

“Character Backstory as Rhetorical Gesture in Children’s Fiction”

This paper will examine the rhetorical function of character backstory on the reader’s reception of character and of the story trajectory and conclusion. The backstory offered late in a narrative is an especially strong and effective way of creating a sudden shift in reader empathy and, therefore, often leads shortly thereafter to acceptable narrative closure. The author’s introduction of a backstory late in a narrative either draws a reader closer or pushes her further away from character in a rhetorical gesture that communicates to the reader that the character is to be given another chance or none at all as the case may be.

The paper will examine several examples and their respective rhetorical implications. On the more common and positive arc of empathy change—an increase in reader empathy—I will consider the story of Voldemort in the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling, Mandy in *Ella Enchanted* by Gail Carson Levine, Howell in Diana Wynne Jones’ *Howl’s Moving Castle*, Iris’ father in Barbara Stuber’s *Crossing the Tracks*, the story of Cecilia in *One Crazy Summer* by Rita Williams Garcia, The Tucks in *Tuck Everlasting*, The Beast in Robin McKinley’s *Beauty*, or others. In these cases, the authors employ the narrative tool of backstory in order to make characters “more real” or more pitiable, and this gesture, so relied upon, increases narrative momentum, compresses narrative time, and creates an emotional crescendo just prior to closure.

A couple of counter examples will also be considered, including The Trunchbull in *Matilda* and Christopher in *The Silver Kiss* (and perhaps the culturally complicated case of Daddy in Jean Webster’s *Daddy Long Legs*). In these cases, characters who might have been made more sympathetic are, in fact, made more disagreeable in order to provide a similar emotional clarity found with increased empathy. In these cases the clear indication that the reader isn’t to “spend” further sympathy enables the same narrative effects of increased narrative momentum, compressed narrative time, and an increased emotional satisfaction.

It is my hope that this discussion will increase our awareness of this particular authorial rhetorical tool in addressing story development and help students consider how they are manipulated.