RHETORICAL CHOICES AND EFFECTS IN JEAN STAFFORD'S "THE END OF A CAREER"

Corina Alexandrina LIRCA[1]

Abstract

The present paper focuses on "The End of a Career,"the last short-story in Jean Stafford's 1969 collection titled *Collected Short-Stories,* using the rhetorical approach to narrative as an investigative method. The result is an investigation of the purpose behind the artistic communicative act that is "The End of a Career," starting from the range of rhetorical effects that accompany the progression of this narrative. As a rule, the narrator's choices of narrative technique and mannerrepresent the way in which (s)he seeks to influence the audience's cognition, emotions and valuesand reveal the purpose of the communicative act. Therefore, I will show that this realistic inverted-chronology reconstruction of Angelica Early'slife the narrator carries out is meant to bring to the short story the dignity of tragedy and reveal the protagonist as a twentieth-century tragic heroine.

Keywords: the rhetorical approach to narrative, Jean Stafford, progression, purpose, the mimetic, the thematic.

According to the main tenant of the rhetorical approach to fiction, narratives are purposive communicative acts, i.e. rhetorical actions by means of which somebody tells somebody else something in order to achieve some purpose. My question then is: what is the purpose of Jean Stafford in "The End of a Career"? The purpose of any rhetorical communication is evident in the choices the author makes when it comes to thethree components of the rhetorical triangle – speaker/teller, audience and text/the narrated, but there are stories, like "The End of a Career",in which only one of these components is of particularrhetorical interest.

The issue of tellers in "The End of a Career" is uncomplicated, because Stafford chose to employ the old-fashioned realistic style, despite a bit of criticism at the time her volume of stories came out, i.e. 1969, when there was a strong tendency towards exciting new experimental forms. The story is a non-character narration employing an omniscient or, in rhetorical approach terms, a non-character narrator focused primarily on character portraiture. For this reason, the narrator, being the only source of information about the narrated, is a reliable teller as the author has no way of communicating behind his/her back. Consequently, one will agree that the author's purpose overlaps with the non-character narrator's and that the author endorses the narrator's report.

With reference to audiences, there is no necessity to insist on the distinction between different kinds of audiences (i.e. flesh-and-blood audience, authorial audience, narratee etc.) involved in the process of communicating the story of "The End of a Career" or on the relation between narrator and audience, for that matter. The narratee and the authorial audience are in the same position with respect to the narrated, both are

[1] Assistant Prof. PhD, "Petru Maior" University of Târgu-Mureş.

BDD-A22829 © 2015 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:03:44 UTC)

fully dependent on the narrator for their information, and the communicationis not multilayered, in the sense a non-reliable character narrator's story would be, for example.

Therefore, I will begin the task of interpretation with the third component of the rhetorical triangle – the textual phenomenon –always keeping in mind the question of the purpose for which the teller communicates the events to her audience and, for that reason, concentrating on the way in which she seeks to influence the audience's cognition, emotions and values. In other words, I will focus on the effect progression has on its audiences, as Phelan demonstrated and explained that "texts are designed by authors in order to affect readers in particular ways [and] those designs are conveyed through the words, techniques, structures, forms, and intertextual relations" (209).

Progression of the Textual Phenomenon

I assume that the key to the form of this story is its emotive effect of progression, specifically the satisfaction the audience experiences in understandinggradually the causes of Angelica Early's tragic demise. This emotive effect determines Stafford's specific choices regarding the sequence of events and the disclosure of information.As readers we enter the narrative audience role and we participate in the mimetic illusion from the very first sentence onward. It is by trying to view Angelica as a possible personthat we get emotionally involved.

A useful device for creating emotive effects and raising readers´ expectations is the title of the short-story. The metaphorical title Stafford chooses, i.e. "The End of a Career"*,* although not immediately apparent as metaphorical, announces the basic shape of the plot from the very first impact with the text and creates expectations of the content of the text readers have taken to read. According to these expectations, the story is an artistic work that portrays a professional person (as it will turn out, Angelica made a "career" out of being beautiful), while the word*end* makes the audience understand that they will in fact witness events that have led to thetermination of that career.

It is a short text of a little more than ten pages told in eight untitled sections. Readers immediately notice that the story is mediated by an omniscient/non-character narrator, but there is little evidence regarding the definite moment of telling or the time of the events narrated. This of course will have a clear effect. The fact that the historical context in which Angelica Early lived is vaguely referenced, thatno large scale event in the American society or anotheris mentioned, means that the larger circle of events do not impact life on the personal level of the characters, thatStafford deliberately narrowed the field to the domestic life, the feminine world and the trivial universe of the upper-class (in the 20th century).

If the time is not made clear, at least Stafford makes sure her readers have a very good sense of the general course events before getting very far into the narrative. In fact,it is immediately visible (from the first two paragraphs of the story) that the text features anon-character narrator telling the story of Angelica Earlylooking backwards - it is an

BDD-A22829 © 2015 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:03:44 UTC)

explicit technique called inverted chronology, which allows the audience the benefit of hindsight.

> By those of Angelica Early's friends who were given to hyperbole, she was called, throughout her life, one of the most beautiful women in the world's history. And those of more restraint left history out of their appraisal but said that Mrs. Early was certainly one of the most beautiful of living women. She had been, the legend was, a nymph in her cradle […] and in her silvery coffin she was a goddess. At her funeral, her friends mourned with as much bitterness as sorrow that such a treasure should be consigned to the eyeless and impartial earth; they felt robbed; they felt as if one of the wonders of the world had been demolished by wanton, marauders. […]
> Between her alpha and omega, a span of fifty years, Mrs. Early enjoyed a shimmering international fame that derived almost entirely from the inspired and faultless *esprit de corps* of her flesh and her bones and her blood [...] (228)

The narrator mentions Angelica deeply mourned death at the beginning of the story and, as a result,the general trajectory of the narrative follows the path of the narrator's reconstruction of Mrs. Early's life. Clearly this is a story in which the interest of the audience is propelled forward by the release of cognitive tension, the tension of unequal knowledge between narrator and audience. Moreover, because the narrator, informing his audience of the death of an extraordinarily beautiful woman of 50, implies that her end was perceived by everyone as both tragic and premature, (s)he chooses to enrich progression by supplementing the question of "what happened?" with "how was it possible for the life of such an admired and exquisite woman to come to such an early end?"

After the introductory paragraph regarding the funeral, the narrator slowly and gradually reduces the cognitive tension by giving various details (carefully chosen) meant to locate the causes of Angelica's tragic demise. By paying close attention to the logic of progression, the audience notices a movement from the depiction of Angelica's glamorous social experience, to the focalization on the mind of the character and the revelation of her inner crisis in the last years of her life.

This depiction of the protagonist in numerous contexts reveals most of Angelica's major mimetic attributes/traits. The audience learns that Mrs. Early wasthe epitome of beauty, due to her blue-eyes, blond-hair, perfect skin and flawless figure. She was also a socialite, whose unearthly beauty brought her numerous admirers and friends, as well as national and international fame. She was the cardinal guest at glamorous dinner parties, where she graced tables like a glittering ornament. Her outstanding appearance startled men who instantly fell head over heels for her and gravitated around her wherever she was; italso made women jealous, initially, and amiable, eventually, once they realized she was "the least predatory of women" (Stafford 230).

Angelica led a wealthy and privileged but loveless life, having entered into a marriage of convenience to Major Early, an obtuse, insensitive, big-game hunter (in fact,

BDD-A22829 © 2015 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:03:44 UTC)

he married such a beautiful woman because he was a hunter eager to get the most spectacular trophies and show off with them) who spent most of his year away, doing hunting expeditions in exotic places. However, her husband's lengthy absences did not make Angelica feel lonely, in fact it gave her considerable freedom to pursue her goal of looking after her physical beauty.

Mrs. Early was an intellectually limited woman, and her company was fairly dull. She was incapable of having meaningful conversations and found reading strenuous as a pastime. She had no dreams of her own and no passions. Her "passion" was for her own physical appearance. She made a career out of being beautiful and she felt compelled to maintain those standards of beauty because of and for her friends' adoring glances.

In time, Angelica discovered that her beauty had been declining and that her endless and (very important in the dynamics of the text) totally secretivedomestic efforts and attention to her face and body paid with the help of a personal maid, a hairdresser and a Finnish masseuse would not suffice. Therefore, after the age of forty she made annual summer trips to France to the obscure clinique of Dr. Fleege-Althoff, who painfully scraped her skin to maintain the illusion of youth. These trips incited her friends to speculate that she had a secret love affair that would give her a rejuvenated air and appearance. The doctor worked miracles as long as he had to treat her face, but the summer when Angelica's hands, too, needed similar plastic treatment, he could not help her anymore and suggested that she wear gloves or mitts instead. The doctor even told her to get a loverand tried to convince her that beauty was not everything that mattered and that the gradual loss of youth was not the end of the world, but to no avail. With her freshly operated face, she stopped first inParis as usual, there she overheard an offensive conversation between two young men discussing her age and mentioning her hands, as a result, she returned home to New York immediately.She isolated herself in her bedroom, took to her bed andpretended to be seriously ill. Angelica's own health deterioratedrapidly, being consumed by self doubt about her own worth. Soon afterwards (in fact, immediately after the visit of her adoring aunt during which Angelica confessed her identity crisis), her heart failed and she died.

Thus, progression takes the readers full circle to the moment the story started with: Angelica's death. The tension is fully resolved and the story is given completion.The answers to what went wrong in Angelica's life are clearly and gradually provided in this progression that offers a chronological re-construction of the course of events that caused Angelica's decline, her torment and her demise. The audience has been through a transformation of attitude towards Angelica's death and the role of society, initially described as innocently mourning the loss of an iconic figure.

Rhetorical Strategy and Purpose

Stafford'sstrategy was to develops a mimetic response to the story and then to subordinate it to the thematic purpose.The ideal audience (the authorial one) haspicked up on all Stafford's signals provided by progression in the appropriate way. It is a

BDD-A22829 © 2015 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:03:44 UTC)

progression which is closely related to and which grows out of its characters. Angelica Early is a character whose mimetic component is overtly emphasized, while her synthetic component, though present, remains covert. As forher thematic component, this does not figure prominently in the first part of the story, but later it becomes clear that sheshould be viewed as vehicle to express an idea and as representative of a larger class. In other words, the author makes Angelica function as an effective mimetic character, but progression develops various thematic functions from her different attributes: her background (the leisurely living high society), her intellectual ordinariness, her spiritiual void and her focus on the preservation ofher exquisite beauty – all of which making her a certain kind of representative figure for the contemporary American society and working together as part of the narrative's exploration of the values of a shallow image-focused society.

With the conversion of Angelica's thematic dimension into a function, the progression gives new importance to the thematic sphere in the story as a whole. Stafford focuses the readers'attention on her thematic points, through the narrator's comments (e.g. "The world kindly imagined that Mrs. Early's beauty was deathlessness and that it lived its charmed life without support. If the world could have seen the contents of her dressing table and her bathroom shelves! If the world could have known the hours devoured by the matutinal ritual! Angelica and her reverent English maid, Dora, were dressed like surgeons in those morning hours, and they worked painstakingly, talking little, under lights whose purpose was to cast on the mirrors an image of ruthless veracity" 231)and by means of two different characters' speeches (both characters being merely synthetic constructs that serve specific functions, than mimetic ones). The first was Dr. Fleege-Althoff's speech, during Angelica's last visit to hissanitarium, urging her to change the focus of her life from youth and perfection of looks to love and actually living life. The second speech was uttered by Angelica's drunken aunt whowas talking to her dinner companion - "She [Mrs. Armstrong] blamed herself for her obtuseness and she blamed Major Early for his, and, to a lesser extent, she blamed Angelica's friends for never realizing that they, with their constant and superlative praise of her looks, had added to her burden, had forced her into so conventual a life, that she had been removed from most of experience" (240). All these rhetorical means and choices have important roles in making the audiencestart regarding the character of Angelica as symbolic rather than natural, designed for a clear thematic purpose. Emotionally involved in the tension of the story, the authorial audience moves easily from mimetic involvement to thematic understanding.

Jean Stafford's story is meant to depict and mock a grim reality. Her purpose is to provide a harsh critique of contemporary (American) society, which places too much emphasis and importance on looksand youth. She shows that incontemporary culture at any age women feel pressure to conform to contemporary standards of beauty. Above and beyond maintaining their own health, in order to preserve beauty and boost their own self-confidence, more and more often, women have been turning to plastic surgery, drugs

BDD-A22829 © 2015 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:03:44 UTC)

and other cosmetic products and procedures. These extreme measures women choose to take regarding their own physical appearance are a sign of their insecurity, of their lack of confidence in their own worth. What is even more ironicaland makes women's effort even greater is the issue of the double standard women have to face when they are told both that their looks is of crucial importance, and also that vanity is shameful. This is the irony of *effortless beauty*!

Angelica's destiny was a tragic one and the attraction of tragedy in her life was not entirely her fault. However, she did not have the stature of great Greek tragic heroes. She was an extraordinary person in that she had an exquisite beauty and world-wide fame, but unlike those heroes who had greatness undermined by one flaw, she was a woman who had many flaws (selfishness, self-love, shallowness, blandness etc.) and one true but evanescent quality (her physical beauty). She let herself be taken in by the shallow values of the contemporary society in which she lived and, instead of cultivating her inner beauty and living a full life; andshe made a profession and an obsession out of preserving her physical appearance. Her beauty was pointless, "an end in itself"(Stafford 230). It served no purpose, broughther little and shallow advantage. It was just an ornament, an embellishment, her passport to all glamorous but spiritually void social events. Her beauty was also a theatrical performance, for which she lived her life in constantpanic and obsession, because of „the innumerable details she was obliged to juggle to sustain the continuity of her performance" (232), to preserve her status asan iconic figure in society. The truth is that she was shallow because she was the product of a shallow environment. Because of the double standard called effortless beauty, she led an impostor's life and her imposture took its toll on her heart. Angelica was given one major chance to escape this trap, when the plastic surgeon took her out of the sanitarium to show her what living life in a true manner looks like, but the outing did not provide Angelica with any paradigm shift, as she did not have the required level of intelligence and the willingness to change. The product of a superficial society, she was incapable of changing her life perspective and of re-inventing herself.

Conclusion

The story "The End of a Career", which is a posthumous recreation of a woman'scontroversial life,is the result of Stafford's realization that writing has the role of making sense of the conflicting experience of another human being's life. Stafford's story renders coherence to thelife experiences of a tragic contemporary heroine by locating the causes of her fall within social, societal, cultural and autobiographical contexts, in narrative. This turns Stafford into a cultural overseer, a professional of the "word" operating within her epistemological and moral limits.This story through the attention to the concrete particularities of contemporary human situations and its capacity to engage our emotions, provides an especially rich arena for the exploration of ethical issues. The narrator invites us to contemplate the issue of beauty and youth and uses a certain form of the story to insist on guilt and the innocence of a woman such as Angelica Early

BDD-A22829 © 2015 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:03:44 UTC)

against the backdrop of the 20th century society. Specifically, she invites us to engage through our initial fascination with the luck of being endowed with such amazing beauty and our more nuanced final response, in a meditation on guilt, societal conditioning and the powers and limits of portraiture narrative. Stafford's choice of method serves and highlights her purpose. The realist style of prose with its omniscient narrator, allows her to provide insights from the main character's inner life as well as other characters' views, opinions, perspectives and to expose mistaken values as well as the gap between reality and carefully preserved appearances. One character's first or third person perspective would have been too limited to serve the purpose.

References

Phelan, James. "Rhetorics/Ethics" (chp.) in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative* (David Herman, ed.). CUP, 2007, pp 203-216

Stafford, Jean. "The End of a Career" in *Images of Women in Literature* (Ferguson, Mary Anne). 2nd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975, pp 228-240

BDD-A22829 © 2015 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:03:44 UTC)