A Proposal for Teaching the Literary Essay through a Rhetorical Analysis

Margarita Esther Sánchez Cuervo, University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain

Abstract
The literary essay is a heterogeneous genre that may contain expository, narrative, descriptive and argumentative types of text. Due to its indefinite nature, it is difficult to find critical studies that develop an accurate understanding of the essay that may lead to an objective teaching of this genre. However, as an exemplar of the argumentative discourse, the literary essay can be studied following a rhetorical model of analysis. Rhetoric can be seen as a general model of text production and as an instrument of textual analysis. In this vein, some rhetorical principles related to *inventio*, *dispositio* and *elocutio* can be recognised in the construction of the modern essay. *Inventio* is concerned with the generation of arguments. *Dispositio* is related to the order of the arguments, and contains the *partes orationis*: *exordium*, *narratio*/*expositio*, *argumentatio* and *conclusio*. By means of *elocutio*, the students recognise the expressive devices that contribute to defining the style of the essay, such as rhetorical figures.

To illustrate my proposal, I use several extracts from Virginia Woolf's short essays. Woolf wrote a large number of literary reviews for the press that can be read following this rhetorical approach and that provide a rich source of arguments and rhetorical figures. In the course of my analysis, I offer undergraduate students of English language and literature some guidelines for the analysis. By using this model, these students can also acquire the training to examine other essays belonging to past and present essayists.

Introduction

The teaching of literature in many universities is usually restricted to the major literary genres: narrative, poetry and drama. As a result, the essay has often been ignored in contemporary literature teaching programmes. The literary essay has been traditionally considered a hybrid genre that comprises different types of text such as the expository, the descriptive, the narrative and the argumentative. The essay presents an exploratory, experiential and inconclusive form that has restrained the existence of precise models of analysis and, for this reason, the teaching of the essay as a genre is not very common.

In this respect, Saloman (2012, p. 13) states that the absence of the literary essay in the classroom is due to the indifference that many scholars feel towards this genre, and the fact that they aren't able to recognise either its literary value or its significance to modern writers. Furthermore, the openness of this genre has favoured the writers' autonomy and the reader's participation in the essayistic process, which has encouraged the existence of diverse interpretive responses (Saloman 2013, p. 56). Although it is a genre that is difficult to categorise, the argumentative nature of the essayistic act is usually preponderant and the essay can be then approached following a rhetorical model of analysis. Through this model, some principles related to the invention of arguments (*inventio*), their arrangement (*dispositio*) and expressive manifestation (*elocutio*) are useful in the construction of argumentative texts like the modern essay (Arenas, 1997, p. 134).

The following section of this study discusses the essay within a rhetorical context and offers an outline of the rhetorical levels that can be encountered in the essay: *inventio*, *dispositio* and *elocutio*. To illustrate my proposal, I use several extracts from Virginia Woolf's short essays. Woolf wrote a large number of literary reviews for the press that can be read following this rhetorical approach and that provide a rich source of arguments and rhetorical figures.

In the course of my analysis, I offer undergraduate students of English language and literature some guidelines for the analysis. By using this model, these students can also acquire the training to examine other essays belonging to past and present essayists.

Theoretical framework: the essay from a rhetorical perspective

Before conducting the analysis, it is necessary that students have some knowledge about the rhetorical tradition as regards to its historical background and more modern conceptions of this discipline. They have already analysed poetic texts in which they have to recognise, analyse and further interpret the varied array of rhetorical figures that are especially present in the poetic genre, but maybe they ignore the operations of classical rhetoric that are present in the production of rhetorical speech and that will be subsequently identified in the analysis of the essays.

In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle refers to a semantic and pragmatic conception of *logos* immersed in a construction of the speaker, the spoken content and the hearer (Aristotle, 1909, I.3). In a wide sense, Rhetoric is at the same time a general model for the production of texts and an instrument of textual analysis (Albadalejo, 1989, p.

11; Lausberg, 1983, pp. 83-84). The textual model of Rhetoric thus possesses a semiotic nature that includes the formal construction of the text (syntax) deriving from its referential elements (semantics) and that confers a relevant place to all intervening elements in the communication of the text (pragmatics): addresser, addressee and the contexts of production and reception. In Woolf's essays, the pragmatic dimension is particularly important because of the explicit presence of the essayist wishing to agree with the "common reader" to whom she dedicates her first published volume of essays:

> There is a sentence in Dr Johnson's *Life of Gray* which might well be written up in all those rooms, too humble to be called libraries, yet full of books, where the pursuit of reading is carried on by private people. '... I rejoice to concur with the common reader; for by the common sense of readers, uncorrupted by literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtilty and the dogmatism of learning, must be finally decided all claim to poetical honours' (Woolf, 1984, p. 1).

However, Rhetoric also becomes a theory of argumentation such as that devised by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969), who studied both the rational and linguistic mechanisms present in argumentation and the effects of the text upon the audience. In this line, arguments can be defined as linguistic patterns that transfer acceptability from premises to conclusions. Similarly, rhetorical figures can also serve as arguments because of the ways they are constructed to engage the audience thanks to their effective nature and their capacity for attracting attention (Tindale, 2004, p. 63).

Classical rhetoric recognises five operations or *partes artis* in the production of rhetorical speech: *inventio*, *dispositio*, *elocutio*, *memoria* and *actio* ([Cicero], 1981, I.7; Quintilian, 1920, III.3). In argumentative texts like the essay, the levels of *memoria* and *actio* are usually absent since they have to do with the memorisation of the text and its oral reproduction, respectively.

Through *inventio*, the author selects those elements that comprise the referent of discourse and that allows different types of arguments to be chosen and constructed (Crosswhite, 2011, pp. 200-201). In Woolf's reviews, the central argument is the act/person interaction. By means of this reasoning, the reaction of the act that corresponds to the person's artistic output, judgement, or reaction, is meant to revise our conception of that individual (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, pp. 297-98). Woolf shows a fondness for focusing on personal facts rather than recognised facets. We thus obtain a different impression of the person under study, and interpret his/her actions against that newly established character (Fahnestock, 2005, pp. 219-20).

For example, in her essay about Jane Austen, she admits at the beginning of her text that "Hence our knowledge of Jane Austen is derived from a little gossip, a few letters, and her books. As for the gossip, gossip which has survived its day is never despicable; with a little arrangement it suits our purpose admirably" (Woolf, 1984, p. 134). In this extract, the author advances that she will use Austen's personal information and also her novels in order to characterise the great novelist.

Another passage from the essay "*Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*" shows Charlotte Brontë's personal circumstances through her famous novel *Jane Eyre*: "In that

parsonage, and on those moors, unhappy and lonely, in her poverty and her exaltation, she remains for ever. These circumstances, as they affected her character, may have left their traces on her work" (Woolf, 1984, p. 155).

Through *dispositio*, the syntactic and semantic conceptual elements deriving from *inventio* are structured. The *partes orationis* are located in the *dispositio* level, which vertebrates the rhetorical organisation of the essay and its referent. The essay, which is a more spontaneous form than the classical rhetorical speech, can be organised into four *partes orationis* (Barthes, 1982, p. 66):

1. *Exordium* or introduction.
2. *Narratio/expositio* or narration/exposition.
3. *Argumentatio* or argumentation.
4. *Conclusio* or Epilogue.

The second and third categories in particular contribute to the syntactic organisation of the text. There are two main ways in which *the partes orationis* can be ordered: the *ordo naturalis*, which follows the order of the four categories, and the *ordo artificialis*, which does not. Woolf's essays usually follow an *ordo artificialis* because *narratio* does not fulfil its classical function of illustrating some subsequent reasoning but rather combines with the author's observations. As a result, *narratio* becomes argumentation proper. For example, in the essay "Leslie Stephen" that is devoted to her father's figure, the essayist uses a digressive narration that is aimed at reflecting her father's personality:

> He himself was the most abstemious of men. He smoked a pipe perpetually, but never a cigar. He wore his clothes until they were too shabby to be tolerable; and he held old-fashioned and rather puritanical views as to the vice of luxury and the sin of idleness. The relations between parents and children to-day have a freedom that would have been impossible with my father. He expected a certain standard of behaviour, even of ceremony, in family life (Woolf, 1950, p. 71).

The following diagram represents the order of categories in which the student can structure Woolf's essay (Sánchez-Cuervo, 2004, pp. 265-266; 2010, pp. 269-70):
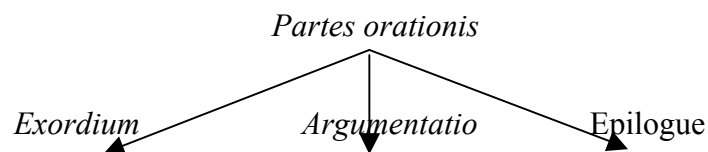
By means of *elocutio*, the reader recognises possible expressive devices such as rhetorical figures. The essayist, when building this *elocutio* level, activates the aesthetic function using *ornatus*. The component of implicit pleasure in the concept of elocutive *ornatus* is responsible for the reader's aesthetic experience and it is an important criterion for specifying the literariness of a text. In the literary essay, *ornatus* has a simultaneous double intention: aesthetic, due to a peculiar textual form that may cause literary specificity, and argumentative, since it can lead a reader to reflect on the way he/she thinks (Arenas, 1997, pp. 361-362).

Examples of rhetorical figures may include tropes, which involve transference of meaning, like simile and metaphor; figures of speech or schemes that contain devices of word arrangement and patterning, like figures of repetition. For example: *ploche*, *polyptoton*, *epistrophe*, *parison*, *anaphora*. Finally, rhetorical figures also comprise figures of thought that entail interactional gestures between speaker and hearer, like rhetorical questions, *prosopopeia*, exclamations, *aposiopesis*… All these figures are reflected in the verbal or linguistic representation of the text and can appear in all the *partes orationis*.

Woolf's essays are abundant with literary figures that appear in all *partes orationis*. The following example represents an *anaphora*, which repeats the same word at the beginning of successive clauses or lines (Lanham, 1991, p. 11):

> In whatever company I am I always try to know what it is like – being a conductor, being a woman with ten children and thirty-five shillings a week, being a stockbroker, being an admiral, being a bank clerk, being a dressmaker, being a duchess, being a miner, being a cook, being a prostitute. All that lowbrows do is of surpassing interest and wonder to me, because, in so far as I am a highbrow, I cannot do things myself (Woolf, 1942, p.178).

The instance below presents a simile, which describes the extension of Madame de Sévigné's work in a novel way: "Thus the fourteen volumes of her letters enclose a vast open space, like one of her own great woods" (Woolf, 1942, p. 51).

This other instance shows several rhetorical questions, which imply an answer but do not usually offer one (Lanham, 1991, 9. 71). In Woolf's portrait of the great essayist Montaigne, she wonders in the last lines of the essay whether the happy life that he lived is all that matters in the end:

> (…) Is pleasure the end of all? Whence this overwhelming interest in the nature of the soul? Why this overmastering desire to communicate with others? Is the beauty of this world enough, or is there, elsewhere, some explanation of the mystery? To this what answer can there be? There is none. There is only one more question: 'Que scais-je?' (Woolf, 1984, pp. 67-68).

Partes orationis

In *exordium*, whose main purpose is to attract the reader's good favour, the reader is expected to find semantic elements like the presentation of an evocative scene, the author's opinions about the topic, the reasons that have led to the writing of the essay, the reference to the title, some quotes from the character that the essayist is going to speak about and also some authority's words that support the topic that is being unfolded. For example, the essay "The Duchess of Newcastle" begins with this character's words as a glimpse of the peculiar woman that the reader is going to discover:

> '… All I desire is fame', wrote Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle. And while she lived her wish was granted. Garish in her dress, eccentric in her habits, chaste in her conduct, coarse in her speech, she succeeded during her

lifetime in drawing upon herself the ridicule of the great applause of the learned (Woolf, 1984, p. 69).

In the extract below, Woolf makes reference to the title of the essay "Women and Fiction" in the first lines of the text:

> The title of this article can be read in two ways: it may allude to women and the fiction that they write, or to women and the fiction that is written about them. The ambiguity is intentional, for in dealing with women as writers, as much elasticity as possible is desirable; it is necessary to leave oneself room to deal with other things besides their work, so much has that work been influenced by conditions that have nothing whatever to do with art (Woolf, 1958, p. 76).

In *argumentatio*, the essayist looks for the most suitable arguments that may increase the reader's adherence to the opinions that are developed. It is a dialectic category that tries to promote the discussion and the controversy of the topic. Apart from the act/person interaction, some arguments that the reader might recognise are the argument from the cause and the consequence, the comparison, the example, and the opposition of ideas, among others. The following extract from Woolf's essay "Professions from Women" represents an argument by the example where the author enumerates several women writers that have instigated women's literary career:

> For the road was cut many years ago – by Fanny Burney, by Aphra Behn, by Harriet Martineau, by Jane Austen, by George Eliot – many famous women, and many more unknown and forgotten, have been before me, making the path smooth, and regulating my steps (Woolf, 1942, p. 235).

Another argument typical of Woolf's essays is the argument from the consequences by which the reader may appreciate a certain act or event according to the positive or negative consequences derived from it. In the excerpt below, the essayist speculates about Dorothy Osborne's possible birth dates and her possible literary occupations resulting from each period:

> Had she been born in 1827, Dorothy Osborne would have written novels; had she been born in 1527, she would never have written at all. But she was born in 1627, and at that date though writing books was ridiculous for a woman there was nothing unseemly in writing a letter (Woolf, 1992b, p. 127).

In the epilogue there is usually a distinction between those semantic elements that try to persuade the reader of the content of the text and those aspects that involve their emotive persuasion, which are known as *peroration*. Woolf herself, in the finishing pages of her essay *A Room of One's Own*, about the difficult relations between women and fiction, states that "Here I would stop, but the pressure of convention decrees that every speech must end with a peroration. And a peroration addressed to women should have something, you will agree, particularly exalting and ennobling about it" (Woolf, 1992a, p. 144).

In Woolf's essays, the reader can find emotive topics like conjectures and hypotheses about the future, as well as the introduction of wishes related to the theme chosen. She

may also present an evocative scene or anecdote, and try the amplification or praise of the character that she has focused on. That is the case in the review of George Meredith's works from the essay "On Rereading Meredith":

> His English power of imagination, with its great audacity and fertility, his superb mastery of the great emotions of courage and love, his power of summoning nature into sympathy with man and of merging him in her vastness, his glory in all fine living and thinking – these are the qualities that give his conceptions their size and universality. In these respects we must recognize his true descent from the greatest of English writers and his enjoyment of qualities that are expressed nowhere save in the masterpieces of our literature (Woolf, 1958, p. 52).

The writer may also include some figures like rhetorical questions and *prosopopeia*, which has to do with the speech in character or impersonation (Lanham, 1991, pp. 123-124). For example, in the essay "Modern fiction", Woolf addresses fiction as if it was human in the last lines of the text:

> And if we can imagine the art of fiction come alive and standing in our midst, she would undoubtedly bid us break her and bully her, as well as honour and love her, for so her youth is renewed and her sovereignty assured (Woolf, 1984, p. 154).

Discussion and conclusions

Although students could be able to analyse the form of the essay and distinguish at least the *partes orationis*, it is still difficult to know whether they are capable of saying why the text is persuasive, or even emotive. In this respect, defining the style of a literary essay is not simply a matter of word-choice and recognition of rhetorical figures.

Once they have specified all the elements that they have previously identified both in the *partes artis* and *partes orationis*, they can make an attempt to define the style of Woolf's essay and try to explain how the argumentative and the expressive combine. Some questions that they can answer before trying this task are the following:

- Can you identify the *partes artis*?
- Are all the *partes orationis* present?
- Which arguments and/or figures are predominant in each part? Can you write an example of each one?
- Can you find examples of tropes, schemes or figures of repetition and figures of thought?
- Would you say that the essay is expressive? Why?
- Does the author try to praise the character or work that she is reviewing? How can you demonstrate it?

In order to answer this final question, the students should follow several steps:
1. Identify the act/person interaction as main argument generated in the *inventio* level.

2. They should then read several essays by Woolf and check that she usually keeps the same order in the *dispositio* part: she starts the *exordium* by offering an introductory argument that attracts her readers' good favour and presents the character and/or the work that she is talking about. Then she develops the *argumentatio* by means of the act/person interaction, offering quotes from the work that she is reviewing as well and anecdotes and personal details of the character under discussion that can bring him/her to presence. Furthermore, she offers personal observations that help to portray the character's personality. Finally, she concludes in the epilogue with arguments and figures that are also typical of this final section of the text.

3. In the *elocutio* or linguistic representation of the essay, the reader should be able to recognise the rhetorical figures that Woolf includes intertwined in the different *partes orationis* and that contribute to emphasising the expressiveness of the essay.

The encountering of all these elements are first order effects that help to define the style of the essay only if students can detect that the arguments and rhetorical figures follow a specific order that is bound for creating an emotive value. This value is usually associated with a positive image of the character or the work that she has reviewed in the text.

References

Albadalejo, T. 1989. *Retórica*. Madrid: Editorial Síntesis.

Arenas-Cruz, M. E. 1997. *Hacia una teoría general del ensayo. Construcción del texto ensayístico*. Cuenca: Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha.

Aristotle. 1909. *The Rhetoric of Aristotle* (Sir Richard Claverhouse Jebb, Trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Barthes, R. 1982. *Investigaciones retóricas I. La antigua retórica* (B. Dorriots, Trans.). Barcelona: Ediciones Buenos Aires.

[Cicero]. 1981. *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (H. Caplan, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Crosswhite, J. 2011. Awakening the *Topoi*: Sources of Invention in *The New Rhetoric*'s Argument Model. In J. T. Cage (Ed.), *The Promise of Reason. Studies in The New Rhetoric*. (pp. 185-205). Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.

Fahnestock, J. 2005. Rhetorical Stylistics. *Language and Literature, 14* (3), 215-230.

Lanham, R. A. 1991. *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* (2nd ed.). Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Lausberg, H. 1983. *Manual de retórica literaria.* Tomo I (J. Pérez-Riesgo, Trans.). Madrid: Editorial Gredos.

Perelman, Ch. and Olbrechts-Tyteca, L. 1969. *The New Rhetoric. A Treatise on Argumentation* (J. Wilkinson and P. Weaver, Trans.). Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

Quintilian. 1920. *Institutio Oratoria*, vols I-IV (H. E. Butler, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Saloman, R. 2012. *Virginia Woolf's Essayism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Saloman, R. 2013. 'Unsolved Problems': Essayism, Counterfactuals, and the Futures of *A Room of One's Own. Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature, 32* (1), 53-73.

Sánchez-Cuervo, M. E. 2004. *La argumentación retórica en los ensayos de Virginia Woolf. Tesis doctoral*. Granada: Servicio de publicaciones de la Universidad de Granada.

Sánchez-Cuervo, M. E. 2010. 'Ah, but what is herself? I mean, what is a woman?': Rhetorical Analysis of Virginia Woolf's Feminist Essays. *ES. Revista de Filología Inglesa, 31*, 263-286.

Tindale, C. W. 2004. *Rhetorical Argumentation*. CA: Sage.

Woolf, V. 1942. *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*, San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace & Company.

Woolf, V. 1950. *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays*, London: The Hogarth Press

Woolf, V. 1958. *Granite and Rainbow*. London: The Hogarth Press.

Woolf, V. 1984. *The Common Reader. First Series*. A. McNeillie (Ed.). NY: Harcourt Brace.

Woolf, V. 1992a. *A Room of One's Own. Three Guineas*, M. Shiach (Ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Woolf, V. 1992b. *A Woman's Essays. Selected Essays. Volume One*. R. Bowlby (Ed.). Harmondsworth: Penguin.