

Argumentative Fallacies Mechanisms in Norman`s *Night, Mother*: A Pragmatic Perspective

المغالطات الحوارية في مسرحية "طابت ليلتك يا أمي" للكاتبة مارشا نورمان:
منظور تداولي

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to present a pragmatic perspective for "Night, Mother", a one-act play written by Norman in 1983. The study tackles the strategies of persuasion employed by Thelma, hoping she may succeed in stopping her daughter, Jessie, from killing herself. Through Walton`s *Pragmatic Theory of Fallacy* (1995), the paper sheds light on the argumentation schemes employed by Thelma in a challenging time to convince her daughter not to commit suicide. For the analysis, the study adopts six excerpts from the play showing the different argumentative fallacies mechanisms employed by Thelma, including Ad Baculum, Slippery Slope, Ad Verecundiam, Faulty Analogy, Ad Populum, Ignoratio Elenchi, Ad Misericordiam. Results show that two polarizations were employed in the argumentative dialogue: a polarization for introducing fallacies, represented by Thelma, and a polarization for refuting these fallacies, represented by Jessie and by Norman herself. The results indicate that fallacies were not convincing enough to encounter Norman`s notion of absurdity of life since Thelma`s fallacious discussion depended heavily on moving the feelings, stirring emotions or triggering threats. On the other hand, logic, reason and mind have been ignored or, at least, marginalized.

Keywords: Pragmatics ,Theory of Fallacy, Night Mother, arguments

المستخلص

فازت مارشا نورمان بجائزة بوليتزر عام 1983 عن مسرحيتها "طابت ليلتك يا أمي" ، و قد أخذت المسرحية، التي تتكون من فصل واحد، حظها الوافر من النقد والتحليل النفسي، لا سيما و أنها تعرض فكرة الموت بشكل مختلف عما سبقه من الأعمال الأدبية. فالكاتبة قدمت فكرة الموت بشكل ينطوي على التهوين وكأنه قرار عادي يتخذه الفرد دون خشية، مثله مثل باقي القرارات الحياتية. تعيش بطله المسرحية "جيسي" ، البالغة من العمر بضع وثلاثون عاما، مع ولدها "ثلما" بعد انفصالها من زوجها. ينتاب " جيسي " أحيانا بعض النوبات الصرعية لذا كانت المسرحية نصا ثريا للتحليل اللغوي النفسي. تستيقظ "جيسي" من نومها و تبحث عن مسدس أبيها حتى تجده، ثم تنظفه و يدور الحوار الصباحي النسائي بشكل طبيعي، وأثناء الحوار تبلغ " جيسي" والدها بكل هدوء أنها تنوي الانتحار الليلة في غضون ساعات. تستنكر الأم بشدة في بداية الأمر، لكن "جيسي" تكمل حوارها بكل عقل و حجة ثم توضح لوالدها كيف أنها رتبت لها كل ما يخص شؤون البيت بعد الوفاة حتى لا تحتار الأم في بعض الأمور بعد ذلك. و يغرد هذا البحث بعيدا عن الدراسات السابقة، حيث يترك الجانب النفسي ويتناول تلك المبارزات الجدلية بين الأم و ابنتها. فالمسرحية ، التي تحتوي على فصل واحد، تنصب بأكملها على الاستراتيجيات الحوارية المختلفة التي تستخدمها الأم لإقناع ابنتها بعدم ارتكاب جريمة الانتحار. فهي تنطلق من الاستنكار إلى التهديد ومنه إلى الاستعطاف والشفقة والرحمة وغيرها من الاستراتيجيات. وللوقوف على هذه الأساليب، تستعرض هذه الدراسة بعض المغالطات الحوارية التي ذكرها " والتن " في كتابه " النظرية التداولية للمغالطات الحوارية" (1995) . وتوضح الاقتباسات، من خلال التحليل، كيف أن الأم قد لجأت إلى الكثير من المغالطات الحوارية رغبة منها في إنقاذ ابنتها.

كلمات مفتاحية: مارشا نورمان ، مسرحية "طابت ليلتك يا أمي"، نظرية والتن للمغالطات الحوارية ، التداولية.

1. Introduction

In 1983, Norman won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for her play "Night, Mother". This one-act play has been heavily discussed from the point of view of psychoanalysis as it conveys the notion of death differently in terms of a quiet decision taken by the protagonist "Jessie". Unlike precedent studies, the present paper introduces a different perspective, tackling types of arguments used by Thelma, the mother, to prevent her daughter from committing suicide.

Norman (1983) introduces the notion of death differently, employing the main character "Jessie", who is in her thirties and who is supposed to have some mental disturbances because of epilepsy, to say indirectly that life is meaningless, absurd and annoying. Such pragmatic meanings are employed by the different verbal responses of Jessie who lived alone with her mother. With no preliminary acts, Jessie tells her mother "Thelma" that she will kill herself this night. With a nonchalant mode, she starts to tell her mother how to manage the house affairs after her death. Comparing the event of death with house affairs, including chocolate, chore, milk, garbage etc, makes the play have two different polarizations: "hyperbole" represented by the mother who cannot believe herself, and "litotes" represented by Jessie who ignores the intensive objection of her mother.

Thelma cross-examines the decision, employing linguistic schemes as different as she can since she has only a couple of hours determined by Jessie before taking her decision. Fallacious arguments are pragmatically exploited with purpose of dissuading Jessie from committing suicide or, at least, delaying the decision until some sort of rescue comes up.

Within the one act play "Night, Mother", a verbal debate is run by the two main characters since other characters are off-stage. Different ways of persuasion, and sometime of sympathy, of threat and of logic etc, are introduced by the mother against the deliberate ignorance introduced by the daughter.

A pragmatic perspective is intended to read between lines, to detect the speaker`s intention and to trace the unsaid words. Norman used different techniques of persuasion within the mother (representing the persuasive polarization) and the daughter (representing the refuting polarization). Some of these techniques are basically fallacious since they depend heavily on sympathy and emotion, not on reason and logic. In his theory, *Pragmatic Theory of Fallacy*, Walton (1995) shows a variety of schemes that can be exploited by speakers to falsely win a step in the verbal debate. In this paper, the pragmatic analysis attempts to uncover the mechanisms used by the characters to avoid the impending unfavorable incidents.

2. Review of Literature

To trace the intertwined relation between pragmatics and literature, Chapman and Clark (2019) introduced *Pragmatics and Literature* to show this indispensable relation between the two domains. The book includes a collection of literary works in addition to theoretical approaches of both literature and pragmatics. For example, the book discusses implicatures in Hemingway`s *The Sun Also Rises* and finds such a relation between the pragmatic Theory of Relevance and irony as a literary device. The book tackles also further pragmatic issues, including explicature and implicatures within McBride`s novel "A Girl is a Half-formed Thing".

In the same sense, Sinha (2021) examines the role of pragmatics in literary works, confirming that literature is considered a specific type of communication. In the light of Speech Act Theory, Sinha analyses some parts from Shakespeare`s *Merchant of Venice* and shows how the words of the author draw a relation between the reader and the text. Such a relation reveals the power of language of each character and uncovers the felicity conditions involved in the scene of "the court of law". Through the processes of inference and implicatures, pragmatics makes the reader, or the audience, feel highly interactive and intensively involved as if s/he is part of the incidents.

Mokhlos and Mukheef (2020) trace the pragmatic manipulation of litotes in the political domain. In their discourses, the official members of the government usually affect the public by either hyperbole or litotes according to the purpose and the target that can serve their ends. So, Mokhlos and Mukheef spot light on the political speeches of Trump, showing the types of litotes and the function of each in the speech, and connect these types with Grice`s Maxims in an attempt to reveal the implicatures intended in each speech. The results indicate that the utilization of litotes was an effective mechanism for flouting Grice`s Maxim of Quantity, and the main purpose was the intention of Trump to draw a state of emphasis and certainty.

Highly close to the core of the present study, Eemerenand and Grootendorst (2004) introduce the concept of "fallacy", adopting a new sense of the term. They indicate that the familiar, or the old fashioned, concept of fallacy revolving around "a false idea that is presented as a true one" is misleading because other imperfect notions are not included under this definition. Instead, they consider "fallacies" a deviation from a discussion move. This deviation, or violation, may be committed

by the protagonist or the antagonist at every stage of a critical discussion. Furthermore, the accompanied context of fallacies has to be taken into consideration. So, the analysis of fallacies has to be a mix of logics and pragmatics.

Depending on the Pragma-Dialectical Theory and Relevance Theory, Lewiński and Oswald (2013) discuss pragmatically the "Straw Man" fallacy, pinpointing the main questions for their research: how can we reasonably judge the occurrence of the fallacy? And how can then we say that it is persuasive or misleading? In this way, they affirm that each form of argumentative moves has its valid and invalid instances and this is ultimately governed by external and contextual factors. So, such an approach, to Lewiński and Oswald, is effective in determining the argument that seems to be appealing and fallacious in the same time.

3. Methodology

To analyze the fallacious dialogue in Norman`s play "Night, Mother" and to show its role in persuasion and in changing the course of incidents, the study presents the most influential excerpts in the play (six quotations) for the purpose of analysis. Quotations were taken in the same order that they appear in the play to show the gradual manipulation of argumentative techniques. In the light of Walton`s *Pragmatic Theory of Fallacy* (1995), the comprehensive concept of "fallacy", in which certain conditions are governing the dialogue, is traced and seven types of fallacy are discussed. Based on the seven types of fallacy, the analysis is conducted and the results are provided.

4. The Pragmatic Theory of Fallacy

Walton (1995) confirms that definition of the concept "fallacy" is still controversial and it is not sufficient to restrict its meaning conventionally to "an argument seems valid but is not". However, Walton presents a new concept of fallacy, framing it under certain conditions as follows:

1.Dialectical: it requires two parties for initiating a dialogue.

2. Pragmatic: the context determines whether, or not, the fallacy occurs.

3. Commitment-Based: commitment to the purpose of the argument is a main factor in determining the fallacy.

4. Presumptive: types of fallacies including arguments from sympathy, authority and emotion have to be scrupulously traced.

5.Pluralistic: various types of dialogues are included and the shift from one type to another is a significant factor in determining the fallacy.

6.Functional: a fallacy is not just a violation of the argument rules, but it extends to represent a technique used in appropriately by one party in a dialogue against another party.

The informal fallacies are supposed to violate the presumptive factor since they depend heavily on triggering the emotions and gaining the sympathy of other parties. The present paper shows how these informal fallacies were employed in the play as a persuasive mechanism that may help in delaying or obstructing a

devastating action. Walton (1995) numerates some tactics of the informal fallacies that can be misleading and deceptive:

4.1. Ad Baculum

This argument tends to be a deceptive one. It somehow neglects reason and highlights emotional appeals. The argument is affected by external factors, including force, threat, and fear. These influential stimuli can work directly or implicitly. In other words, force is not supposed to be physical, but it can be in the form of authority. A tripartite relation is pragmatically hidden in the manipulation of these items (force – threat – fear). In other words, each one can lead and help create the other. The generated influence, even if it achieves its purpose, is misleading because the argument misses "reason" as a major corner of appropriate dialogues.

4.2. Ad populum

According to Engel (1982), this argument evokes passion and generalization and ignores pieces of evidence. This may occur when the arguer confirms to the other party that all people have the same notion he or she presents. This fallacious argument, to Walton (1995), is frequently exploited by youths when they have to oppose their parents` ideologies. So, it is sometimes called "Mob Fallacy". This argument may affect psychologically the recipient as it leaves him in a state of "alienation" and "loneliness" after having the feeling that his, or her, ideas are different from those of other people in the society. In the same time, the arguer can win a step and moves forward to support the ideas he, or she, wants.

4.3. Ad Misericordiam

Michalos (1969) asserts that Ad Misericordiam is a misleading dialogue because it attempts to draw others` sympathy. Within existing plights and problems, and the fact of being exacerbated, the arguer addresses the emotion of the other party and entreats his/her sympathy and mercy. It is fallacious because reason and logic conclusions are invisible. So, when a careless student, who neglected all tasks during the course, tells her teacher that her failure may lead to her divorce, she employs a misleading fallacy, exploiting a given trouble to win an unspoken purpose. This debate is popular and it may succeed in drawing the attention of others, but it is still fallacious due to the absence of equality and appropriate evaluation.

4.4. Slippery Slope

This argument is controversial and debatable because it may be fallacious or true. According to Walton (1995), it occurs when one of the arguers is warned against the outcomes of certain moves. This argument is considered by the context and the surrounding environment. So, if the context can give some pieces of evidence, the argument lies in the circle of trueness; and if it fails to do so, the argument is misleading. This argument may turn into the fallacy of Ad Baculum if it does not carry a proof about what is said. So, if the arguer says to the other party "your words can make you an accomplice in the crime", this is judged as fallacious, or not, in the light of the evidence available. If not, it is a matter of threat and coercion for the purpose of winning the present step.

4.5. Faulty Analogy

Supposing a similarity or making a comparison can be an argumentative trap for the respondent. Copi & Cohen (1990) posit definite terms, governing this dialogue. This is because analogy can take a correct form leading to a plausible conclusion, and it may be a way for flouting the course of the argument. So, checking the context is inevitable for determining the purpose of the analogy. Making irrelevant comparisons can be inserted by the arguer so as to distract the other party and take him, or her, to a different point, especially when the current point cannot be defended within the regular course.

4.6. Ignoratio Elenchi

According to Walton (1995), it is also called the "fallacy of irrelevance" and "red herring". Like Grice`s Maxim of Relevance, the argument has to be directed to its core purpose. Failure to trace the intended conclusion and deviation from the main subject can lead to a fallacious argument. In this context, Hamblin (1970) indicates that irrelevance can be a denominator in all false arguments. Changing the topic or shifting the dialogue is a main concept in detecting the fallacy and in deciding the degree to which the argument is true and fruitful.

4.7. Ad Verecundiam

It is also called the reverence fallacy (Walton, 1995). This argument is misleading when the arguer quotes the opinion of an expert incorrectly or irrelevantly. It is fallacious because the arguer attempts to support his/her dialogue by attributing it to a respected figure that cannot be a source of suspect. Exploiting religion, and religious people, to prove an arguer's opinion is a common form of the reverence fallacy.

5. Analysis

(1)

"MAMA. Well, I'm calling Dawson right now. We'll just see what he has to say about this little stunt... Dawson will put a stop to this. Yes he will. He'll take the gun away.

JESSIE. If you call him, I'll just have to do it before he gets here"
(Norman, p. 15, 1983).

It is a mixed dialogue where debate is the major arena. The debate is a mix of a critical discussion dialogue and a quarrel one (Walton, 1995). In the debate, the parties of the dialogue argue freely and strongly until the argument is gained by either party. The mother commits the Ad Baculum fallacy by indirectly threatening and forcing Jessie to stop. Calling Dawson, Jessie`s brother, is supposed to create some sort of negotiation as shown in the beginning of the argument, but Thelma turns to a dialectical shift by saying "He'll take the gun away". Jessie interprets the words pragmatically and considers it a type of coercion and threat, so she, too, forsakes the negotiation and moves her debate towards stubbornness. In this way, the arena awaits the winner of the debate. Similarly, Jessie counterbalances the argument by using the same fallacy (threat), but, now, Thelma`s argument is defeated and Jessie cannot respond to this type of dialogue. This is because Jessie bolsters her fallacy by coupling it with the slippery slope argument in which the arguer is warned against the consequences. So, Thelma has to try other forms of argument.

(2)

"MAMA. I think we better call the doctor. Or how about the ambulance. You like that one driver, I know. What's his name, Timmy? Get you somebody to talk to"(Norman, p. 16, 1983) .

The dialogue moves from threat (calling Dawson) to an advice-giving dialogue (calling a doctor) where a consultation from an expert is required. This is included under the fallacy of Ad Verecundiam because this dialogue needs pieces of evidence to support the speaker`s argument. These pieces can be the clear symptoms of disease like high temperature, headache, stomach pain etc. The argument is not accepted by Jessie since it has already been preceded by that of threat without negotiating the symptoms of any disease. Furthermore, a dialectal shift occurs as Thelma changes the topic in the same turn. She talks about "the doctor" and moves to "the ambulance driver" and shaky loving words. Pragmatically, Thelma flouts Grice`s maxim of relevance, committing a fallacy that cannot be sustained by evidence, and makes a hasty dialectical shift. The result is that her argument is not persuasive and Jessie ignores a counter response.

(3)

"MAMA. You don't know what dead is like. It might not be quiet at all. What if it's like an alarm clock and you can't wake up so you can't shut it off. Ever

JESSIE. Dead is everybody and everything I ever knew, gone, Dead is dead quiet"(Norman, p. 16, 1983).

A different tactic of argument is employed in which a comparison is made. Comparing two elements requires a proof, or at least a previous experience,

uncovering the similarity between the two objects. If not, the fallacy of Faulty Analogy is committed. Thelma compares death with a constant alarm clock in an attempt to stir Jessie`s fear (the fallacy of Ad Baculum). The argument is fallacious because Thelma herself has not experienced death before and cannot bring a piece of evidence that can enhance her words. On the other hand, Jessie counteracts the fallacy by comparing death with silence and tranquility, and her argument is supported by factual scenes associated with the dead. In this way, Jessie wins this step because physical experience tells that the dead are silent and quiet, so Thelma has to use a different strategy.

(4)

"MAMA. It's a sin. You'll go to hell .

JESSIE. Jesus was a suicide, if you ask me" (Norman, p. 17, 1983) .

Under the fallacy of Ad Populum, the moral argument is included. In these turns, Marsha Norman creatively exploits her characters to introduce life fallacies. Can committing suicide be forgivable or it is always a sin? Frequently, not few people resort to religion, perhaps inappropriately, when reason and logic fade. Thelma turns her argument to the ethical standards and, in the same time, employs the Slippery Slope fallacy by inserting "Hell" in the dialogue. However, Norman, through Jessie, responds logically in the same line by evoking religion and penetrating the beliefs of Thelma. The debate goes for the favor of Jessie and the Ad Populum is detected and defeated. So, till now, Thelma is not able to present a persuasive argument for Jessie.

(5)

"MAMA. You can't use my towels! They're my towels. I've had them for a long time. I like my towels...And you can't use your father's gun either. It's mine now too. And you can't do it in my house .

JESSIE. I have to go in the bedroom and lock the door behind me so they won't arrest you for killing me" (Norman, p. 17, 1983) .

It is a presumptive dialogue where claiming authority attends. Moving to the argument of authority, Thelma claims her own right for the tools Jessie wants to use in killing herself. The Ad Baculum fallacy occurs because forcing by authority is exploited. The pragmatic meaning included in the Thelma`s speech acts states that " you own nothing in this place: the gun, the towel and even the house itself ". The fallacy of possessing the towel is rejected as Jessie has already been allowed to use it before the debate starts. The fallacies of the gun and the house are counteracted by a negotiating argument in which some sort of gain awaits the arguer. So, Jessie promises the mother not to let her involved in the crime when the police come. In this way, Jessie misses the core point and negotiates around the topic. By doing so, Jessie flouts Grice`s Maxim of relevance and in the same time traces the fallacy of Ignoratio Elenchi.

(6)

"MAMA. Jessie, how can I live here without you? I need you! You're supposed to tell me to stand up straight and say how nice I look in my pink dress and drink my milk. You're supposed to go around and lock up so I know we're safe for the night..."

JESSIE. ...so you wouldn't blame yourself, so you wouldn't feel bad. There wasn't anything you could say to change my mind"(Norman, p. 48, 1983) .

This dialogue approaches closely the end of the play. Experiencing all tactics of argument, the arguer finds no way but entreating the mercy of the other party by exposing her own plight. The Ad Misericordiam argument is usually fallacious. Pressure is activated by sympathy. The core point of the argument is flouted and the consequences of the arguer`s plight are the factors that are supported. It is a different, and the last, strategy used by Norman, within Thelma, as a way of persuasion. Compassion and pity are highlighted; reason and logic are silent. Since all schemes of arguments have already been consumed, Norman employs "mercy" at the end of the play where short time gives no chance for reason. This fallacious argument is not convincing to Jessie as she is not ready enough to show some sort of flexibility. On the other hand, Jessie, too, violates the main topic, committing the fallacy of Ignoratio Elenchi, and makes a dialectical shift by which she focuses the talk on "blaming or not".

Conclusion

The paper presented Norman`s " Night, Mother", tracing somehow an unprecedented point of view. It is not new because of its novelty; the pragmatic perspective is heavily adopted in a myriad of studies. But the fact is that the previous studies have intensively considered this play from the point of view of psychoanalysis and neglected the pragmatic aspects. In this respect, the results confirm that the play has been a rich material for pragmatic analysis due to the linguistic duel between two main parties, a real dialogue based on arguments

aiming at dissuading one party from committing suicide. One polarization, "the mother", has the bigger responsibility for linguistically maneuvering and pragmatically negotiating the other party (the daughter) who is employed, by Norman, to refute any strategy, either by following logic and reason or by flouting relevance and willingness. The results assert that the different types of dialogues stated by Walton (1995) could reveal the different tactics used by Norman, through the characters, in an attempt to face the audience with certain fallacies and, in the same time, to introduce counter responses, letting the reader in the position of a judge who listens and evaluates both arguments. Results affirm that quotations taken in the same order that they appear in the play were able to show the significance of the final excerpt in which mental processes began to lose some sort of control. Such gradual utilization of fallacies, from the strongest mode of the speaker to the weakest one, confirms that pragmatic negotiation was highly intended and argumentative mechanisms were profoundly purposeful. Finally, the results indicate that fallacies were not convincing enough to change the course of incidents and stand against Norman`s notion of absurdity of life because Thelma`s argumentation relied on moving feelings, stirring emotions or triggering threats. Conversely, whenever Jessie took the chance, logic, reason and mind were somehow associated with her responses, repressing a case of linguistic awareness, an ability to refute fallacies and a skill to pragmatically negotiate.

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