

So What? So What?: The Uses of Rhetorical Questions in *Okay for Now* by Gary D. Schmidt

In his novel *Okay for Now*, Gary D. Schmidt uses a conversational form of first person narration to convey the story. This conversational voice uses an unusual rhetorical device in narrative fiction: questions which frequently address the reader directly. Although the device is often avoided in narrative fiction, Schmidt uses it to its maximum effect. Through his use of rhetorical questions, Schmidt reinforces the conversational tone, characterizes the narrator through voice, and makes the reader an active participant in the story.

Rhetorical questions tend to be the domain of argumentative and persuasive nonfiction. In much of fiction, rhetorical questions tend to feel too intimate or, alternatively, too much of a posture. However, these properties can also create a conversational tone in fiction. Schmidt employs this tone throughout the narration in *Okay for Now*, and the use of direct address and rhetorical questions helps to foster intimacy with the reader. The narrator of *Okay for Now* is the protagonist, Doug Swieteck. Throughout the story of a teenager building a life in a new town and navigating the often-abusive relationships in his family, Doug narrates in first person, regularly addressing the reader directly in asides. The narrator frequently couples this direct address with rhetorical questions such as “Do you know how that feels?” (twenty-six times) or “Remember how I said . . . ?” (fifteen times). Out of over 225 rhetorical questions in the book, at least 132 use the word “you,” and another ten indirectly address the reader using an imperative form (such as “Guess what” or the above mentioned “Remember how I said”; thirteen questions combine these verbs with direct address). Frequently, he leaves the reader to imagine an answer, although at least thirty times, Doug answers the questions.

Using these rhetorical questions including direct address (implied or stated) helps to mimic real speech. Grammarian John Gardiner writes that rhetorical questions “suggest

dialogue, especially when the speaker both asks and answers them himself, as if he were playing two parts on the stage” (339).

Obviously, *Okay for Now* is a novel told in narrative prose format from the perspective of a fictional person, a monologue read—*not* a verbal conversation with a real person in a dialogic and synchronous format. However, even written communication often imitates speech to great effect. In an observational study of Internet forum postings, Davis and Brewer found that although writers’ online forum postings were written and asynchronous, they were “laden with conversationlike conventions” to simulate dialogue (156). Among these conventions, they found that “rhetorical questions were intertwined with aspects of direct and indirect address” just as Schmidt uses them in narration (145).

In Davis and Brewer’s observations, simulating speech helped to build rapport among the writers and negotiate meaning. In *Okay for Now*, Schmidt uses rhetorical questions to simulate this conversational tone just as Davis and Brewer’s forum posters did: “In the absence of certain overt features of face-to-face conversation or dialogue,” the writers they observed “move[d] to the dialogic and manipulate[d] multiple aspects of voice in written text” in ways that simulated speech (155). By using techniques including rhetorical questions and direct address, the students were able to simulate a spoken conversation. In fiction, a conversational voice helps to simulate the same kind of connection with readers. The use of direct address and rhetorical questions almost makes it feel as though Doug Swietek is telling the reader all this in real time, checking for understanding, trying to help the reader imagine, and encouraging them to fill in the blanks.

The conversational tone also adds to the realism of Doug as a character, by extending the characterization into the character’s voice in a dramatic way. In fact, rhetorical questions themselves are a dramatic form. Gardiner writes that “The effectiveness of rhetorical questions in

argument comes from their dramatic quality. . . . They are not always impassioned; they may be mildly ironical or merely argumentative: but they are always to some extent dramatic, and, if used to excess, they tend to give one's style a theatrical air" (339).

On the surface, the idea of using a self-consciously dramatic rhetorical device in a novel might seem to undercut its believability. However, this character in this environment must employ a certain level of dramatics to survive. Doug Swieteck is shown to come from a background of family violence, crime, and toxic masculinity. As a cruel birthday present two years before, Doug's father had "mama's baby" forcibly tattooed on his twelve-year-old son's chest (145-46). In this hostile environment, Doug is not allowed to show any vulnerability. To protect himself from his older brothers' and father's physical abuse, he must employ an element of swagger, hiding his own vulnerability through acting. This dramatic survival mechanism carries over to all contexts of his life. When she meets him sitting on the library steps early in the novel, classmate (and future girlfriend) Lil Spicer describes him as a "skinny thug" (28) and throughout the novel he has to fight the stereotyping against his older brother as a "criminal" (67). Doug's dramatic nature is even part of the plot when he is cast in a Broadway play.

It is no surprise, then, that Doug's act of swagger and bravado extends to his narrative voice. His rhetorical questions in the narration can sometimes serve as a challenge to the reader especially when directly addressing them: "So what?" he asks repeatedly (36 times), sometimes expanding such as "And so what if I've never been in a library before?" (16) or "So what that they landed a mere third of a mile from the landing site?" (101). In the former example, he ups the challenging attitude with follow-up questions: "You think she's been to Yankee Stadium like I have? You think Joe Pepitone's jacket is hanging up in her basement?" (16). The rhetorical questions here allow Doug to highlight emotion without having to make himself vulnerable

enough to describe it.

Although paradoxically, questions can be used to create dramatic distance and hide vulnerability, they can also create a more effective connection with the reader. Doug frequently challenges—or invites—the reader to fill in the emotional blanks rather than explaining his own emotions by asking such questions as “[Do] you know what that [situation] feels like?” (twenty-six times). By inviting the reader to imagine the emotional response that Doug felt, the reader takes part in the act of creation and performance along with Schmidt. This can create a deeper emotional response and emotional connection with the reader, drawing them into the story even more.

This is not the only way rhetorical questions can help to foster that relationship with the reader. In Internet forum postings, Davis and Brewer found that rhetorical questions played “a role in establishing common ground or consensus for shared or given knowledge” (145). This shared, given knowledge is an important part of creating a fictional world as well. Creating reader identification with a fictional narrator relies on an unknown future reader suspending disbelief. Davis and Brewer point out that in their observations, “Rhetorical questions function as a fairly overt means of negotiation and community formation” (152). Thus, they can help foster community between readers and characters.

Further, rhetorical questions give the reader the opportunity to step into that community and create part of the world themselves. VCFA alumna Jennifer C. Bailey explored this phenomenon in her critical thesis, *Make the Reader Your Accomplice*. Quoting Keith Oatley in *Such Stuff as Dreams: The Psychology of Fiction*, she states that in “the space-in-between,” “the reader’s imagination can expand without coercion. It is in this space that the reader can take up and turn over the words of the writer. The experience of the book can become the reader’s own”

(qtd. in Bailey 4).

Bailey argues that providing too much emotional or sensory information limits the readers' imagination and thus involvement in a story. Thus, she says, "Trusting the reader to use their experience and emotions encourages active reading. The novel becomes a work of dialog rather than one of soliloquy. Readers feel more connected to the story because, in a way, their personal feelings and memories have now become a part of it" (15). Schmidt explicitly does this with rhetorical questions, which he frequently uses to invite the reader to ponder and experience the emotions the character is experiencing:

- "So I guess I waited most of the morning. When people walked by, they'd look at me like I didn't belong there. You know what that feels like after a while?" (21).
- "Do you know what it feels like to walk into a house where everything is going along just fine when back at your own house Lucas is going out every day for nothing and Ernie Eco is wearing your jacket?" (183)
- "You know how good it is to see my mother laugh?" (222)

As Bailey states, the act of inviting the reader to fill in the blanks helps to create the narrative in their mind, a dialogic and dramatic process that reflects the dramatic, dialogic nature of rhetorical questions themselves.

This isn't easy to do well. However, Schmidt's novel gives us some key patterns to follow to use rhetorical questions and direct address in the narration effectively:

- Use other conventions of speech. If rhetorical questions and/or direct address are the only dialogic conventions employed in the narration, they will likely be less effective because they will stand out against a less conversational tone. This is not to say that direct address is required: rhetorical questions may be employed by a narrator posed to themselves

rather than an external audience (e.g., What am I supposed to do with this?)

- Make sure it fits the character and their purposes. This doesn't mean you have to write a carbon copy of Doug. As we've established, rhetorical questions can serve a number of purposes and tones. For Doug, rhetorical questions offer an emotional shield which further characterizes him. With a different character, rhetorical questions could be used to establish common ground or to put the narrator in a position of authority or subservience.
- Use questions to invite the reader into the narrative. Rhetorical questions inspire the reader to think about the answer themselves, to fill in the blank. This can be especially effective as Schmidt uses it, in inviting the reader to imagine the emotion, helping to feel it for themselves.

Throughout *Okay for Now*, Schmidt uses rhetorical questions to foster a conversational voice, characterize the narrator and create a dialogic effect for the reader, inviting the reader into the narrative. This dovetails perfectly with the dialogic and dramatic nature inherent in rhetorical questions, reinforcing the use and the effect of the rhetorical device itself. Rhetorical questions are not frequently used in prose narratives, but when employed carefully with a narrator whose characterization suits their dramatic nature, they can help to create an even more fully realized character and world in the mind of the reader.

Works Cited

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