

Cyrus Seal: Voice and Audience in Literature

Dr. Vilma Pizarro-Santiago

Associate Professor

Department of English

Inter American University of Puerto Rico

Barranquitas

As in the ancient biblical times, when the use of an emperor's seal such as for example Cyrus- who with his authority and power provided a place for the Jewish to return to their religious practices- was important; it is also important for writers to provide an accurate and well developed voice within one's narration, one that represents a quality seal such as Cyrus'; a voice that portrays a clear message, whatever that is, through one's writing. A voice that could be understood nowadays as it was in the past.

The voice of the writer

"The quality of each writer, whether Jane Austen or James Joyce, is determined by what the writer is **intrinsically** and by **what he adds** to the novel, by the way the novel is refined to **say something unique**" (Karl, 1972, p.3) [emphasis added]. This is the way Professor Frederick Karl introduced his discussion on the nineteenth century British novel in his work *The nineteenth century British novel*, back in 1972; thus, shielding these great masterpieces from the critics that tried to "destroy" "literary taste" with "pseudo-scientific reasoning". Nonetheless, this statement also serves our purpose of discussing the literary voice in a reading selection, since the defense he uses to support the nineteenth century British novel has part of the definition of what is a voice in literature.

Part of what has been said about the voice in a literary work, different from, what is simply the *mood*, includes some of the words that Fredrick Karl employs in the excerpt we have used as the introductory part of this discussion. A voice is the personal seal every writer adds to his/her composition, either poem or prose. Amateur or professional, the writer has an urge to write because he/she has something to say. That urge goes beyond the term known as *universal theme* or an even simpler term, the *main idea*.

As Karl says, the voice of that writer is intrinsic, personal, authentic, and even more, it is the writer himself/herself; and it embodies all the personal experiences, values, and beliefs that have made of that writer, a person. Based on this foundation, we can agree with Karl on the aspect that since this is like that, the work of that writer would be unique.

History records how King Cyrus, known as Cyrus the Great, used as all the emperors of his time, a seal which was placed upon any document he converted into law. Cyrus the Great was named such not only because of the many conquests he achieved during his lifetime, but also because of the mercy he showed towards the people he conquered; especially towards the Jewish people, who did not disappear as a nation precisely because of the decree he issued on their favor to allow them to return to their country and to restore what had been destroyed.

Cyrus the Great serves us in this occasion, as a figure of what is the voice to a literature composition. Just as Cyrus's seal, the voice of a writer, his/her statements and proclamations influence the reader and thus changes or improves his/her way of seeing life. A well-developed voice in a literary work can even change a nation. A voice can be present not only in a selection that would be read but also in a speech that would be heard. This is the case of two very different situations, such as the Bible and the speeches of Adolf Hitler.

Even when the term *voice* basically refers to something heard, it literally goes beyond the simple physical sound and is used more as a belief, as a conviction, or as a principle. Wrapped in an amorphous state of being, a voice can penetrate not only the reader's hearing sense but also his/her emotions, the way of life, it can become a set of values, an experience of faith, a certainty, a passion.

What I should believe: The guidance of the voice

Among the attributes that provide a seal of style to a composition, there is the one that creates a credible and attention-grabbing voice, or as Karl says referring to Don Quixote's true vocation, [the one] that "create[s] a way of seeing" (Karl, 1972, p. 4). This voice, or this new "way of seeing" will guide the reader throughout the reading selection and it will be the one that will help he/she to never forget that reading experience, to retain a little something in his/her memory for ever, to change his/her attitudes in life due to the reading, or even to quote the author in order to motivate others through their path in life; among many other reactions that might arise within the reader's mind.

This is what happens for example, with the Spanish poet Miguel Hernández. Hernández was totally caught up in his admiration towards the countryside of the Spanish Province of Alicante, where he was born and raised, and where he was forced to look after his father's goats by the 1920's. Nevertheless, even though Hernández was not fond of being a shepherd, he was indeed captivated by the beauty of the landscape he had to contemplate every day. More than a poem with this theme became part of Hernandez's work; there is no doubt his voice invites us to admire what he admired so much. The voice captured in these poems is not only an ode to the beauty that surrounded him in those days, but it was also totally committed to let others see the difference between the countryside and the city. According to Orlando Santiago- Díaz, one of Hernandez's biographers and critic; the poet presents the city as a "symbol of dreadful conditions, evil and discredit", while the countryside represents "purity, happiness and decorum" (Santiago-Díaz, 2011, p. 17, footnote 11) (Translated by author) .

As Hernandez grows as a poet, his voice tends to relate nature with his anti-fascists ideas.¹ We can clearly hear his rebellious voice in the following excerpt:

La alegre tristeza del olivo

Andaluces de Jaén,
 aceituneros altivos,
 decidme en el alma: ¿quién,
 quién levantó los olivos?
 No los levantó la nada,
 ni el dinero, ni el señor,
 sino la tierra callada,
 el trabajo y el sudor.
 ¡Cuántos siglos de aceituna,
 los pies y las manos presos,
 sol a sol y luna a luna,
 pesan sobre vuestros huesos!
 Jaén, levántate brava
 sobre tus piedras lunares,
 no vayas a ser esclava
 con todos tus olivares.

(*La revista cristiana de hoy*, 2013, <http://www.21rs.es/news/view/7161>)

The voice that echoes the people

In literature, a voice can be created in a series of indefinite forms. It all depends on the imagination, on the writing power, as well as on the creativity or on the sensibility of the author. Most common voices are found in essays, where the author, and only the author, shares his/her thoughts and /or engages in a discussion with his/her audience. One good example of this is *The Gettysburg Address* by Abraham Lincoln and the speech *I Have a Dream* by Martin Luther King. Nevertheless, even in these type of essays, the author, like in Lincoln and King's case, might be representing a huge invisible crowd left behind, one who believes like him/ her and who makes this author's ideas its own: "But one hundred years later, we must face the tragic fact that the Negro is still not free.

¹ Some of the voice characteristics that could have helped Miguel Hernández to weld his voice clearly onto the heart of his readers in spite of figurative language, could have been several aspects mentioned by Natalie Tilghman (2011, Nov 27) such as: tone, background and word choice.

One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination" (King, *I have a dream*). Yet, when this could be the case, there is no doubt that the voice in these essays, is the voice of each one of their authors and no devices have been used to create a different voice.

This also occurs with another kind of nonfiction literature, for example, biographical diaries like Anne Frank's. Even when Anne Frank is portraying herself in her work -up to the point that she does not even change her name in her diary- she has created a novel out of her diary experience; and, both, the other characters and herself are in some way, themselves; but they are also shaped characters like in a fiction literary work. Not only the diary -writer, but also the novelist Frank, describes them with a masterwork technique and makes them fit into her purpose. She intimately pinpoints all the virtues and defects as well as the difficult relationship of those who are forced to live together due to their situation. Although she did not write an ending phrase for her diary, history and late research on her final days, did.

Frank's intention with this technique, probably without knowing it, is to create a voice. According to the Glossary of Literary Terms of Hunter College (1998), the voice "...is associated with the basic vision of a writer, [his/]her general attitude toward the world". Through her novel-like memoirs, Anne created a defiant voice, one who represented the voice of those who longed for help, liberty and respect. Those who believe in these values, inhabitants of all historical eras respond to, and are as well, echo recipients of Anne's voice.

Ann's diary is supposedly written to a fictional character named Kitty; yet, instead of Kitty, the reader becomes Anne's interlocutor, and somehow due to Frank's narrative ability, the reader becomes another "character" which is also living in the hideout with that family and experiencing Nazi Holland in his/her own skin. Whoever the reader is, he/she feels himself/ herself committed to Anne's cause. This is created thanks to the wonders that the voice can perform.

In her article *Finding a voice: First-person narration in young adult literature and coming-of-age adult fiction* (2007, November 27), Natalie Tilghman presents the relationship the author Sylvia Plath creates between narrator and reader, thanks to the voice crafted in the narration by means of the technique of confession that she adds to her character. Tilghman says that Plath allows the reader to be an onlooker or *voyeur*, and even when the character shuts herself in the bathroom planning to commit suicide, the reader is the only one there with her and the power of Plath's voice is such that the reader becomes the vessel that experiences "the psychological pain that comes from 'somewhere else, deeper, more secret' "(p.3). As it is known, Plath committed suicide shortly after writing the *Bell Jar*, the narration we are making reference to. There is no doubt her voice in that reading selection was not only quite honest and crystal clear, but also well read and understood by the reader, whoever he or she was.

When the voice is a character

In the case of fiction, the voice determines the impact that the reading would have upon the reader's soul and emotions. The author might decide either to be himself, like in the novel *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens, or to convert his narrator into a complete different person. He could be an onlooker, a witness or a friend who is telling about what he/she sees and experiences, but, he/she is certainly one who is beyond the emotions of the rest of the characters, the real characters, the ones who feel, the ones who cry; the ones who have the power to change the events.

In some cases like in the nineteenth century novel *El Final de Norma* by Pedro Antonio de Alarcón, we see a technique adopted by some authors of the fiction of the time, in which the author uses a quick moving dialogue between the protagonist (Alberto) and a friend of his (Serafín), which helps not only to narrate the events, but also to set the mood of the story and to introduce a voice which presents the author's purpose, values and current beliefs². This character- narrator cannot change the events, he is merely the teller or one of the tellers; the one in charge of passing this story to future generations.

² "El retrato del personaje no se elabora a partir de la observación de la realidad, sino que se inventa en función de una finalidad..." Leguen citado en Laudato (1998-99)

In the same essay, Laudato also says: "Generalmente, los narradores de Alarcón presentan, de una vez, una descripción directa y completa del personaje al principio del relato sin que esto impida la diseminación de datos sobre la moral y el físico del mismo".

Yet, somehow, due to his/her honesty and stability, this narrator- even with the limitations of a third person point of view- can be almost invisible to the others and he/she can immerse himself/herself into the deepest observations which will create a very clear portrait of the realities lying beneath the background of the story and/or of the characters' reality. This device was cultivated by the end of the nineteenth century and by the beginning of the twentieth century, and we can see an example of this in the narrator of *Wuthering Heights*, the famous novel by Emily Brontë.

...Catherine's library was select, and its state of dilapidation proved it to have been well used, though not altogether for a legitimate purpose: scarcely one chapter had escaped, a pen-and-ink commentary--at least the appearance of one--covering every morsel of blank that the printer had left. Some were detached sentences; other parts took the form of a regular diary, **scrawled in an unformed, childish hand**. At the top of an extra page (quite a treasure, probably, when first lighted on) I was greatly amused to behold an excellent caricature of my friend Joseph,--**rudely, yet powerfully sketched**. An immediate interest kindled within me for the unknown Catherine, and I began forthwith to decipher her faded hieroglyphics. (*Project Gutenberg*, 2003-2010, http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world/readfile?fk_files=3454207&pageno=13) [emphasis added].

The author could also create a narrator that takes a stand and who becomes part of the characters crew, and although his/her participation might be weak; still, he is taken into consideration by the other characters of the novel or short story and is part of its resolution. Due to his/her emotional involvement with the characters, its voice- especially when dealing with moral issues that are to be judged- might be more limited and subtler. His description of the characters is not as powerful or as deep as the onlooker-type of narrator. An example of this narrator appears in *El final de Norma*, by Pedro Antonio de Alarcón; it is also in some of Ernest Hemingway's stories and novels, such as: *For Whom the Bells Toll* and *Farewell to Arms*. The following is an excerpt of this technique in *For Whom the Bells Toll*, where Anselmo takes a stand and explains Robert Jordan-the protagonist-his vision toward killing in war.

"You have killed?" Robert Jordan asked in the intimacy of the dark of their day together.

"Yes. Several times. But not with pleasure. To me it is a sin to kill a man. Even Fascists whom we must kill. No. I am against the killing of men."

"Yet you have killed."

"Yes. And will again. But if I live later, I will try to live in such a way, doing no harm to any one, that it will be forgiven."

"By whom?"

"Who knows? Since we do not have God here any more, neither His Son nor the Holy Ghost, who forgives? I do not know." (Hemingway, *For Whom the Bells Toll*)

When the author masks himself/herself in this way and becomes a character of the story, he converts himself into a *persona*³, another character; this time with the responsibility of narrating but also of participating. This is the case of most 1st person narrations. One of the masters of this style of narration is Edgar Allan Poe. Poe creates a persona in stories such as *The Tell Tale Heart* and *The Cask of Amontillado*. This voice knows most things because usually his narrator is also the protagonist of the story, and the voice's decisions are the ones that determine the outcome of the story. Most of Poe's voices within his writings are dark instead of light; arrogant instead of humble; determined instead of insecure; and because of this, Poe's voice has personality and rules in an omnipotent way over the whole story, and even over the other characters. They cannot escape its influx and power. They cannot either go over it or stand against it. Likewise, no reader can escape this voice's sovereign and control over his/her feelings.

³ The persona is almost invariably distinct from the **author**; it is the voice chosen by the author for a particular artistic purpose. The persona may be a **character** in the work or merely an unnamed narrator... (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2013).

Such is the impact that a well developed voice can cause not only upon the other characters in the story and upon the development of the events, but also upon he/she who reads:

Presently I heard a slight groan, and I knew it was the groan of mortal terror. It was not a groan of pain or of grief --oh, no! --it was the low stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe. I knew the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my own bosom, deepening, with its dreadful echo, the terrors that distracted me.

... And still the men chatted pleasantly, and smiled. Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God! --no, no! They heard! --they suspected! --they knew! --they were making a mockery of my horror!--this I thought, and this I think. But anything was better than this agony! Anything was more tolerable than this derision! I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die! and now --again! --hark! louder! louder! louder! louder! (Poe, *The Tell Tale Heart*, 1843).

The voice and the audience

In order to be used with mastery, a voice must know its audience. The voice has the responsibility of using the appropriate vocabulary, phraseology, and of carrying the message that will cause an impression upon those who read. The audience whom the voice addresses should be able to understand the discourse within the reading selection. They should be able to judge it, to criticize it or to condemn it. They should become one single flesh; both: voice and audience; audience and voice.

Without audience there is no voice. Without voice, audiences have no way of regenerating themselves. The cycle of life is somehow interrupted.

It is important that as well as the voice is developed, the audience is educated. Once the audience has been identified and selected, the next step is to instruct it. Audiences are difficult to please. Their desire is not merely to be entertained, but also to be challenged, to be taught, to be changed, to be improved, to be moved, far beyond mere emotion.

Besides, as stated in Malm's recent book (*Las voces de la literatura cambian con el tiempo*, 2012 octubre) about compared literature, a voice in very old literature can also get old, and as a consequence, our new generations might have difficulty not only reading but also understanding it.

That's why in order to read classical literature, young readers of the 21st century require research and study to refresh a voice lost in the past; that would be the case of Aristotle, Plato, Virgil, Chaucer or as Malm himself presents : the poetry on Hercules.

Their issues were not ours; neither were their fears , their realities or their foes. As an example, even when I enjoyed *La Charca*, back in the early seventies- an excellent 19th century Puerto Rican novel which presented the terrible situation lived by that generation on the Island- our Puerto Rican students have been hating reading it lately; even when the language of the novel is their own language. As Malm himself says, its reading does not say anything to them anymore. There is no communication. There is no relationship between voice and receptor. The audience does not understand that issue any longer. For the new generations, there is no voice in *La Charca*.⁴

It has been suggested that "hearing" a literature voice also includes an amalgamation of syntax, punctuation and declamation among the other aspects we have mentioned in this essay. Whenever it is necessary it could be important to read the selection in loud voice as suggested by Malm. There is an absolute relationship between the enjoyment of a reading selection and its understanding. It is important that we return to the enjoyment of the human voice and the human message, however it is presented. As Malm says : "The voice of a text is always important" (Translated by author) .

⁴ What could have been a well heard voice in the past, is not necessarily heard now due most probably, not only to a generational gap, but to a change in expression. According to Ingemar Algulin, cited in Malm (2008, p. 2), the poem Hercules which has been considered to be a Swedish masterpiece has "...a large arsenal of effective images, antithesis, enumerations, alliteration, [and] inner rhyme..."among other literary elements and rhetorical tools.

With this in mind, we understand that both writing and sometimes reading request doing a lot of thinking, and doing a lot of both, researching and reading, editing again and again, criticizing oneself, doubting oneself. Creating a voice that makes us reflect, needs to have had its own time of reflection. Using a voice that makes us stand against what is unjustly established must be a full grown up one. A voice is the writer's means to protest, to create conscience, to disentangle truths, to provoke scandals; in a word, to humanize us. We must not forget that creation did not take one minute, not even one day; it lasted six full days⁵, and it is said that having it all done, God saw it was good and rested on the seventh.

Bibliography

- Alarcón, P. (1888). *El final de Norma*. Madrid: Pérez Durbull. Retrieved from: <https://archive.org/details/elfinaldenormano00alaruoft>
- De la Revilla, M. (1877, septiembre 15). Don Pedro Antonio de Alarcón. Bocetos Literarios. *Revista Contemporánea*. Año III, Núm 43, Tomo XI, Vol. I, pp. 17-26. Retrieved from: <http://www.filosofia.org/hem/dep/rco/0110017.htm>
- Encyclopaedia Britannica. (2013). Retrieved from: <http://global.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/452915/persona>
- Hamon, J. (2001). *The Cyrus Decree*. USA: Christian International Ministries Network.
- Hunter College Reading/Writing Center-Writing for English Courses
Glossary of Literary Terms. (1998). Retrieved from: <http://rwc.hunter.cuny.edu/reading-writing/online/lit-terms.html>
- Karl, F. (1972). *A reader's guide to the nineteenth century British novel*. New York: The Noonday Press.
- Las voces de la literatura cambian con el paso del tiempo. *Voces Literarias*. (2012, octubre 19). Retrieved from: http://www.tendencias21.net/Las-voces-de-la-literatura-cambian-con-el-paso-del-tiempo_a13779.html
- Laudato, R. (1998-1999). El talento solitario de Pedro Antonio de Alarcón: Abordaje a la manera posterior a 1874. *Espéculo. Revista de estudios literarios*. Universidad Complutense de Madrid
Retrieved from: <http://pendientedemigracion.ucm.es/info/especulo/numero10/alarconc.html>
- Lehan, R. (1998). *The city in literature: An intellectual and cultural history*. University of California Press.
- Los árboles de Miguel Hernández. *La revista cristiana de hoy*. (2013). Retrieved from: <http://www.21rs.es/news/view/7161>
- Luther, M. (1965) *I have a dream*. Retrieved from: <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/martin-luther-kings-speech-dream-full-text/story?id=14358231>
- Malm, M. (2008). *Rhetoric, morals and patriotism in early Swedish literature: Goerg Stiernhielm's Hercules (1658)*. Copenhagen: Pernile Harsting & Jon Viklund
- Poe, E. (1843). *The Tell Tale Heart*. Retrieved from: xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/poe/telltale.html
- Project Gutenberg, Wuthering Heights. (2003-2010). Retrieved from: http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world/readfile?fk_files=3454207&pageno=13
- Santiago-Díaz, O. (2011). *Voz de las venas de la tierra*. San Juan: Mariana Editores.
- Tilghman, N. (2011, nov. 27). Finding a voice: First-person narration in young adult literature and coming-of-age adult fiction. *Tri-Quarterly*. Northwestern University. Retrieved from: <http://www.triquarterly.org/views/finding-voice-first-person-narration-young-adult-literature-and-coming-age-adult-fiction>
- Wisdom Commons. Excerpt from Whom the Bells Toll. (2013). Retrieved from: <http://www.wisdomcommons.org/wisbits/1754-excerpt-from-for-whom-the-bell-tolls>

⁵ In the Bible it is said that one day is also interpreted as a thousand years. 2nd Peter 3:8.