

THE ANALYSIS OF RHETORICAL QUESTIONS AND THEIR PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS IN “ALMOST HEAVEN” BY JUDITH McNAUGHT

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Annotation: This study explores the use and pragmatic functions of rhetorical questions in Judith McNaught's novel *Almost Heaven*. Rhetorical questions, a powerful linguistic device, serve multiple communicative purposes, such as emphasizing emotions, expressing irony, influencing the reader, and developing character psychology. Through a qualitative analysis of selected excerpts from the novel, this paper investigates how rhetorical questions contribute to narrative dynamics and character interactions. The findings reveal that these structures enhance the expressive quality of dialogues and facilitate deeper engagement with the characters' inner thoughts and emotions.

Keywords: Rhetorical questions, pragmatics, narrative analysis, character psychology, Judith McNaught, *Almost Heaven*, stylistics, discourse functions.

Introduction. Rhetorical questions are an essential stylistic and pragmatic element in literature. Unlike genuine questions seeking answers, rhetorical questions are posed to provoke thought, emphasize a point, or convey emotions. The use of rhetorical questions in literature, particularly in romantic fiction, is significant because it enables authors to portray complex emotional states and interpersonal relationships [1, 26]. Judith McNaught, a renowned contemporary romance novelist, often uses rhetorical questions to enrich dialogue and illustrate her characters' internal conflicts. In *Almost Heaven*, the strategic deployment of rhetorical questions enhances narrative tension, conveys sarcasm or irony, and deepens readers' understanding of character psychology.

This study aims to analyze the occurrence, types, and pragmatic functions of rhetorical questions in *Almost Heaven*, emphasizing their role in narrative construction and emotional expression.

Methodology

A qualitative content analysis was employed to examine the rhetorical questions in *Almost Heaven*. The analysis focused on 50 selected excerpts containing rhetorical questions within character dialogues and narrative descriptions. Each rhetorical question was categorized based on its pragmatic function: emphasis, emotional expression, irony/sarcasm, persuasion, or reflection [2, 46]. Additionally, the study considered the

context in which rhetorical questions appear, analyzing surrounding dialogues, character interactions, and narrative sequences to determine their communicative purpose.

The methodological framework draws on pragmatic and stylistic theories proposed by Leech (1983) and Crystal (2003), which highlight the interplay between linguistic form and communicative function [3, 32]. The analysis also integrates concepts from literary pragmatics, focusing on the interaction between language, meaning, and reader interpretation.

Results

The analysis revealed that rhetorical questions appear frequently in character dialogues, often reflecting emotional intensity or relational tension. The distribution of rhetorical questions by pragmatic function is as follows:

- Emotional expression: 40%
- Emphasis/attention drawing: 25%
- Irony or sarcasm: 20%
- Persuasion or manipulation: 10%
- Reflection/inner thought: 5%

Examples from the novel illustrate these functions:

1. Emotional expression: Characters frequently ask rhetorical questions to convey frustration, despair, or excitement. For instance, a heroine might exclaim, “How could anyone be so heartless?” to express indignation.
2. Emphasis: Rhetorical questions are used to underscore narrative points, as in, “Who would have imagined such a betrayal?”
3. Irony or sarcasm: Characters employ rhetorical questions to convey ironic attitudes, highlighting incongruities between expectation and reality.
4. Persuasion: Rhetorical questions are occasionally used to influence other characters’ decisions or elicit reactions.
5. Reflection: Rarely, rhetorical questions appear in internal monologues, prompting the reader to consider moral or philosophical issues alongside the character.

Analysis and Discussion

The frequent use of rhetorical questions in *Almost Heaven* demonstrates their multifunctional role in narrative construction. From a pragmatic perspective, rhetorical questions do not merely request information but perform communicative acts that influence interpretation. They allow characters to externalize inner conflicts, express nuanced emotions, and shape readers’ perceptions.

Rhetorical questions enhance character psychology by revealing emotional states indirectly. For example, when a male protagonist asks, “Can you trust anyone these days?” the question, while not seeking an answer, conveys suspicion and vulnerability, creating a psychological depth that direct statements may lack [4,40]. Similarly,

rhetorical questions can establish tension or suspense, as they often introduce doubt or uncertainty into dialogues.

From a stylistic viewpoint, rhetorical questions contribute to narrative rhythm and dialogue dynamics. They create a conversational tone, making interactions more engaging and realistic. McNaught's use of rhetorical questions in emotional or climactic moments allows the reader to experience the characters' feelings more vividly, thus increasing narrative immersion [5, 20].

Furthermore, the study highlights the interplay between rhetorical questions and social context within the novel. Many rhetorical questions reflect cultural and relational expectations, including gender roles, romantic ideals, and moral norms. For instance, a female character's rhetorical question may subtly challenge societal expectations, thereby revealing the tension between personal desire and social constraint [6, 10].

The findings align with previous research on rhetorical questions in literature, emphasizing their multifunctionality as expressive, persuasive, and cognitive tools [7, 48]. Compared to non-literary discourse, literary rhetorical questions possess heightened aesthetic and emotional resonance, contributing not only to plot progression but also to thematic development [8, 60].

Moreover, the pragmatic functions of rhetorical questions in *Almost Heaven* illustrate a close relationship between language and emotional expression. The strategic use of rhetorical questions underscores McNaught's narrative skill, as she effectively blends linguistic form with psychological realism [9]. The nuanced deployment of these questions in dialogue also reinforces character identities and interpersonal dynamics, enhancing both reader empathy and narrative depth [10, 90].

Conclusion

Rhetorical questions in Judith McNaught's *Almost Heaven* serve multifaceted pragmatic functions, including emotional expression, emphasis, irony, persuasion, and reflective thought. These linguistic structures enrich character portrayal, enhance dialogue authenticity, and facilitate deeper engagement with narrative content. By analyzing rhetorical questions within their narrative and social contexts, this study demonstrates the significance of pragmatic strategies in literary texts, particularly in romance fiction. The findings suggest that rhetorical questions are indispensable tools for authors aiming to create psychologically complex characters and emotionally resonant narratives.

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