

Social Imaginings:

A Rhetorical Analysis of the text *Alcoholics Anonymous*

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“One could as well describe writing as an imagination of a relationship.”
-George L. Dillon¹

A text that effectively employs the use of rhetorical strategies builds a relationship between the writer and reader that transcends the words on the page. It compels the reader to a new way of thinking, or perhaps even to a new way of life. *Alcoholics Anonymous*, or “the Big Book,” as members of AA commonly refer to it, is an excellent example of a text that strives to build such a relationship using different rhetorical approaches. First published in 1939, the Big Book is still used today as the basic textbook by members of Alcoholics Anonymous. The membership of this society has grown exponentially over the past 64 years. Alcoholics Anonymous has groups in over 60 countries with membership totals conservatively estimated at over two million. At the center of this society, whether translated in Turkish, Chinese, or Russian, is the text *Alcoholics Anonymous*. Only through a rhetorical analysis of this influential text can we understand how it has maintained its relevance. This paper attempts to answer several questions. What rhetorical strategies do the authors employ to create this society? What elements of style serve to strengthen and/or undermine its effectiveness? Finally, how does ethos as location affect the authors’ attempts to establish credibility?

Alcoholics Anonymous has the unenviable task of trying to convince the reader, who is often in full flight from the reality of his/her situation, that he/she suffers from the disease of alcoholism, and that recovery is attainable by following the program that the

¹ George Dillon, "Footnote: The Codes of Engagement," *From Rhetoric as Social Imagination: Explorations in the Interpersonal Function of Language* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986): 14-42, 41.

book outlines. In order to accomplish this task, the authors intentionally utilize several rhetorical devices. In this paper, I will focus on three areas of rhetorical strategy using articles that were presented in class. Tone (or Footing), writer's technique, and ethos are all elements that the authors combine to promote identification and association between the writers and the reader.

In his article, "Footing: The Codes of Engagement," Dillon addresses the importance of tone. It not only establishes a personal link between the writer and reader, but also plays a role in the construction of the identities of these categories themselves. When the book *Alcoholic Anonymous* was first published, no society of recovering alcoholics existed. In fact, alcoholics, because they come from all different places in society, have no institutional definition. Therefore, the text did not address a pre-existing "community" of alcoholics. Rather, it created a *new* community. Dillon notes that, "When the text is not instrumental to furthering a pre-existing relationship, however, as in advice writing, the writer has a scope to create roles and relations that is almost as large as that in literature."² Dillon states that the definition of the situation is to a large degree a choice of the writer.³ The choice made by the authors of *Alcoholics Anonymous* in how they define the situation of the alcoholic allows them to construct both the writer and reader in a particular way. The authors define the problem of the reader for them. As a result, the text projects the audience into existence. Therefore, we can understand the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* as "an act of social imagination: projection or construction of a self, an other, and a footing between them out of bits of social and

² Dillon 15.

³ Dillon 15.

linguistic codes.”⁴ The “Forward to the First Edition” starts off with a definition of self, purpose, and audience: “We, of Alcoholics Anonymous, are more than one hundred men and women who have recovered from a seemingly hopeless state of mind and body. To show other alcoholics *precisely how we have recovered* is the main purpose of this book.”⁵ The language seems simple enough. The authors of the text identify themselves as alcoholics and address a community of ‘other alcoholics.’ However, the alcoholic authors and their imagined alcoholic audience are defined in a particular way. After outlining two types of drinkers in chapter two, the authors of the text write, “But what about the *real* alcoholic (emphasis added)?”⁶ The book goes on to address the alcoholic “of the hopeless variety” in chapter four.⁷ The various characteristics of the alcoholic or symptoms of alcoholism are less important than the fact that the authors are attempting to define the situation of the alcoholic so as to create the identity of who is to be the new community of readers.

After constructing the self and the reader, the authors of *Alcoholics Anonymous* attempt to establish a particular footing between them. This section will attempt to analyze the complex combinations of footing that are used in the text. The first category that is described by Dillon is the Impersonal/Personal relationship. As Dillon states, “A writer moves the Footing toward the personal by dramatizing (or scripting) his and the reader’s involvement in the discourse. That is, a personal pronoun introduces subjectivity, but this subjectivity can be developed to various degrees.”⁸ *Alcoholics*

⁴ Dillon 15.

⁵ Anonymous, *Alcoholics Anonymous* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc, 1939, 1955, 1976), xiii.

⁶ Anonymous 21.

⁷ Anonymous 44.

⁸ Dillon 21.

Anonymous begins with the extremely personal use of the pronoun “I” in the first chapter entitled “Bill’s Story.” Dillon says, “As the *I* talks more about itself, we begin to have what Wayne Booth calls the ‘dramatized author’--the text includes information that could be used for a biography.”⁹ “Bill’s Story” reads, “I was part of life at last, and in the midst of the excitement I discovered liquor;”¹⁰ “I woke up. This had to be stopped. I saw I could not take so much as one drink. I was through forever.”¹¹ In fact, in this chapter, the pronoun “I” is used 208 times, along with “my, myself, and me” over 100 times. This repeated use of personal pronouns is effective in dramatizing the readers’ own involvement in the situations that were confronting Bill.

This type of Footing also uses rhetorical questions. Dillon writes, “We may speak of the Reader being scripted by such devices as you and (implicitly) by imperatives and questions.”¹² *Alcoholics Anonymous* employs this strategy on several occasions. At one point it states, “Why does he behave like this? If hundreds of experiences have shown him that one drink means another debacle with all its attendant suffering and humiliation, why is it he takes that one drink? Why can’t he stay on the water wagon? What has become of the common sense and will power that he sometimes displays with respect to other matters?”¹³ In this passage, the “he, him” pronouns are implied references to the reader. Dillon notes, “Rhetorical questions do not acknowledge the response of the Reader—in fact, they so surely predict it that they move in the direction of Superiority. However, they do presuppose Solidarity, insofar as the reader can be expected to know

⁹ Dillon 22.

¹⁰ Anonymous 1.

¹¹ Anonymous 5.

¹² Dillon 22.

¹³ Anonymous 22.

and assert to the assumed answer.”¹⁴ In this case, the assumed conclusion is that the person with the drinking problem, the implied “you,” is an alcoholic and cannot help his behavior due to a failure of the mind, what the book refers to as a type of “insanity.”¹⁵

The book *Alcoholics Anonymous* attempts to establish another type of Footing, which Dillon refers to as the Distant/Solidarity relationship. The text reads, “How often have some of us began to drink in this nonchalant way, and after the third or fourth, pounded on the bar and said to ourselves, ‘For God’s sake, how did I ever get started again?’”¹⁶ This passage leans toward solidarity by not distinguishing between author and reader. The authors assume that the reader has similar experiences with drinking and therefore share a common perspective. As Dillon notes, “Indeed, by assuming a shared piece of specialized knowledge, the writer moves toward solidarity with the Reader.”¹⁷ The specialized relationship in this case is a shared experience in regards to alcohol.

Other passages do not adopt either the impersonal/personal or distant/solidarity footing. For example, in chapter three, the writers state, “We do not like to pronounce any individual as alcoholic, but you can quickly diagnose yourself. Step over to the nearest barroom and try some controlled drinking. Try to drink and stop abruptly. Try it more than once. It will not take long for you to decide, if you are honest with yourself about it.”¹⁸ At first appearances the authors seem to be claiming that they have no knowledge of the readers’ condition. However, the end of the passage implies that the authors already know the outcome of their recommendation. As a result, the tone shifts toward a Superior footing. The reader lacks knowledge that the authors already possess.

¹⁴ Dillon 22.

¹⁵ Anonymous 37.

¹⁶ Anonymous 24.

¹⁷ Dillon 24.

¹⁸ Anonymous 31-2.

In addition, the authors have recovered while the reader is presupposed to have not. As Dillon notes, “But it is the very act of writing/reading presupposes commonality, it also presupposes difference of knowledge and perspective on the part of the Reader—minimally, the ignorance or folly the advice is directed to.”¹⁹

Ultimately, the authors of *Alcoholics Anonymous* are successful in their attempts to establish three types of footing at various points in the text: impersonal/personal, distant/solidarity, and superior/equal. The impact of each footing likely depends on the personality of the individual reader. Interestingly, the authors may have known that the individual sentiments of the audience would vary and, therefore, chose to establish these three different “Footings.” This situation is an excellent example of what Dillon notes, “the writer’s relation to an audience involves projection *as well as* accommodation.”²⁰

Technique, specifically organization, is also central to the rhetorical effectiveness of *Alcoholics Anonymous*. Writer’s technique, as defined by Bazerman, allows the authors to establish credibility. Bazerman writes, “Because the writer’s purpose is realized through the specifics of words in combination, the writer’s technique is present in every sentence and in every word—as well as in the larger groupings of paragraphs. Technique is present in every choice made by the writer at every stage of creation.”²¹ The preface begins by stating the origin of the text and how it has grown in number through the years. This is done to establish credibility, the same technique that one can find in all forms of advertising. Forwards to the First, Second, and Third Editions follow, roughly outlining a statement of purpose and giving more information as to the

¹⁹ Dillon 25.

²⁰ Dillon 15.

²¹ Bazerman, Charles, *The Informed Reader: Contemporary Issues in the Discipline* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 213.

growth of the society. A chapter entitled, “The Doctor’s Opinion” is next. It is a letter of support written by a non-alcoholic physician who has treated alcoholics and has seen first-hand the implementation of the AA recovery program. The placement of this letter at the beginning of the text is noteworthy. By beginning the book with a letter by a non-alcoholic physician, the authors again are striving to establish credibility. This strategic organization works to convince the reader that the arguments that follow have merit.

However, the credibility of the authors is not absolute. Nedra Reynolds asks in her article, “Ethos as Location,” how do writers identify themselves, claim authority, and position their projects?²² Using this question as a guide, I will examine how the authors of *Alcoholics Anonymous* attempt to establish further credibility. Reynolds argues that a declaration of self-identity is critical to establishing ethos. The authors are effective in this respect by explicitly identifying themselves personally. For instance, the first chapter is a personal account written by one of the society’s members. Furthermore, the book contains forty-four personal stories whose purposes are to aid in the identification and association by the reader. In these stories, the authors often identify their socio-economic, geographical, and cultural position. However, the non-autobiographical sections often overwhelm these attempts by assuming that the experiences of the authors of the text are universal. They assume that they can speak about ‘the alcoholic experience,’ regardless of race, class, gender, or sexuality. This assumption is painfully clear in the chapter entitled “The Family Afterwards,” which is intended to outline the obstacles a family may encounter after the alcoholic is sober. The authors write, “Family

²² Nedra Reynolds, “Ethos as Location: New Sites for Understanding Discursive Authority.” *Rhetoric Review* 11 (1993): 325 – 38, 333.

confidence in dad is rising high....²³ He is striving to recover fortune and reputation, and feels he is doing very well. Sometimes mother and children don't think so. Having been neglected and misused in the past they think father owes them more than they are getting."²⁴ This passage portrays the family as composed of a breadwinning dad, a resentful wife, and neglected children. The authors undermine their credibility by moving away from positioning themselves within their particular experiences and toward projecting a universal situation. Entire sections of society are excluded from this portrayal of a universal alcoholic experience. Some examples of those excluded are single men, alcoholic women, non-heterosexual men or women, alcoholics without children, etc. In addition, even if we assume that the reader is an alcoholic man with a wife and children, the text portrays a particular one-dimensional family structure. The writers state, "There will be other profound changes in the household. Liquor incapacitated father for so many years that mother became head of the house. She met these responsibilities gallantly... Thus mother, through no fault of her own, became accustomed to wearing the family trousers. Father, coming suddenly to life again, often begins to assert himself. This means trouble...."²⁵ The text conflicts between the authors' attempt to locate themselves in their particular experiences by self-identification and their assumptions about a universal alcoholic experience. Reynolds writes, "*Ethos*, in fact, occurs in the 'between' (LeFevre) as writers struggle to identify their own positions at the intersections of various communities and attempt to establish authority

²³ Anonymous 123.

²⁴ Anonymous 126.

²⁵ Anonymous 131.

for themselves and their claims.”²⁶ It is precisely at the intersection of various communities that the authors fail to establish such an ethos.

In conclusion, Dillon states, “The roles of Writer and Reader, and the Footing between them, are not just set once in advance, but are adjusted constantly as the discourse proceeds and may be altered for various reasons.”²⁷ This paper reveals that Dillon’s analysis extends beyond discussions of Footing. The rhetorical strategies employed by the authors of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, namely tone, technique, and ethos, change throughout the text. Although the different strategies appear to sometimes be in conflict, the overall effect of their complex interaction allows the authors to achieve their desired goal of identification. If identification and association is achieved, the reader, through the text, *becomes* a ‘real’ alcoholic.

²⁶ Reynolds 333.

²⁷ Dillon 16.

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