Reading literature rhetorically in education: Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'The Prison-Door' as an exercise in close reading

Magnus Ullén, Karlstad University

Abstract

Despite the many historical links between literature and rhetoric, teachers of literature have made relatively few attempts to draw on rhetoric for teaching purposes. The present article suggests how this may be done, and argues for the pedagogical benefits of taking a rhetorical approach to literature. By means of a close reading of the first chapter of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, I demonstrate how a text may be systematically explored through the five steps (partes) of the classical rhetorical process. In conclusion, it suggests that rhetoric may be a means to bridge the gap between the many facets of English as a second language subject, as rhetoric provides a holistic framework allowing us to study literature and culture as language, and vice versa.

Keywords: rhetoric, literature, English education; Hawthorne

1. Introduction

Rhetoric and literature have been deeply associated throughout Western history. It is commonly held that it is only toward the end of the eighteenth century that this long-standing association begins to break down (Gossman 1990: 228). While the link between the two disciplines has never been completely disowned, rhetoric and literature have come to be seen as contrasting rather than complimentary practices, and as a rule organized as distinct departments in the academy.[1] The consequence of this division is the curious separation of what might reasonably be seen as one subject into two separate ones: Literary departments typically

[1] From a "neo-sophistic" (Walker 2000: xi) perspective, Jeffrey Walker calls on us to "rethink some key assumptions on which our histories of rhetoric have traditionally been based" (3), such as "that poetic, epideictic, or 'literaturized' forms of rhetoric are 'secondary,' derivative manifestations" (4) of a primary civic rhetoric. For examples of this view, see Baldwin 1924 and 1928. As Walker documents, this predominant view has been heavily critiqued by rhetoricians at least since the 1990s and also questioned by literary theorists and historians.

Ullén, Magnus. 2016. "Reading literature rhetorically in education: Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'The Prison-Door' as an exercise in close reading" *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 15(2):142–158.

proceed hermeneutically, teaching students the art of interpretation, while rhetoric is treated as a form of applied linguistics, often in relation to composition courses in the art of writing. Much would be gained if this gap between the practices of writing and reading could be overcome.

Attempts to make rhetoric a resource for literary studies have conceived of the relation between the two fields in very different ways. A case in point is the different reception histories of the works of Kenneth Burke and Wayne C. Booth, both of whom explicitly grounded their thinking in rhetoric, but are now influential in other spheres. For Burke, the rhetorical nature of literature must be seen in the light of its function as a socially symbolic act (Burke: 1966) and as a form of rhetorical discourse among others; for Booth, the relevant rhetorical aspect of literature derives from its fictional status (Booth: 1983), which makes it a rhetorical discourse distinct from other kinds of communication.[2]

And yet, in-between these two seemingly mutually exclusive ways of articulating the rhetorical dimension of literature, and independently of both, literary studies in general have taken a distinctly rhetorical turn in recent decades.[3] Literary criticism has gradually come to realize that literary history is "the history of the *situations* of the texts, and not some 'history' of the texts themselves" (Jameson: xxvi), as Fredric Jameson put it a quarter of a century ago. Despite this rhetorical turn of much recent literary criticism, literary studies have shown relatively little interest in actively pursuing rhetoric.

The lack of interest in rhetoric among teachers of literature is all the more surprising considering the methodological importance courses in literature to this day accord to close reading, a critical procedure that

---

[2] One subfield of literary theory drawing on rhetoric is narratology; see, for instance, Phelan 1996 and Walsh 2007. However, work in this area is largely concerned with only the fifth of the five canons of rhetorical pedagogy: invention, arrangement, style, memorization, and delivery. Yet, the potential of rhetoric as a method lies in its holistic nature. Rhetoric can provide a lasting meta-language to totalize many aspects of literary studies and clarify the relation between reading and writing.

[3] See, for instance, Paul de Man's pioneering work on the tropological nature of language and literary language specifically, Judith Butler's inquiries into the performative nature of gender, the New Historicist stress on the importance of historical contextualization, and feminist, post-colonial, and queer theory insistence on the importance of situating the reading of literature.

grew out of the rhetorical practice of New Criticism, which isolated the text from history and context, thus forcing us to focus on particular words and their arrangement.

But if there are pedagogical benefits in isolating the text from the context, the drawbacks of doing so are also well-known. Once the text is separated from the context of its writing and reading, the question is how one can re-establish a connection to that larger context, which can now no longer be taken for granted. This is the moment where close reading, which starts off as a simple methodology, calls for the intervention of theory, because we have reached a point where we have to *account* for the concepts we make use of: *author*, *society*, *meaning*, *interpretation*, and even *text*, must be justified. As the manifold perspectives of literary theory make evident, there are many ways of doing so. Here I only sketch the advantage of taking a rhetorical approach to literature, the benefit of which is twofold. Firstly, we avoid the theoretical complexities that come with having to account for the relation between the text and the context since the two are never separate in the rhetorical model, in which they are seen rather as two facets of the rhetorical situation that is our real object of analysis. Secondly, and equally important to teaching, rhetoric offers a set of conceptual tools for systematically exploring the manifold aspects of the text.

I shall demonstrate this by means of a close reading of the first chapter of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. This text was chosen partly because the novel is standard reading for university level courses in English, and partly because the opening chapter is brief enough to allow for a relatively thorough discussion. However, any passage in any text could in principle be approached in a similar manner. My purpose is pedagogic rather than hermeneutic – I make no claims to originality here, but seek merely to illustrate how rhetoric can be used to untangle the persuasive dimension of a literary text, just as it can help us approach more openly rhetorical discourses like speeches. In the process, I hope to hint at another benefit of bringing rhetoric into the English classroom in a second language setting such as Sweden. Rhetoric, it will be seen, allows us to turn the study of literature into an exercise in linguistic analysis rather than in aesthetic appreciation, and could thus potentially bridge the two major facets of English as a discipline, namely literature and linguistics.

2. The text

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is a novel virtually read by every American college student. It tells the story of Hester Prynne and her troubled relationship to the Puritan community of colonial Boston. Set in the 1640s, it is a story about the infancy of the American nation, to some extent based upon historical records. Hester, who has come to the new world ahead of her husband, has been found guilty of adultery; there is no question of her guilt, because she has given birth to a baby that must have been conceived in America. The story opens with Hester being brought out of jail carrying her baby in her arms to be publicly displayed on the scaffold, as was the custom of the Puritan community. To make evident the nature of her crime, she has been sentenced to sew onto her breast the letter A, for adulterer. She does so, but to the dismay of the crowd gathered to watch her public humiliation, it turns out that she has embellished the letter so that it looks like a symbol of glory and beauty rather than a badge of shame, and she stands on the scaffold unrepentant.

Through the rest of the story, we follow the different interpretations engendered by the letter A. It is suggested in the text that it may as well mean Able, or even Angel, as Hester conducts her life in great humility and is always ready to help those in need. Ironically, the man that the community looks to as their spiritual leader, a young priest, Arthur Dimmesdale, is in fact as guilty of sin as is Hester, for unbeknownst to everyone, he is the father of her child. Although plagued by a bad conscience, he keeps this secret for seven years. When he finally confesses his sin, he does so by entering the very scaffold Hester had stood upon alone seven years earlier, baring his chest before the crowd. And there, "imprinted in the flesh" (Hawthorne 1962: 258), the astonished crowd sees – well, it's anyone's guess. The implication is that Dimmesdale reveals a scarlet letter of his own, but whether he really does so is impossible to say, because Hawthorne refuses to enlighten us. Instead, he offers a number of accounts of what people claim to have seen, stating: "The reader may choose between these theories" (Hawthorne 1962: 259). This novel thus invites interpretation, as suggested already by its short opening chapter. Since we will be concerned with textual detail throughout, here is the chapter in full:

I. THE PRISON-DOOR

A throng of bearded men, in sad-coloured garments and grey steeple-crowned hats, inter-mixed with women, some wearing hoods, and others bareheaded, was assembled in front of a wooden edifice, the door of which was heavily timbered with oak, and studded with iron spikes.

The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognised it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison. In accordance with this rule it may safely be assumed that the forefathers of Boston had built the first prison-house somewhere in the vicinity of Cornhill, almost as seasonably as they marked out the first burial-ground, on Isaac Johnson's lot, and round about his grave, which subsequently became the nucleus of all the congregated sepulchres in the old churchyard of King's Chapel. Certain it is that, some fifteen or twenty years after the settlement of the town, the wooden jail was already marked with weather-stains and other indications of age, which gave a yet darker aspect to its beetle-browed and gloomy front. The rust on the ponderous iron-work of its oaken door looked more antique than anything else in the New World. Like all that pertains to crime, it seemed never to have known a youthful era. Before this ugly edifice, and between it and the wheel-track of the street, was a grass-plot, much overgrown with burdock, pig-weed, apple-pern, and such unsightly vegetation, which evidently found something congenial in the soil that had so early borne the black flower of civilised society, a prison. But on one side of the portal, and rooted almost at the threshold, was a wild rose-bush, covered, in this month of June, with its delicate gems, which might be imagined to offer their fragrance and fragile beauty to the prisoner as he went in, and to the condemned criminal as he came forth to his doom, in token that the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to him.

This rose-bush, by a strange chance, has been kept alive in history; but whether it had merely survived out of the stern old wilderness, so long after the fall of the gigantic pines and oaks that originally overshadowed it, or whether, as there is fair authority for believing, it had sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Ann Hutchinson as she entered the prison-door, we shall not take upon us to determine. Finding it so directly on the threshold of our narrative, which is now about to issue from that inauspicious portal, we could hardly do otherwise than pluck one of its flowers, and present it to the reader. It may serve, let us hope, to symbolise some sweet moral blossom that may be found along the track, or relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow.

3. Partes – the rhetorical process

The starting point of rhetorical analysis is the assumption that literary texts like other cultural discourses seek to persuade us of something. As rhetoricians it is our job to establish what the literary text seeks to persuade us of, how it does so, and why. To this end, we may start from Aristotle's definition of rhetoric as the art of "observing in any given

case the available means of persuasion." While the actual means will vary from situation to situation, they can in principle be reduced to three: the speaker's own character (*ethos*), the words used (*logos*), and finally the feelings of the auditors (*pathos*). By combining these means, the speaker may fulfil three duties: to instruct, to entertain, and to move the feelings of the auditor (Quintilian, 3.5.2-3). It is our job to unveil what means of persuasion the rhetor (the practitioner of rhetoric) – whether a speaker or a writer – has made use of, and to ask why the rhetor observed these particular means. We thus end up with three questions to guide the analysis:

- What does the text try to persuade us of?
- How does it do so? (What means of persuasion does it employ to that end?)
- Why does it draw on these particular means, to this particular end, in this particular situation?

The overall aim of the work in question may be provisionally determined by the situation it grew out of, and hence in some sense responds to. One will want to consider, that is, what cultural work the text in question is designed to perform. In texts that are closely associated with rhetorical discourse, such as speeches or ads, the overall rhetorical intent is often fairly easy to establish. Ads want us to buy the product on offer, speeches to take the point of view of the speaker. With literary texts, the situation is more complicated, not only because they are generally more multifaceted than non-literary texts, but because they stay relevant over time in a way that non-literary texts as a rule do not. Despite this transtemporal complication, relating literature to the specific historical and social environment it was conceived in remains useful.

Still, talking about the aim of a literary text means talking about its rhetorical aspect in a wide sense – similar to the overall aim or thesis of a speech. Identifying such a thesis is a very important step of the rhetorical analysis, but it does not tell us much about how the speech really works. To find out, we need to provide an account of how we arrive at the thesis. A good way to begin is to approach the text in terms of the five canons, often spoken about as the five interdependent steps of the rhetorical process: *inventio* (coming up with something to say); *dispositio* (arranging it in a specific order); *elocutio* (fashioning the individual words and sentences to the overall purpose); *memoria* (memorizing the discourse); and finally *actio* (delivery), the actual

rhetorical performance. In the following discussion, each aspect is considered in turn.

3.1 Inventio – the rhetorical situation

The first step is to consider what type of text we are dealing with, and remind ourselves of the greater whole of which our passage is a part. This is tantamount to considering the text as a rhetorical situation, a concept introduced by American rhetorician Lloyd Bitzer (1968). In Bitzer's definition, a rhetorical situation is one that can be altered by the use of rhetorical discourse, and it always features three constitutive factors, namely:

1) an *exigence*, that is, an imperfection or urgent matter inherent in the situation that prompts the rhetorical discourse
2) an *audience*, or more specifically the people addressed by the speech who by moving on it might take care of the problem; and
3) a set of *constraints*, which may include anything that may prevent the speech from being persuasive.

The question, then, is what *exigence*, *audience*, and *constraints* the text as it stands responds to. The *exigence* is a pressing circumstance that can be alleviated through rhetorical discourse. In terms of literature, we may have in mind the reason for writing it. This means thinking of exigence in external terms, and hence we need to take in other factors than the text as such makes available to us.

But we can also think of its exigence more locally, in relation to each chapter, and internally to the text. What is the job of this particular chapter in the story as a whole? What urgent requirement of the *narrative* is met by the chapter? What exigence of the unfolding chain of events of the story does it address? In the present case, the chapter obviously opens the story, as the reference to "our narrative" in the final paragraph reminds us. Yet, it is a pretty strange opening, since the story does not really get going. The first paragraph places us in a situation, but the rest of the chapter would seem to stall the story rather than to further it.

Why that is may be answered by taking into account the *audience* of the literary work. Again, this may be conceived in (at least) two ways, as we should distinguish between the contemporary audience of the text, known to the author, and its subsequent audience(s), made up of later or geographically distant audiences unknown to the writer. Hawthorne, we

may assume, primarily addressed an American mid-nineteenth century audience with moral standards different from ours.

Even if we ignore the distance between audiences, we can hardly fail to notice that Hawthorne consciously thematizes the issue of its importance, since the first paragraph draws attention to the fictional audience of Hester Prynne's release from prison. This audience, composed of non-identified men and women of the Puritan community, are present not only in the first but also in the concluding scaffold scene, and while they are absent from the central scaffold scene in chapter 12, they are invoked intermittently throughout the novel. Equally important, the chapter ends with a direct address to the external audience of the text, namely the reader. Evidently, the audience, fictional and real, or the transhistorical audience that includes all the subsequent readers of the novel, was of great importance to Hawthorne, since he framed the chapter in this manner.

Consequently, we must ask: what is the (rhetorical) function of the audience that figures in the text as such? While it figures only briefly in the present chapter, its importance is underscored by being the first thing mentioned. If we glance ahead in the book, two things can be noted: 1) initially, the stance of this audience is almost entirely condemnatory – yet their view would not seem to be shared by the narrator (Hawthorne). Rather, the function of the audience is largely to suggest how *not* to read Hester and the scarlet letter she wears. 2) Their view of Hester – and the letter – changes in the course of the story. For that reason, they clearly serve not only the negative function of telling us how not to read, but the positive one of bringing home the point that meanings are not permanently fixed, but liable to change with time and circumstance.

Our understanding of the audience will inevitably be affected by our account of the *constraints* that Hawthorne has to deal with in this novel, that is, the aspects that might prevent him from persuading the audience to deal with the exigence the way he wants them to deal with it, and that he must try to turn to his advantage. The most obvious constraint in this case is that it is an historical novel, as some knowledge of the historical setting is vital to a full appreciation of the story. In the fashion of the good rhetor, Hawthorne turns the constraints into an advantage, by including enough historical detail to make his story work, and by presenting it in such a manner that his story benefits from it.

If we keep in mind that the fictional audience is faulted by Hawthorne for judging too rashly, and that the overall aim of the novel would seem to be to teach us not to jump to conclusions but make due allowance for the complexity of life, the rhetorical strategy of the first chapter becomes clearer: its function is precisely to stall the story, to provide the reader with a context of the coming events that will dispose us to see them the way Hawthorne wants us to see them.

3.2 Dispositio – the structure of the text

Literary texts do not come with formulaic dispositions of the kind that can be used when analyzing speeches, which as a rule follow a set order: *exordium*, *narratio*, *propositio*, argumentatio, *peroratio*. But this is not to say that they lack structure. The three scaffold scenes at the beginning, middle, and end of the novel are the most prominent structuring device of the novel as a whole, but once again, keep in mind that the disposition of the text can be considered locally (in terms of a single chapter, a single paragraph, or even a single sentence) as well. Disposition, moreover, is studied not just in terms of order, but in terms of function. One way to display the functional organization is to consider the movement of the chapter. What happens in the chapter? How does it start, and how does it end, and in what way is the ending connected to the beginning? Has the story moved forward? Has the tone changed?

In the present case, the chapter consists of three paragraphs that vary in length as well as in content. The first paragraph places us immediately in the story – or so it may seem – in the form of the crowd of Puritans waiting outside "a wooden edifice" – the paragraph significantly fails to specify that this is a prison. It is very brief, a mere single sentence.

The second paragraph, by far the longest, does not continue but abandons the situation established in the opening paragraph. This circumstance is emphasized through the change of tense, from the past tense characteristic of the narrative situation (or the situation of the story), to the present tense characteristic of the narrating situation (or the situation in which the story is narrated). To be sure, the tense switches back into the past already in the second sentence, but the change of tone will already have been felt: for the rest of the paragraph, we are no longer in the immediate vicinity of the story, but removed from it, as suggested by the narrator's account of the historical context.

The third paragraph, finally, brings us into immediate contact with the narrative situation once again, when the narrator plucks a flower from the rose-bush that grows outside the prison and "present[s] it to the reader" – an impossible gesture, as it reaches across the boundary between the fictive universe of the story and the real universe we are in. Yet it is performed (it even has a name; see below). But even if we are again close to the story, we are close in a different sense than in the first paragraph. The first paragraph places us in the Puritan crowd; the third paragraph places us next to the narrator. The disposition of this first short chapter thus prefigures the double perspective that runs throughout the novel. For in the novel, too, we see things both from the (narrative) perspective of the Puritans and from the (narrating) perspective of the narrator.

The movement of the chapter could be described as movement from identification with the Puritan perspective, to identification with the narratorial perspective, mediated by the historical objectivism of the second paragraph. In other words, it is by means of historical distance that this text seems to achieve its end of teaching us not to judge too rashly.

3.3 Elocutio – style and figures of speech

The fourth step of the rhetorical process involves the study of figures of speech (schemes and tropes), or, more generally, of style: how does the style of the text further its rhetorical intent? How does the style of the text contribute to persuading us to see things the way the writer wants us to see them? The three paragraphs of the opening chapter are stylistically distinct. The first is straightforwardly descriptive of the crowd, and the prison-door. The situation comes across as curiously frozen, because of the unconventional grammatical construction of the sentence, which notably lacks an active verb. The crowd "was assembled", almost as if the people were there involuntarily, suggesting that free will is curbed in this community. In addition, this first description of the crowd portrays a "throng of bearded men […] intermixed with women", almost as if the Puritans lacked individuality.

The second paragraph, as noted above, removes us from the story, by means of a historicizing excursion. Its first sentence contains an *antithesis*, contrasting the utopian hopes of the "new colony" with the

practical necessity of setting off some part of that colony to those old reminders of the difficulty of realizing utopian ventures: a prison and a cemetery. This antithesis between the utopian hopes attached to what is new and the dismal reminders of the past is reinforced throughout the paragraph, through the emphasis on factors complicating the utopian scheme. The jail is described as "marked with weather-stains and other indications of age"; its rust looking "more antique than anything else in the New World", as if "never to have known a youthful era." The net-effect of this imagery is to suggest that human depravity is an inescapable, natural component of humanity, a suggestion which culminates in the sentence describing the prison metaphorically as "the black flower of civilised society," that is, as something sprung from human culture as inevitably as the weeds have sprung from the grass-plot upon which the prison has been erected. However, even while the paragraph is dominated by imagery suggesting that nature will impede all plans to perfect human culture, it ends with a sentence suggesting that nature – or more precisely, Nature, in the form of a *personification* – may nevertheless prove sympathetic to human suffering. The personification is no mere embellishment but performs an important function: the "fragrance and fragile beauty" offered to the "prisoner [...] and to the condemned criminal" is offered not by nature, but by Nature, imaginatively transformed by human consciousness – something in-between nature and culture, partaking of both while not being reducible to either. It inhabits that "neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other" (Hawthorne 1962: 36) mentioned in the sketch that introduces the novel. Since this neutral territory is also the space of romance, the last sentence of the second paragraph can be said to subtly prefigure the message of *The Scarlet Letter*, or at least to suggest why it would seem to put such tremendous weight on interpretation.

The third paragraph is a result of this imaginative transformation of nature into Nature. Hawthorne pretends to be talking about a real rose bush, as is confirmed when he performs the gesture of plucking a flower and presenting it to the reader. This represents the trope called *meta-*

lepsis, which is rarely seen in realist fiction, precisely because it breaks the realist illusion by calling attention to the story as story.[4]

Another conspicuous aspect of the style is the complex construction of the sentences. There are only eleven sentences, ranging in length from 15 to 73 words. As a rule, each sentence contains several subordinate clauses, contributing to the stately, somewhat archaic tone. The oratory quality is further underlined by the color imagery that reinforces the somber tone of the situation depicted in this opening chapter, and by its highly effective use of alliteration. The joint effect is that of a text that speaks clearly, if gravely, about complex matters, a text that calls for the pause that allows for reflection.

3.4 Memoria (Medium)

The significance of the fourth step of the rhetorical process, memorization, or *memoria*, is apparent to anyone who has given a speech. It is still treated at length in courses on public speaking, but the advice is predictably of a practical nature. In courses centering on rhetorical analysis rather than rhetorical performance, however, memorization is often side-stepped, for apparent reasons, giving us the impression that *memoria* is a somewhat antiquated category, of relevance, perhaps, for the practical purposes of public speaking, but of little analytical import.

I would suggest, however, that *memoria* does indeed identify a central aspect of rhetorical communication. Only, in order to see this, we need to rename it: what is at stake is not memorization (only) but rather the particular constraints that come with the *medium* of the rhetorical discourse. When the *partes* were developed, *memoria* was clearly an attempt to render the medium transparent, or even invisible, so that the audience would mistake rehearsed speech for spontaneous speech. While this is not the case anymore, the question of the medium of the rhetorical discourse remains central.

In the present case, we are reminded of this circumstance by the very fact that Hawthorne explicitly addresses “the reader” in this chapter, as

[4] Which is not to say that it is uncommon in other forms of fiction – think for instance of Woody Allen’s *The Red Rose of Cairo*, where an actor steps out of the movie screen, having fallen in love with a woman in the audience.

he does from time to time throughout the novel. Another indication of Hawthorne's awareness of the importance of the medium is of course that we are dealing with a book (composed of letters) about the significance of a letter – the letter A, which happens to be the first letter of the Alphabet, and because it is the first, it suggests all that follow.

3.5 Actio – delivery, the actual presentation of the rhetorical discourse

Once we realize that the fourth stage of *partes* concerns medium rather than memory, it also becomes apparent that delivery is not just a question of the speaker's performance of the speech. Rather, what is at stake in the fifth step of the process is the way the medium articulates the rhetorical discourse. When the medium is a speaker, then pronunciation, movements, dress etcetera naturally carry all the weight that classical rhetoricians such as Quintilian attributed to them.[5] But when the medium is a text, whether verbal, visual or aural, other matters take precedence: the discipline of narratology is all the evidence we need to conclude that attention to textual delivery may be just as detailed as was ancient rhetoricians' attention to oratorical delivery.

There are at least two aspects of the textual delivery of fictional texts that must be considered: point of view and voice – who sees, and who speaks? The first aspect is unusually easy to determine in this particular chapter, since the point of view throughout is that of the narrator, that is, of the Hawthorne who tells us the story.[6] Saying that means acknowledging that it is his voice we hear throughout. Yet, what is important is not primarily whose voice we hear, but what that voice is like – how the story is being told. One of the most striking features is the equivocating nature of many of the statements in the passage: "it may safely *be assumed* that the forefathers of Boston had built the first prison-house somewhere in . . . ;" "it *seemed* never to have known a youthful era;" " such unsightly vegetation […] *evidently* found something

[5] While Quintilian devotes only a small section – some 30 pages – to delivery in his Oratoria, he still adamantly refutes those who "have asserted that the study of delivery is useless" (11.3.10-13).

[6] The question to what extent, if at all, the voice of the narrator coincides with that of the author is a tricky one that space does not allow me to discuss here. Suffice it to say that one should be as careful not to rule out the possibility that they coincide, as one should be wary of confusing them.

congenial in the soil;" "a wild rose-bush […] which *might be imagined* to offer their fragrance and fragile beauty to the prisoner;" "*whether* it had merely survived out of the stern old wilderness, […] or *whether*, as there is fair authority for believing, it had sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Ann Hutchinson as she entered the prison-door, *we shall not take upon us to determine*;" "we could *hardly* do otherwise than pluck one of its flowers;" "It *may* serve […] to symbolise *some* sweet moral blossom that *may* be found along the track" – very few things are stated as indisputable facts in this novel. Again, this circumstance suggests the necessity of interpretation, that is to say, the co-operation of the reader.

4. Conclusion

It remains to pull the above observations together to show how the analysis may suggest a reading of the novel as a whole. Considering the occasion for this text, we found that it fills the office of opening an historical novel, and is marked by the exigence of establishing a relation between the audience of the present and the events of the past through the medium of the story. This much is subtly suggested through the very disposition of the chapter, which moves from the past of the narrative events to the present of the act of narration. It is brought to the fore more dramatically by means of the concluding metalepsis, the figural gesture in which the narrator leans into the story and plucks a rose from a bush within its fictional space and hands it over to the reader. As this trope suggests, we are dealing with a text that is very aware of itself as a medium, a text that is delivered in a narrative voice designed to co-opt the reader into taking an active part in the story.

It is thus a fitting opening for the subsequent narrative, which in various ways extends the opening strategy of involving the reader in the story. In the chapter following, Hester emerges from the prison with the luxuriously embroidered scarlet letter upon her breast, and we witness the different reactions of the seventeenth century Boston audience. In the final chapter, the reader is placed in a situation strikingly similar to that of the audience within the story, when the narrator refuses to make clear whether Arthur Dimmesdale actually reveals a letter "imprinted in the flesh" or not. This recourse to indirection at the very moment when facts crucial to the case are to be revealed is highly characteristic of Hawthorne's writings. In fact, it is arguably his most important rhetorical

strategy. Every time the A is mentioned, we know that it stands for something, but we are not told what, because Hawthorne's strategy is to force us to work things out for ourselves. By withholding essential information, Hawthorne forces us to go over the text again, or at least, to reflect on our reading, and ask ourselves upon what evidence our understanding of the story is built. Thus, he inculcates the lesson that what we think of as history is not so much a series of facts as a series of interpretations, and that we need always to be prepared to go back to history and read it anew. Perhaps that is why *The Scarlet Letter* has been enshrined as well-nigh the model American literary text. For this novel does not only provide America with an imaginative account of the nation's history; it provides a model for reading that goes hand in hand with the democratic spirit that America prides itself of – or so critics have been want to argue (see, for instance, Bercovitch 1991). According to this model, there is no one way to understand the past, nor is just one way to understand the present and the future. The world is complex, requiring constant renegotiation of our relationship to it. This calls for debate, discussion, and a multitude of voices – and it calls for works of literature that allow for a multitude of interpretations.

This is hardly a controversial conclusion. But, then, all I have attempted to do here is to demonstrate how rhetoric allows us to approach texts in a systematic manner, fine-tuning our eye for detail in the process. Reading rhetorically entails re-directing focus from *what* the text means to *how* it means. More pointedly, it can be seen as a means to redirect focus from our aesthetic experience of the text to the text as linguistic structure. I do not mean to imply that aesthetic experience is not important, only that it would be useful for students to direct their attention to the text rather than to their own experience of it, especially since research has shown that in comparison with students in Russia, Finland, and France, Swedish students tend to focus less on formal aspects of the text, and more on extrinsic factors, or on simply recapitulating the story (Torell 2002; Johansson 2014).[7]

[7] Whereas Swedish students are prone to focus mainly on their own interpretation regardless of its basis in the text, French students, Johansson remarks, run the opposite risk of focusing on formal aspects to such an extent that they neglect to reflect upon a text's overarching purpose. Her suggested remedy is to find a balance between the French focus on *explication de texte* and the Swedish focus on reader response (Johansson 2014,

The approach presented here suggests that literature should or at least could be taught less as a specific type of discourse, than as an occasion to discover language. Rather than teaching literature as an exploration of the self in the tradition of Louise Rosenblatt (1938), literature could be taught instead to help students become aware of the effects that can be achieved by the manipulation of its linguistic building-blocks, from minutiae like punctuation marks, over larger units such as sentences and paragraphs, to complex entities such as genres and formal registers. To that end, rhetorical analysis comes with the additional benefit of not discriminating between different types of texts. In contradistinction to literary analysis, rhetorical analysis does not depend upon any preconceptions about the nature of the object studied – any discourse can profitably be analyzed from a rhetorical perspective. Rhetoric can thus be a means to help us understand what is distinct about the discourses generally classified as "literature" in contemporary society, while at the same time helping us see the ways in which the functions of literary works overlap with those of other kinds of discourses, such as newspaper articles, political or religious pamphlets, academic textbooks, ads, or whatever.

Incidentally, a rhetorical turn in the teaching of literature would be especially useful in a second language learning environment. As practiced in the Nordic countries today, second language teaching risks coming across as a series of separate subjects – linguistics, literature, as well as social and cultural history, and often pedagogical content knowledge to boot – that may seem only contingently related to each other. Rhetoric, which as part of the *trivium* along with grammar and logic made up the foundation of Western schooling for the better part of a millennium (Joseph 2002), provides something of a sociolinguistic platform for dealing with language and communication, reminding us that "there can be no social man without language, and no language without social man" (Halliday 1978: 12). As such, it would make it easier for students and teachers alike to see the many points of contact between the various aspects of English as an academic discipline.

---

254). As I hope to have demonstrated, rhetorical analysis may be a more efficient means of rectification, as it combines close scrutiny of the text with an explicit injunction to relate it to its social situation.

References

Baldwin, Charles Sears. 1924. *Ancient Rhetoric and Poetic*. New York: MacMillan.
Baldwin, Charles Sears. 1928. *Medieval Rhetoric and Poetic (to 1400) Interpreted from Representative Works*. New York: MacMillan.
Bercovitch, Sacvan. 1991. *The Office of The Scarlet Letter*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP.
Bitzer, Lloyd F. 1968. "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1: 1-14.
Booth, Wayne C. 1983 [1961]. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Second ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Burke, Kenneth. 1966. *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature and Method*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Gossman, Lionel. 1990. *Between History and Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
Halliday, Michael. 1978. *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning*. London: Edward Arnold.
Hawthorne, Nathaniel. 1962 [1850]. *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Vol. 1. The Scarlet Letter*. Edited by William Charvat, Roy Harvey Pearce, Claude M. Simpson, Thomas Woodson, et al. Columbus: Ohio State UP.
Jameson, Fredric. 1989. *The Ideologies of Theory. Essays 1971-1986. Volume 1: Situations of Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Johansson, Maritha. 2014. "Att tolka en skönlitterär text. Mikro- och makrotolkningar hos svenska och franska gymnasieelever." In *Mångfaldens möjligheter. Litteratur- och språkdidaktik i Norden*. Eds. Peter Andersson, Per Holmberg, Anna Lyngfelt, Anna Nordenstam & Olle Widhe. Gothenburg: Gothenburg University. 237-256.
Joseph, Miriam. 2002. *The Trivium: The Liberal Arts of Logic, Grammar, and Rhetoric*. Ed. Marguerite McGlinn. Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books. [Original work published 1937].
Phelan, James. 1996. *Narrative as Rhetoric: Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology*. Columbus: Ohio State UP.
Quintilian, [Marcus Fabius]. 1856. *Quintilian's Instutes of Oratory: Or, Education of an Orator*. Eng. tr. John Selby Watson. London: Bell & Daldy.
Rosenblatt, Louise. 1938. *Literature as Exploration*. New York: Appleton.
Torell, Örjan (red.) 2002. *Hur gör man en litteraturläsare? Om skolans litteraturundervisning i Sverige, Ryssland och Finland: rapport från projektet Literary Competence as a Product of School Culture*. Härnösand: Institutionen för humaniora.
Walker, Jeffrey. 2000. *Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity*. New York: Oxford UP.
Walsh, Richard. 2007. *The Rhetoric of Fictionality: Narrative Theory and the Idea of Fiction*. Columbus: Ohio State UP.