emotion already existed preformed in his mind (or "gut"), only to be expressed in a highly persuasive way. Rather, the emotions of both Frankl and his fellow inmates emerged synergistically as the episode progressed.

Not all emotional episodes are so explicitly rhetorical, as in this example by Frankl. Consider the Victorian lady who faints on hearing a sexual innuendo. She is not deliberately trying to persuade her audience of her virtue; yet her "performance" can be analyzed from a rhetorical perspective. Her faint is not like a stumble or a *grande mal* epileptic seizure; as she slumps to the floor, she manages to avoid both injury and embarrassment. (It would be unseemly to have one's skirt fly above one's waist in the name of sexual propriety.) Although involuntary (in a deliberate, conscious sense), Victorian fainting was a self-controlled, symbolic act.

Most emotional episodes fall somewhere between a Victorian faint and an explicitly exhortatory appeal, such as that by Frankl. But regardless of where it falls along this dimension, to the extent that an episode carries a message, and can be done well or poorly, it is subject to analysis from a rhetorical perspective.

### A FINAL NOTE ON THE APPEAL OF LITERATURE

To summarize briefly, the emotions—especially basic emotions—are commonly held to be biologically primitive responses, hard-wired into the nervous system during millennia of human evolution. By contrast, I have argued that emotions are social and individual constructions and hence subject to creative change (but not immune to biological influences). Three types of evidence support this argument: 1) cultural differences in emotional syndromes; 2) individual differences in the ability to be emotionally creative; and 3) the improvisation of emotional responses during the course of an episode. The present article has focused on the last of these three types of evidence, using rhetoric as a model for the analysis of emotional episodes.

Let me now return to the question, What makes great literature great? The answer I have offered is that great literature allows the reader to participate in an act of emotional creation, or re-creation. I further suggested that emotional creativity is the way catharsis exerts its influence, as opposed to a "purgation" of preformed emotions.

The above suggestions are not original, although their empirical basis may not be widely appreciated. Consider the following observations by D. H. Lawrence (1936). Lawrence contrasted what he called feelings with emotions: feelings are

poorly formed, opaque, and ephemeral; they arise from deep within a person's nature—that nature which is metaphorically both lower (our untamed animal heritage) and higher (the God within). “And from Him [the God within] issue the first dark rays of our feeling, wordless, and utterly previous to words: the innermost rays, the first messengers, the primeval, honourable beasts of our being, whose voice echoes wordless and for ever wordless down the darkest avenues of the soul, but full of potent speech” (p. 759). In contrast to feelings, Lawrence conceived of emotions as well-formed, clear, and fixed; they are part of our cultural heritage, recognized and named in ordinary language. It is up to the creative artist and writer in all of us, Lawrence insinuated, to give voice to feelings without imprisoning them in conventional emotional categories.

I believe that recent research on the emotions, only some of which I have reviewed here, supports Lawrence's insight. I would, however, phrase the issue somewhat differently (Averill, 1999a), even if less eloquently. Society provides us with a set of beliefs and rules that, together with biological predispositions (“our untamed animal heritage”), help constitute the emotional syndromes recognized in ordinary language (e.g., anger, fear, love, and grief). These syndromes are part of the culture into which we are born. During socialization, an individual acquires (internalizes) the relevant beliefs and rules to form emotional schemas—cognitive structures that help shape the feelings and behavior of the emoter, emotee, and any third-party witnesses to the emotion.<sup>4</sup> Emotional schemas do not “run off” automatically during the course of an episode. Rather, a good deal of improvisation occurs, depending on the goals of the emoter and emotee, and on the context in which the interaction occurs. The results of such improvisations may, in turn, feed back to alter the beliefs and rules that help constitute the emotional syndromes. The slow accumulation of such changes, diffused throughout a society, is one of the ways that emotions undergo historical change and diverge across cultures.

Due to exigencies of the situation and conservative social pressures, emotional improvisation is typically limited. Literature is not so constrained. Tsur (1983) has described literature as “organized violence against cognitive structures and processes” (p. 8). It is an apt phrase (I thank Louise Sundararajan, personal communication, for calling it to my attention). The “violence” is not limited to the intellectual domain, but applies with equal force to emotional schemas. What is left following disruption of emotional schemas are the “dark rays of our feeling, wordless, and utterly previous to words” alluded to by Lawrence. These

<sup>4</sup> The distinction between emotional syndromes and emotional schemas has been described in detail elsewhere (e.g., Averill, 1999a). Whereas emotional syndromes corresponds roughly to what Lawrence calls “emotions” *simpliciter*, emotional schemas are intervening variables—intrapsychic mechanisms—that help mediate between an emotional syndrome (which exists “out there” as part of the culture) and the behavior and feelings (in Lawrence's sense) of participants during an emotional episode.

"honourable beasts of our being" are not, however, unadulterated biological impulses; rather, they are new emotions in the making. Drawing on Arieti's (1976) analysis of creativity, I refer to such nascent emotional schemes as "endocepts" (Averill & Nunley, 1992; see also, Getz & Lubart, 1998). We have no words for endoceptual experiences, not because they are primordial in a biological sense, but because they are new and different and idiosyncratic to the individual. Yet they are, as Lawrence states, "full of potent speech." In the hands of a skilled writer with aesthetic sensibility, they are the stuff of great literature.

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