

## Representation of Rhetorical Presence in Virginia Woolf's "Madame de Sévigné"

Margarita Esther Sánchez Cuervo

University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain

*This paper seeks to represent rhetorical presence in "Madame de Sévigné", an essay by Virginia Woolf that reviews Sévigné's collection of letters. In general, Woolf's essays that appraise an author and her/his work are organised into several sections that correspond to the traditional rhetorical levels of inventio, dispositio and elocutio. The synergy of arguments and figures that are found at each of these levels are first-order effects which can create rhetorical presence, defined as a strategy that relies on the selection of certain elements and how they are presented to the audience. Presence of this kind involves a second-order effect which transmits the persuasive and expressive value of the essay if several conditions pertaining to the values of the audience and Woolf's expertise in writing are attained. "Madame de Sévigné" is persuasive in that it tries to increase readers' admiration towards the letter writer and thus affects the readers in a positive way. This admiration is achieved by means of Woolf's specific use of language, which amplifies Sévigné's figure and grants expressive prominence to the text.*

### Keywords

Virginia Woolf; Madame de Sévigné; literary essay; rhetorical presence; rhetorical figure

### Introduction

"Madame de Sévigné" is an essay written by Virginia Woolf towards the end of her life and published after her death which reviews Madame de Sévigné's (1626–1696) extensive collection of letters.<sup>1</sup> In the first lines of the essay, Woolf explains that many people do not probably know this seventeenth-century French writer because she "created her being, not in plays or poems, but in letters – touch by touch, with repetitions, amassing daily trifles, writing down

what came into her head as if she were talking” (Sévigné 497). But it is precisely this epistolary production that allows us to “live in her presence” (Sévigné 497), to examine this writer’s work, and to further unveil her fascinating character. The essay is a good example of Woolf’s non-fiction prose which portrays many writers’ works throughout different historical periods. In order to do so, the essayist makes use of the person/act argument, by means of which any person’s accomplishments, mode of expression, emotional response, or opinions are assessed in such a way that a novel vision of that person under study is created (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 297; “Rhetorical Stylistics” 219–220). As Elizabeth Madison (65–66) explains, the consideration of an author’s personality is used in Woolf’s essays to shape and influence her vision of that author and the work that she is reviewing. The way in which she unfolds details, many of them fictionalised, of the life and circumstances of an artist, may prepare the reader for the final portrait of such a person. In her evaluation of the artist and her/his artistic production, Woolf also performs the role of “an implied or encoded critic” who is capable of finding positive traits in an unsatisfactory piece of work and who offers different perspectives on the same piece, be it good or bad (Little 109).

The subjective quality that is part of her non-fiction writing is in consonance with her conception of the essay as a genre which is able to employ fiction and to establish dialogical strategies between Woolf and her readers (Gualtieri 53; Koutsantoni 15; Saloman 9). Not only that, but Woolf also conceives readers as co-creators of literary works who should try to appraise works of art and observe their form, as it occurs with Sévigné’s epistolary work (Nünning 983). Indeed, in her essay about the letter writer Dorothy Osborne, Woolf affirms that “the art of letter-writing is often the art of essay-writing in disguise”, and that “it was an art that a woman could practice without unsexing herself” (“A Woman’s Essays” 127). As a writer of letters herself, Woolf thus celebrates the world of resistance that women letter writers could create in a relegated literary form that was not recognised in Osborne and Sevigne’s time either (Dusinberre 98).

In this paper, I carry out a rhetorical analysis of “Madame de Sévigné” and its subsequent interpretation of presence, which is aimed at showing the expressive and persuasive value of the text. As it is an argumentative piece of text, this and other essays by Woolf which review an author and her/his work can be examined according to the rhetorical levels of *inventio*, *dispositio* and *elocutio*. In section 2, I revise the notion of rhetorical presence, which is conceived as a strategy that derives from the combination of first-order

effects achieved at these rhetorical levels (Gross and Dearin 135). In section 3, I analyse each one of these levels and, in section 4, I seek to demonstrate how this analysis can generate a second-order effect or rhetorical presence by means of which Sévigné's figure is amplified.

In general terms, the rhetorical reading of Woolf's essays can be applied to all her non-fiction work: (1) the numerous essays devoted to literary criticism, both those dealing with individual writers like Sévigné and with the writing practice in texts such as "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", "The Decay of Essay Writing", "The Narrow Bridge of Art" or "Phases of Fiction". (2) Those pieces focusing on more personal reflections on an array of topics such as "The Death of the Moth", "On Being Ill", "Old Mrs. Grey", or "Thoughts of Peace in an Air Raid", to name just a few. And (3) those more well-known essays pertaining to feminist concerns like the unfair role that women have played in history and the improvement of their rights, as in *A Room of One's Own*, "Professions for Women", "The Intellectual Status of Women", "Memories of a Working Women's Guild" and *Three Guineas*. In all of them, Woolf employs a varied group of arguments and rhetorical figures in order to persuade the reader of the validity of her reflections. Apart from the person/act argument as a dominant technique which allows an innovative reading of the author who is being reviewed, the argument from authority is also frequent. This argument is associated with prestige in that it uses the opinions of a person to prove or support an idea (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 305). For instance, in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", Woolf explores the conception of character in Modernist literature, and states that the current age is "rather a melancholy one" as compared with that of "Shakespeare and Milton and Keats or even of Jane Austen and Thackeray and Dickens, if you think of the language, and the heights to which it can soar when free, and see the same eagle captive, bald, and croaking" ("A Woman's Essays" 84). In addition to these arguments, the essayist makes use of rhetorical figures which contribute to both the persuasive and aesthetic value of her ideas. A first group includes figures of repetition, which involve patterns of word arrangement and which intensify the presence of a person or a concept, as the rhetorical analysis of "Madame de Sévigné" will show. This rhetorical device is very effective in granting emphasis to discourse and is one of the strategies for achieving amplification which Quintilian (III.263) recommends in his *Institutio Oratoria* ("Rhetorical Style" 391-392). In the following quotation, taken from *Three Guineas*, Woolf exhorts her male addressers to contemplate the arduous work of raising children as a paid profession. She stresses this idea with *epistrophe*, a figure

which repeats a word at the end of several sequences so as to emphasise its importance (Lanham 276):

For if your wife were paid for her work, the work of bearing and bringing up children, a real wage, a money wage, so that it became an attractive profession instead of being as it is now an unpaid profession, an unpensioned profession, and therefore a precarious and dishonoured profession, your own slavery would be lightened. (“A Room and Three Guineas” 317)

In the second place, the inclusion of tropes such as simile and metaphor is common as well so as to express Woolf’s views in a more imaginary, poetic way. In the next excerpt, taken from “Modern Fiction”, her famous essay wherein she advises the novelist to write what he wants to, “not what he must”, and to interpret life according to his whims, Woolf defines life through this enlightening metaphor:

Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible? (“The Common Reader” 150)

A third group of figures are “figures of thought”, which try to attract the readers’ good favour and engage them in the context of the participants, both the writer and her readers (“Rhetorical Figures in Science” 20). Woolf does employ these figures in her essays to establish a connection with an audience that may be able to partake in her reasonings (“Appeal to Audience” 127). One of these figures, also present in the quoted words above, is *erotema* or rhetorical question, posed as a statement but punctuated as a question, which implies an answer but does not offer any (Lanham 71). Another important technique is the *enallage* of person from “I” to “we” as a veiled invitation to her readers to take part in the argumentation. Although this figure is pervasive in Woolf’s non-fiction, it is perhaps more significant in her feminist texts where the interaction with her readership is more passionate. For instance, *A Room of One’s Own*, the well-known essay in which the author speaks about the difficult relation of women and fiction throughout history, is mostly written using the first-person singular pronoun. However, on some occasions the

essayist includes the pronoun “we” to empathise with both her fellow writers and her audience. That is the case of the following fragment, where Woolf laments the social confinement in which some celebrated female authors had to develop their writing career:

But they were not granted; they were withheld; and we must accept the fact that all those good novels, *Villette*, *Emma*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Middlemarch*, were written by women without more experience of life than could enter the house of a responsible clergyman; written too in the common sitting-room of that respectable house and women so poor that they could not afford to buy more than a few quires of paper at a time upon which to write *Wuthering Heights* or *Jane Eyre*. (“A Room and Three Guineas” 91)

## Rhetorical presence

Traditionally, the notion of presence has consisted of making certain elements present to the audience’s mind by using several techniques (Tindale 4). Gross and Dearn (135–137) define presence as “the cumulative effect of interactions” among the rhetorical levels of *inventio* (or invention), *dispositio* (or arrangement) and *elocutio* (or style). The individual rhetorical devices of the first-order effects which are achieved at these levels combine to form a synergy whose result is the creation of a second-order effect or presence. This strategy appeared first in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, where he makes a distinction between metaphors with *energeia*, which can bring an inanimate object to life, and metaphors without *energeia* (Aristotle III.11). Whereas *energeia* brings things alive in the mind of the audience, the term *enárgeia* means “clearness” or “distinctiveness” (Kennedy 222). The confusion between these two terms arises because Quintilian also refers to *enárgeia* as making inanimate objects animate (Quintilian VI.2). Through *energeia* the listeners or readers see something, be it an image or a word, and learn from this, so we obtain a cognitive effect deriving from a perceptual cause (Tindale 5). However, in the case of *enárgeia*, a concrete and vivid style of depiction usually has an impact on the listeners or readers, who can create for themselves the image described by the speaker or writer (Kochin 392).

Campbell (95–96) anticipates the concept of presence in the second half of the eighteenth century, and refers to it as “circumstances in the object presented by the speaker which serve to awaken and inflame the passions

of the hearers”. He relates these circumstances to vivacity that includes matters of invention and style. His ideas are further developed by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (119) who, in their *New Rhetoric*, explain presence as a technique of argumentation which implies the selection of certain elements to make them present. In this line, along with invention and style these authors add arrangement, and state the following: “the order of the arguments will accordingly be dictated in large measure by the desire to bring forward new premises, to confer presence on certain elements, and to extract certain agreements from the interlocutor” (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 492). Louise Karon (96–97), for her part, stresses Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s ideas about presence being the product of style, delivery and arrangement, and concludes that presence is a major psychological element in rhetoric. She adds that the conjunction of these techniques is what transforms the psychological into argumentative because the speaker seeks the audience’s adherence with her/his words. In her examination of *The New Rhetoric*, Karon mentions five characteristics that derive from presence: (1) it is a felt quality in the auditor’s consciousness. This quality is created by the rhetor’s “verbal magic” when trying to impress upon the consciousness of the audience. (2) This presence fixes the attention of the audience and changes its perceptions and perspectives. (3) Its most potent agent is the imagination. (4) Its aim is to initiate action or to dispose the audience toward a certain action or judgment. (5) It is created mainly through the techniques of style, delivery and arrangement.

The notion of rhetorical presence has been mainly applied to political, philosophical and scientific texts by scholars like Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969), Kaufmann and Parson (1990), and Gross and Dearin (2003). Gross (“Rhetoric of Science”, “Rhetorical Tradition”, “Verbal-Visual Interaction”, “The Mystery of Presence”) has also studied forms of presence in visual occurrences pertaining to the scientific discourse which contains tables, figures, photographs, white spaces and type sizes. Gross (“The Mystery of Presence” 83) argues that presence cannot be the product of verbal interaction exclusively, since there are texts with images that possess information which contribute to meaning considerably. In this paper, I examine presence in a literary discourse and discuss how the way in which arguments and figures work together can produce persuasive force and expressiveness in Woolf’s text.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, this rhetorical strategy aims at identifying how Woolf’s use of language and her readers’ good disposition to (re)discover Madame de Sévigné’s figure in a laudatory way “are in constant interaction when one

wishes to gain the adherence of minds” (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 132).

## Rhetorical analysis of “Madame de Sévigné”

“Madame de Sévigné” was first published posthumously in the collection *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (1942).<sup>3</sup> It was then reprinted in *Collected Essays. Vol. III* (1967), and *The Essays of Virginia Woolf. Vol. VI: 1933–1941* (2011), which is the edition used for this paper.<sup>4</sup> In her essay, Woolf reviews the French writer’s letters while showing her readers some meaningful moments that influenced both de Sévigné’s life and work, and which results in a complimentary image of de Sévigné. As said above, the act-person interaction becomes the main argument that derives from *inventio*, through which the author chooses the diverse material for arguments and figures that will shape the portrait of the letter writer. The essayist wanted to write about Sévigné, as she reveals both in her diary and in her own letters.<sup>5</sup> In addition to being pleasurable reading, the Frenchwoman’s letters become a weapon that women like Woolf and Sévigné herself possessed so as to fight men’s literary dominance (Dusinberre 100-101). Woolf uses this powerful referent to construct her text although it is not clear whether the essay was meant for publication.

In *dispositio*, the *partes orationis* which seek to divide the parts of an essay usually follow a natural order: *exordium*, *narratio/expositio*, *argumentatio* and *epilogue*. Woolf’s reviews do not follow this more canonical ordering but rather unfold distributed into *exordium*, *argumentatio* and *epilogue*. The narrative sections which are present become part of the argumentative thread rather than start the course of said argumentation, as the classical tradition dictated (“Rhetorical Analysis” 269–270). The essay covers eight paragraphs that differ in content and that are used to justify the division into the three sections below:

### *Exordium*

This introductory part of Woolf’s essay includes two paragraphs which have as their main purpose the presentation of the topic and the reader’s favourable disposition. The first one reveals Woolf’s admiring opinion about Marie, Madame de Sévigné’s first name, her hypothetical achievements as a fiction writer had she lived today, and the fact that she is probably regarded as a vague character from the past: “This great lady, this robust and fertile writer, who

in our age would probably have been one of the great novelists, takes up presumably as much space in the consciousness of living readers as any figure of her vanished age” (Sévigné 497). The initial phrase “this great lady, this robust and fertile writer” can be analysed as *auxesis* (Lanham 26), a rhetorical figure which uses heightened words in place of ordinary ones, and which is also one of Quintilian’s strategies for amplifying alongside repetition (“Rhetorical Style” 391). This is the first of several magnifying instances that Woolf uses to describe Sévigné. The essayist recognises her difficulty in finding the right words to characterise her, “partly because she created her being, not in plays or poems, but in letters – touch by touch, with repetitions, amassing daily trifles, writing down what came into her head as if she were talking” (Sévigné 497). A simile also reflects the enormity and the complexity of her epistolary creation that Woolf compares with Marie’s land: “Thus the fourteen volumes of her letters enclose a vast open space, like one of her own great woods; the rides are crisscrossed with the intricate shadows of branches, figures roam down the glades, pass from sun to shadow, are lost to sight, appear again, but never sit down in fixed attitudes to compose a group” (Sévigné 497).

In the second paragraph, much shorter, Woolf remarks on Sévigné’s corporeal quality by means of her letters: “Thus we live in her presence, and often fall, as with living people, into unconsciousness. She goes on talking, we half listen. And then something she says rouses us. We add it to her character, so that the character grows and changes, and she seems like a living person, inexhaustible” (Sévigné 497).

Here I observe the repetition of the lexeme “live” through the present tense and the two -ing verbal forms that appear in “living people” and “living person”. The reiteration of the same root in different forms is known as *polyptoton*, a rhetorical figure wherein a change of different forms deriving from the same root shows a different syntactic function (“Rhetorical Figures in Science” 169; “The Art of Style” 30). In the passage, the essayist affirms that “we live in her presence”, but fall into unconsciousness like “living people”. The contrast between life and maybe sleep or dream is interrupted by Sévigné’s words when “she rouses us” and so “she seems like a living person”. As a result of these words, both Woolf and Sévigné herself are “living” once more. Furthermore, the repetition of the noun “character” in “we add it to her character, so that the character grows and changes” can be analysed as *ploche*, a figure in which a single word is repeated several times in one or more sentences and arises with a new meaning after the intervention of new



words (“Rhetorical Figures in Science” 158; Lanham 116). In the example, the first sense of “character” may refer to Marie’s personality that is being transformed until she becomes “the character” who is that “living person, inexhaustible”.

### *Argumentatio*

This is the longest section of the text and comprises five paragraphs. After *exordium*, where Madame de Sévigné is introduced, *argumentatio* offers diverse reasonings that expand and strengthen Marie’s image as reflected by the volumes of letters that are being reviewed. In paragraph 3, an argument by comparison contrasts Sévigné with other illustrious letter writers like Horace Walpole (1717–1797) and Thomas Gray (1716–1771). Comparison used for the sake of inflating or deflating a character is another of Quintilian’s devices for magnifying (“Rhetorical Style” 392). Woolf explains that “because of her unconscious naturalness, her flow and abundance, possesses it far more than the brilliant Walpole, for example, or the reserved and self-conscious Gray” (Sévigné 497). For that reason, the Frenchwoman is more capable of letting us “sink deeper down into her, and know by instinct rather than reason how she will feel; this she will be amused by; that will take her fancy; now she will plunge into melancholy” (Sévigné 497–498). This sequence of sentences that are of approximately equal length and corresponding structure can be analysed as *isocolon* (Lanham 93). This rhetorical figure also places emphasis on the preposition “to” + infinitive phrases that follow, in which Woolf describes the content of the letters, as it is appreciated in this excerpt: “She has a robust appetite; nothing shocks her; she gets nourishment from whatever is set before her. She is an intellectual, quick to enjoy the wit of La Rochefoucauld, to relish the fine discrimination of Madame de La Fayette” (Sévigné 498).

However, the characterisation changes its gentle tone when Woolf focuses on Sévigné’s complex relationship with her daughter. The adversative conjunct “but” introduces a contrast between more mundane themes and this revealing topic: “But there is a sensibility in her which intensifies this great appetite for many things. It is of course shown at its most extreme, its most irrational, in her love for her daughter. She loves her as an elderly man loves a young mistress who tortures him” (Sévigné 498).

The simile in which Sévigné’s love for her daughter is likened to an obsessive love from an elderly man to his young mistress leads to a narrative throughout the whole paragraph. This account in the past tense is intertwined with Woolf’s

observations about this “twisted and morbid” passion (Sévigné 498). As said above, this narration is part of the argumentation in that it includes Woolf’s judgement of the situation, as the following passage shows:

For, from the daughter’s point of view it was exhausting, was embarrassing to be the object of such intense emotion, and she could not always respond. She feared that her mother was making her ridiculous in the eyes of her friends. Also she felt that she was not like that. She was different; colder, more fastidious, less robust. Her mother was ignoring the real daughter in this flood of adoration for a daughter that did not exist. (Sévigné 498)

Paragraph 4 continues the narration, now in the present tense, of Marie’s maternal tribulations. It is worth mentioning the use of several figures of repetition that provide a rhythmical quality and emphatic force to this part. In this instance of *isocolon*, the pairing of the adverbial particle “so” + adjective intensifies the meaning of the phrase, along with the pairing of the preposition “to” + noun: “Sometimes, therefore, Madame de Sévigné weeps. The daughter does not love her. That is a thought so bitter, and a fear so perpetual and so profound, that life loses its savour; she has recourse to sages, to poets to console her; and reflects with sadness upon the vanity of life; and how death will come” (Sévigné 498).

*Anaphora*, another rhetorical figure by which the same word is repeated at the beginning of several clauses, is used through the reappearance of “then” in two successive sentences that relate the sequence of Marie’s suffering: “Then, too, she is agitated beyond what is right or reasonable, because a letter has not reached her. Then she knows that she has been absurd; and realises that she is boring her friends with this obsession” (Sévigné 498). In creating this cadence that seems to reflect a miserable woman, Woolf amplifies the letter writer, once more, by means of *auxesis* in a succession of nominal phrases that revive her spirit in this way: “And then when the bitter drop has fallen, up bubbles quicker and quicker the ebullition of that robust vitality, of that irrepressible quick enjoyment, that natural relish for life, as if she instinctively repaired her failure by fluttering all her feathers; by making every facet glitter” (Sévigné 498).

Once comforted by the knowledge of her daughter’s affection, Sévigné confesses that she loves being alone. *Isocolon* is the figure chosen to finish this paragraph, and to transmit in a rapid series of short sentences what the French artist loves doing the most: “She is happiest alone in the country.

She loves rambling alone in her woods. She loves going out by herself at night. She loves hiding from callers. She loves walking among the trees and musing. She loves the gardener's chatter; she loves planting. She loves the gipsy girl who dances, as her own daughter used to dance, but not of course so exquisitely" (Sévigné 499).

Paragraph 5 contains the same meaningful sentence that appears in *exordium*: "It is natural to use the present tense, because we live in her presence. We are very little conscious of a disturbing medium between us – that she is living, after all, by means of written words" (Sévigné 499). In the extract, *polyptoton* is used to contrast "present" vs. "presence", and "live" vs. "living". In the first occurrence, the use of the adjective "present" that has to do with the tensed verb is related to Sévigné's "presence" as it is revealed through her letters. This explanation has its correlation between the present verbal forms "live" and "living", which clarify that we are aware that we "live in her presence" because she is also "living" through her own creation. Another encomiastic sentence is followed when Woolf realises that she is being addressed "by one of the great mistresses of the art of speech" (Sévigné 499).

A number of questions occupy the first section of paragraph 6. They can be analysed as *rogatio* or *anthyphora*, a device which is posed as a question that the writer asks and answers herself ("Rhetorical Style" 299; Lanham 87). This type of query is useful in the text for trying to elucidate, perhaps, how Sévigné is capable of writing her letters as she speaks:

Then we listen for a time. How, we wonder, does she contrive to make us follow every word of the story of the cook who killed himself because the fish failed to come in time for the royal dinner party; or the scene of the haymaking; or the anecdote of the servant whom she dismissed in a sudden rage; how does she achieve this order, this perfection of composition? Did she practise her art? It seems not. Did she tear up a correct? There is no record of any painstaking or effort. She says again and again that she writes her letters as she speaks. (Sévigné 499)

By way of justification, Woolf provides an *anaphora* that creates a rhythmical pattern with the recurrence of the preposition "by":

It seems then that she must have been so imbued with good sense, by the age she lived in, by the company she kept – La Rochefoucauld's wisdom, Madame de La Fayette's conversation, by hearing now a play by Racine,

by reading Montaigne, Rabelais, or Pascal; perhaps by sermons, perhaps by some of those songs that Coulanges was always singing – she must have imbibed so much that was sane and wholesome unconsciously that, when she took her pen, it followed unconsciously the laws she had learnt by heart. (Sévigné 499–500)

This chain of possible motives for her mastery of letter writing is reinforced by the addition of *ploche* and *polyptoton* in this sentence: “She was a born critic, and a critic whose judgements were inborn, unhesitating” (Sévigné 500). The repetition of “critic” in *ploche* is endorsed by synonyms that add to its meaning: “born” and “inborn, unhesitating”. Marie’s ability to be a “critic” is accentuated by the fact that, as “a critic”, her decisions are also “inborn, unhesitating”. Furthermore, in *polyptoton*, the different forms of “born” and “inborn” as modifiers seem to stress the idea that everything revolves around her innate capacity for exercising this critical talent.

Woolf also refers to the locations where the letter writer could carry out her writing: Les Rochers, Paris and the court. The reiteration of the preposition “to” + infinitive in this *isocolon* reflects Marie’s feelings about the moment when she expresses herself by means of words in a beautiful way. Likewise, that “moment” is heightened by a sequence of adjectives: “She is free, thus anchored, to explore; to enjoy; to plunge this way and that; to enter wholeheartedly into the myriad humours, pleasures, oddities, and savours of her well nourished, prosperous, delightful present moment” (Sévigné 500).

In paragraph 7, other characters like “her disagreeable cousin Bussy Rabutin” (Sévigné 500) and her son Charles make an appearance. The praising tone is present in the *polysyndeton* that involves the repetition of the additive conjunction “and” in this excerpt: “There is something wise and large and sane about her which draws the confidences of her own son”. Her relationship with Charles seems to be a good one, as when “Charles nurses her with the utmost patience through her rheumatic fever” and when “She laughs at his foibles; knows his failings” (Sévigné 500).

### Epilogue

The last section of the essay covers paragraph 8. The content of this concluding part is roughly divided into two different scenes that try to influence readers favourably. In this respect, the epilogue of “Madame de Sévigné” follows the *ratio posita in affectibus* in the sense that it aims at amplifying the character

that is being reviewed. This type of conclusion is considered *peroratio* in that it possesses a highly emotional quality (Quintilian VI.1).

After presenting Marie as “radiant and glowing” (Sévigné 501) because of her busy correspondence, Woolf identifies the world that has witnessed her letters with a garden in this metaphorical evocation:

Here is the garden that Europe has been digging for many centuries; into which so many generations have poured their blood; here it is at last fertilised, bearing flowers. And the flowers are not those rare and solitary blossoms – great men, with their poems, and their conquests. The flowers in this garden are a whole society of full-grown men and women from whom want and struggle have been removed; growing together in harmony, each contributing something that the other lacks. (Sévigné 501)

This garden that has contemplated different scenarios throughout history harbours various types of flower. *Ploche* is visible with the reappearance of the plural form of “flowers” three times. The first refers to “bearing flowers” that are fertile only after much grief. The second specifies that “the flowers” are not “rare and solitary blossoms” like those “great men, with their poems, and their conquests”. This reference to former male figures from a male-dominated literary world leads to the third occurrence which highlights the fact that “the flowers in this garden” are “a whole society of full grown men and women”. Therefore, the term “flowers” finally encompasses creative males and females who can express their points of view freely. The garden also exemplifies a peacetime vision within the context of the Second World War, and an ideal space where both Woolf and Sévigné can create without men’s intrusion (Dusinberre 100). It is worth pointing out the use of *polyptoton* in the various versions of “grown” and “growing”, representing an idea of continuity by means of which the men and women that inhabit the garden are already “grown”, as if completed, yet they still continue “growing together in harmony”.

In the last lines of the essay, the garden appears further characterised through a lively and animated scene that happens “The month of May, 1678, at Les Rochers in Brittany”:

There are the birds singing; Pilois is planting; Madame de Sévigné roams the woods alone; her daughter is entertaining politicians in Provence; not

very far away Monsieur de Rochefoucauld is engaged in telling the truth with Madame de la Fayette to prune his words; Racine is finishing the play which soon they will all be hearing together; and discussing afterwards with the king and that lady whom in the private language of their set they call Quanto. The voices mingle; they are all talking together in the garden in 1678. But what was happening outside? (Sévigné 501)

In this final passage, Woolf reflects a dynamic sequence of simultaneous actions performed by some illustrious characters, all of them connected thanks to Sévigné's letters. *Hypotyposis*, a rhetorical figure defined as a vivid description of something or someone, can be identified in this picturesque scene insofar as the reader can recreate the different situations that are occurring (Lanham 64). Woolf enumerates and describes several activities that we can visualise as part of that sheltered existence that surrounded these people. Furthermore, the use of this figure is related to the *enárgeia* which I referred to above as regards to the formation of a certain image in the reader's head. As a result, *hypotyposis* serves Woolf's purpose in the epilogue as a figure which praises Sévigné while affecting the reader positively. The final question, in contrast, will interrupt the effervescence of the letter writer's secluded world when she is confronted with the real world outside.

## Interpretation of rhetorical presence through arguments and figures

The identification of these arguments and figures in *inventio*, *dispositio* and *elocutio* are first-order effects which can produce an interpretation of rhetorical presence by showing an encomiastic vision of the figure presented:

1. At the level of *inventio*, the person/act interaction is the most important argument from which Woolf construes her portrayal of the French letter writer.
2. In arrangement or *dispositio*, a sequence of arguments and rhetorical figures is presented all through *exordium*, *argumentatio* and *epilogue* following the typical order of Woolf's reviews:
  - a) *Exordium*: Woolf uses *auxesis* in order to praise Marie with a specific choice of words. The magnificence of the letter writer's work is then likened to one of her woods by using simile. Two figures of repetition,

*polyptoton* and *ploche*, emphasise the terms of “character” and “live” that will be persistent through the text.

- b) *Argumentatio*: in this second section, this “character’s” new impression is mainly attained by the act-person interaction. Woolf employs several devices which help to delineate the letter writer, mainly by means of the essayist’s particular assessment of Sévigné’s epistolary work:
- An argument by comparison demonstrates that the Frenchwoman is more gifted for letter writing than other recognised male writers.
  - *Isocolon*, as a figure of repetition, underscores some aspects of Marie’s personality and the content of her letters. This figure is also used to focus on the tormented relationship between the letter writer and her daughter, to express the mother’s activities in solitude, and to detail her varied feelings in different moments of her life.
  - A simile is employed to describe Sévigné’s love for her daughter as a somewhat abnormal type of relationship.
  - A narrative tells the reader about this parental relationship. In this account, the narration is fused with Woolf’s comments, so it is part of the argumentative thread.
  - *Anaphora*, as another figure of repetition, is present to highlight Marie’s unhappiness with this maternal affection. This scheme reappears to give reasons for her unique way with words.
  - Woolf makes use of *auxesis* to praise the letter writer’s ability to cheer herself up.
  - *Polyptoton* appears again in order to emphasise the terms “presence” and “live” that are so meaningful in the essay. This figure, alongside *ploche*, underlines the concepts “born” and “critic”.
  - *Rogatio* is introduced so as to question, and answer, Marie’s talent for letter writing.
  - By means of *polysyndeton*, Woolf compliments the letter writer’s good temperament that makes her son feel close to her.
- c) Epilogue: in the final part of the essay, two main devices can be identified: a metaphorical evocation and *hypotyposis* as a figure that tries to attract the reader’s visual attention. Both contents are characteristic of the conclusion. Once more, *ploche* and *polyptoton* are used so as to point out the terms “flowers” and “grow” which, in the text, are part of the metaphorical scene that identifies the flowers with men and women that are still growing in unison after a long period of sorrow.

This progression of arguments and figures in the arrangement (or *dispositio*) is also conducive to presence if readers can notice three persuasive aspects (Gross and Dearin 99–113):

1. The arguments and figures which are shown follow a logical order into *exordium*, *argumentatio* and epilogue.
  2. This order is also self-referential or natural in the sense that Woolf's readers are used to finding an introduction, a development of ideas and a conclusion in this and other essays. It is an order, furthermore, which contributes to redefining Marie in a positive way.
  3. The arguments and figures try to reflect Woolf's flattering attitude towards Sévigné so that her readers can share or agree with her points of view. She achieves this with a particular use of language which is meant for admiring Sévigné's figure so that "we live in her presence".
3. By means of *elocutio* or style, the use of expressive devices such as rhetorical figures is revealed in the linguistic representation of the essay when a detailed analysis of the *partes orationis* is performed:
- An argument using comparison and a short narration introduce the reader to some traits of the Frenchwoman's personality.
  - *Auxesis* as a type of rhetorical figure that emphasises the letter writer is found in *exordium* and *argumentatio*.
  - Simile and metaphor are tropes that are used for different purposes: the first is employed to speak about Sévigné's literary work and her relationship with her daughter; the second appears in the epilogue to show a suggestive scene.
  - Several figures of repetition are pervasive in the text: *ploche* and *polyptoton* are present in *exordium*, *argumentatio* and epilogue with the aim of accentuating diverse concepts that are important for the argumentation. *Isocolon*, *anaphora* and *polysyndeton* are equally employed to draw attention to several characteristics which enlarge the letter writer's figure.
  - Other rhetorical figures like *rogatio* and *hypotyposis* qualify important topics of the essay like Marie's ability for words and the assortment of people in different situations with whom she engaged with in her letters.

This being said, by making use of the act-person interaction Woolf offers her singular vision of the character under study so that "we live in her presence". The essayist hopes that readers will be able to regard Madame de Sévigné as



a woman who could live a full existence and who could exercise her literary talent freely. Woolf transmits the data that are contained in Sévigné's letters and the expertise with which she accomplished this writing with a selection of expressive elements that appear in the linguistic representation of the text, and that are going to amplify the French woman's figure. Hence, a second-order effect or presence is revealed, one that presents an engaging character that is still living through her letters, and that is capable of reflecting both her ordinary and poignant experiences through her correspondence, conceived as a powerful means of expression by means of which she could give free rein to her creativity and feel at liberty in a male-governed world.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have performed a rhetorical analysis of the essay "Madame de Sévigné", by Virginia Woolf. This analysis is able to produce an interpretation of presence as an element of the writer's persuasive strategy, which seeks to reflect how a certain use of language, arranged according to a specific order, tries to amplify this letter writer's figure. The argumentative nature of the essay allows the study of the rhetorical levels that can be found in the text, such as *inventio*, *dispositio* and *elocutio*. The notion of presence as a principle depends on the interaction of first-order effects in the form of arguments and figures that are attained at each one of these rhetorical levels, and which produce a second-order global effect in her essay writing.

At the inventive level, Woolf develops the person-act argument. This technique revises the conception of the character under review, Madame de Sévigné, through her literary production. At the dispositive level, the gradual ordering of topics is organised into *exordium*, *argumentatio* and epilogue so as to obtain her readers' good favour throughout their knowledge of the French woman. At the elocutive level, Woolf highlights this knowledge by using several rhetorical figures that also try to have an emotional impact on readers through their expressive value. The persistent use of repetition, not only of syntactic structures but also of single words; the inclusion of tropes like simile and metaphor; and the addition of other figures of amplification like *auxesis* and *hypotyposis*, for example, are intended to persuade readers of Marie's exceptional capacity.

The synergy of all these first-order effects is able to create presence,

a rhetorical strategy with which Woolf makes her readers aware of how Sévigné saw life mainly through the letters which are being reviewed. In its praise of Sévigné, the essay can be also interpreted as an encomium which pays tribute to the character's qualities. "By verbal magic alone" (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 117), Woolf makes the most of the expressive potential of language without abandoning an intent to persuade the readers, one that has attempted to gain their admiration towards the letter writer.

### Notes

1. See *Lettres de Madame de Sévigné, de sa Famille et de ses Amis*, ed. [L. J. N.] Monmerqué, revised and enlarged [by E. Sommer] (14 volumes, L. Hachette, 1862–6), and *Iconographie des Lettres de Mme de Sévigné. Collection de 137 portraits* (2 volumes, Bureau des Galeries Historiques de Versailles et L. Hachette, n.d. [1863] and 1868).
2. For my study of rhetorical presence in other essays by Woolf, see Margarita Esther Sánchez Cuervo, "Katherine Mansfield about Katherine Mansfield: Rhetorical Analysis of Virginia Woolf's 'A Terribly Sensitive Mind'," *Neophilologus*. 99.2 (2015): 335–349.
3. See *Virginia Woolf. The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1942) and *Virginia Woolf. Collected Essays*. Vol. III. Ed. Leonard Woolf (London: The Hogarth Press, 1967).
4. Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader. First Series*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1984). Virginia Woolf, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf. Volume VI. 1933–1941*, ed. Stuart Clarke (London: The Hogarth Press, 2011).
5. See *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. 5: 1936–1941*. Ed. Anne Olivier Bell and assisted by Andrew McNeillie (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1984), and *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Vol. 6: 1936–1941*. Eds. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982).

### Works Cited

- Aristotle, *The Rhetoric of Aristotle*. Translated by Sir Richard Claverhouse Jebb. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909. Print.
- Campbell, George. *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1868. Print.
- Dusinberre, Juliet. *Virginia Woolf's Renaissance: Woman Reader or Common Reader?* Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997. Print.
- Fahnestock, Jeanne. "'No Neutral Choice': The Art of Style." *The Promise of Reason. Studies in The New Rhetoric*. Ed. John T. Gage. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011. 29–47. Print.
- . *Rhetorical Figures in Science*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. Print.

- . *Rhetorical Style. The Uses of Language in Persuasion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Print.
- . "Rhetorical Stylistics." *Language and Literature*. 14.3 (2005): 215–230. Print.
- Gross, Alan G. *The Rhetoric of Science*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996. Print.
- . "The Rhetorical Tradition." *The Viability of the Rhetorical Tradition*. Eds. Richard Graff et al. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005. 31–46. Print.
- . "Solving the Mystery of Presence: Verbal/Visual Interaction in Darwin's *Structure and Distribution of Coral Reefs*." *The Promise of Reason. Studies in The New Rhetoric*. Ed. John T. Gage. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011. 83–102. Print.
- . "Toward a Theory of Verbal-Visual Interaction: The Example of Lavoisier." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*. 39.2 (2009): 147–169. Print.
- Gross, Alan G. and Ray D. Dearin. *Chad'm Perelman*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003. Print.
- Gualtieri, Elena. *Virginia Woolf's Essays: Sketching the Past*. London: Macmillan, 2000. Print.
- Karon, Louise A. "Presence in *The New Rhetoric*." *Philosophy and Rhetoric*. 9.2 (1976): 96–111. Print.
- Kaufmann, Charles and Donn W. Parson. "Metaphor and Presence in Argument." *Argument Theory and the Rhetoric of Assent*. Eds. David Williams and Michael David Hazen. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990. 91–102. Print.
- Kennedy, George, A. *Aristotle. On Rhetoric. A Theory of Civic Discourse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Print.
- Kochin, Michael Shalom. "From Argument to Assertion." *Argumentation*. 23 (2009): 387–396. Print.
- Koutsantoni, Katerina. *Virginia Woolf's Common Reader*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2009. Print.
- Lanham, Richard A. *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991. Print.
- Little, Judy. "Virginia Woolf as Encoded Critic." *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*. 9 (1998): 103–119. Print.
- Madison, Elizabeth. "The Common Reader and the Critical Method in Virginia Woolf's Essays." *Journal of Aesthetic Education*. 15.4 (1981): 61–73. Print.

- Nünning, Vera. "A Theory of the Art of Writing: Virginia Woolf's Aesthetics from the Point of View of her Critical Essays." *English Studies*. 98.8 (2017): 978–994. Print.
- Perelman, Chadm and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca. *The New Rhetoric. A Treatise on Argumentation*. Translated by John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969. Print.
- Quintilian. *Institutio Oratoria*. Translated by H. E. Butler, Vols. I-IV. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920. Print.
- Saloman, Randi. *Virginia Woolf's Essayism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012. Print.
- Sánchez Cuervo, Margarita Esther. "Ah, but what is herself? I mean, what is a woman?": Rhetorical Analysis of Virginia Woolf's Feminist Essays." *ES. Revista de Filología Inglesa*. 31 (2010): 263–286. Print.
- . "Katherine Mansfield about Katherine Mansfield: Rhetorical Analysis of Virginia Woolf's 'A Terribly Sensitive Mind'." *Neophilologus*. 99.2 (2015): 335–349. Print.
- . "The Appeal to Audience through Figures of Thought in Virginia Woolf's Feminist Essays." *Renascence. Essays on Value in Literature*. 68.2 (2016): 127–143. Print.
- Tindale, Christopher. "Rhetoric's Presence: Or, 'Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain'." University of Windsor, 2012. Lecture.
- Woolf, Virginia. *The Common Reader. First Series*. Ed. Andrew McNeillie. New York: Harcourt Brace & Jovanovich, 1984. Print.
- . *The Essays of Virginia Woolf. Volume VI. 1933–1941*. Ed. Stuart Clarke. London: The Hogarth Press, 2011. Print.
- . *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*. Ed. Morag Shiach. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992. Print.
- . *A Woman's Essays. Selected Essays. Volume One*. Ed. Rachel Bowlby. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992. Print.

**MARGARITA ESTHER SÁNCHEZ CUERVO** is Senior Lecturer of English at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (Spain). Her research is mainly devoted to the rhetorical analysis of different types of discourse, and the study of evidentiality, modality, and corpus analysis. Her most recent publications include articles in *Nordic Journal of English Studies*, *Neophilologus*, *Renascence. Essays on Values in Literature*, *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses*, and

the co-edition of the book *Input a Word, Analyze the World: Selected Approaches to Corpus Linguistics*, by Cambridge Scholars Publishing.  
*margaritaesther.sanchez@ulpgc.es*