# HOW TO ANALYSE MEMOIRS AND AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

This is going to shock you. In general, it should be relevant to consider what the narrative hook of the work is as well as to look for structure. However, if you want to look for a framework that is more specific for memoirs and autobiographies, you could consider the concept of "facework" as defined by sociologist Erving Goffman. He studied how we dramatize and perform in our everyday lives, and he developed the theory of "front stage" and "back stage" borrowing terms from theater to describe what we do when we "perform" our lives.

In his 1956 book on the topic, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman explains how we all try to keep up appearances according to the way we perceive ourselves – our "face". "Front stage" is, therefore, what we do to maintain our "face"; what we let people see. "Back stage" is all the things we keep to ourselves so that our "face" does not deteriorate. Now, Goffman's studies were focused on face-to-face interactions, but his theories have since been used when interpreting any kind of social performance, and writing a memoir is arguably also a kind of social performance*. However, since many memoirs give the readers insight into the more intimate thoughts of the writer, perhaps even focusing on self-doubt, addiction, ignorance, crimes committed, etc., you could argue that the texts offer a peek into a more backstage-like version of the writer. Again, this might just be another literary front stage where the so-called confessions are just a new type of carefully planned performance.

> * Goffman's ideas are also applied in chapter 3 of this book where "face-work" is used in connection with apologies and apologia.

In memoirs and autobiographies, the writer naturally takes center stage in the work, since it is essentially about their life experiences, so as an analytical reader or viewer, you might consider some of the following points:

- How does the writer portray themselves?*
- What seems to be the purpose of the text?
- Is there an obvious lesson and/or point that they are trying to make in their memoirs?
- Are they just being observers of the events, or do they cast themselves as heroes, villains, or something in between?
- How do they portray other people?
- Also, if the memoir centers around a specific experience in the writer's life, then how is that experience framed?
- How much detail do they give about their surroundings and

> * Also read about framing on p. 280

people in their lives?
- It is interesting to notice what stories, details and people that are included in a memoir, but also to notice who and what are *not* included, and why that may be.
- Does the writer comment on their own understanding (or lack thereof) or perhaps how other people do not seem to get what is going on?
- Comment on the facework used.
- How does the writer engage the audience?
- Is this more of a memoir (focuses on specific parts of the writer's life) or more of an autobiography (chronicles a life, year by year)?

**Remember**: Do not go through ALL the elements belonging to a specific method of analysis – just apply the ones relevant for your focus. You must be able to argue for the choices you have made.

# HOW TO ANALYSE NONFICTION IN GENERAL – RHETORICAL CRITICISM

Rhetoric is the study of effective speaking and writing, and so rhetorical criticism is especially relevant when analysing nonfiction texts such as speeches, opinion pieces, ads, essays, and articles, as well as documentary films and podcasts. Rhetorical criticism lets you examine how the author argues, and whether or not (s)he is likely to reach their intended audience. This depends on the context, so the first thing you might do when analysing nonfiction is to examine the "rhetorical situation" as defined by rhetorician Lloyd Bitzer.

According to Bitzer, a rhetorical situation is when the need to say/write something is called into existence by something else; there is a need for text because of a real (text-external) issue. While there are many other ways of analysing nonfiction, "the rhetorical situation" serves as a good basis for analysing a text. The rhetorical situation includes the following elements:

### Exigence
What is the purpose of the text? What is the speaker/writer trying to achieve/change? A situation becomes rhetorical once you believe that you can change something in life by uttering something.

### The audience
Who is the text meant for? What is the medium (newspaper, blog, TV program, radio, live audience, etc.?), and who is the specific audience of this medium? What is their social background, political and religious belief, age, nationality, gender, ethnicity, etc.? According to Bitzer, the true audience will be the **mediators of change** who can act on the exigence (i.e. do something about the issue).

### Constraints
The rhetorical situation will have some limitations and possibilities related to the context, the speaker/writer, and the mediators of change. These are the constraints. What can be said? What cannot? Here, you must also include your knowledge of the mediators of change: Would they prefer an emotional text, one that appeals to logic, or both? Would they prefer formal or informal language? Would they like simple words or complex ones? Have the mediators of change already formed an opinion about the speaker/writer? And what does this opinion mean in terms of possibilities and limitations?

You should always consider how the elements above interact and affect each other. Is the writer/speaker the right person to be dealing with the topic? Will the people listening/reading be the right mediators of change? Why/why not? Moreover, you might examine whether or not the language is suitable for the topic and for the audience. Questions like these can help you reflect on the context and background of the text, which is important.

*   Also known as Cicero's pentagram/pentagon. The model is popular in Danish schools, but your international friends may not recognize it.

As an alternative to the rhetorical situation, you can employ the "rhetorical pentagram"* (topic, reader, writer, language, and circumstances). Both the rhetorical situation and the pentagram will be a good place to begin your analysis. Having established some context, you may then look more closely at the text.

Here is a list of elements you should consider in your rhetorical analysis, where relevant:

*   o  What type of text is this, and what is its purpose (to inform, to persuade, or to entertain)? Support your answer.
*   o  What is the main claim of the text? Is it supported by evidence? Find examples.
*   o  What modes of persuasion are most dominant?
    *   • How credible is the writer/speaker, and how does (s)he try to strengthen his or her own credibility and likability (ethos)?
    *   • Does the writer/speaker try to convince the audience by appealing to emotions (pathos) or by making logical arguments (logos)?
    *   • What is the balance between credibility, emotion, and reason?
    *   • Does the text strike a balance that is appropriate in the context?
*   o  How is the speech/text structured?
*   o  What arguments are used? Are they weak or strong? And are arguments important in this context?
*   o  What personal pronouns are used (I, you, we, etc.)? And to what effect?

*   See a list of language features later in this chapter.

*   o  What language features are used (imagery, alliteration, anaphora, metaphor, tricolon, etc.), and what is the effect?*
*   o  Are there any references to events, art, other texts, historical documents, politicians, etc., and what is the effect of these references?
*   o  What kind of language is used? Name some of the types of words, phrases, language features, and sentence forms that are used.*

*   For more on this look at the guide to style of writing towards the end of this chapter.

*   o  Towards the end of your rhetorical analysis, you might also discuss whether the text is a fitting response to the rhetorical situation.

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