“Nobody’s Son”

Rhetoric is an inevitable part of human life. It appeared long time ago in the old times but within wise civilizations. Although, rhetoric is, first of all, associated with politics and also determined as “the study of effective speaking and writing. And he art of persuasion. And many other things” (Burton n. p.). Thus, rhetoric, which had been earlier used only by politicians, orators, and commanders in order to persuade people of something, got other functions later. Rhetoric studies “the how of language, the methods and means of communication” (Burton n. p.). It provides more possibilities for usage of rhetoric. That is why nowadays one can speak about rhetoric not only in a political sphere, but in the spheres of art and literature as well. Let us consider how modern authors use it in order to transfer ideas of their works on the example of the short story “Nobody’s Son” by Mark Slouka.

In “Nobody’s Son,” Mark Slouka tells a story about how he lost his father. The organization of the work is interesting as the author combines the description of events, which took part in his life and that surrounded the death of his father. He tells of the feelings and emotions, which were evoked by this sad event in his life. In order to transfer the main idea of the text, Mark Slouka uses a lot of rhetorical maneuvers. One can find a lot of metaphors, antitheses, and rhetorical questions in “Nobody’s Son.” However, one of the most important rhetorical maneuvers here is digression. This maneuver can be determined in the following way that, “digression is a part of the text that should not figure in the text, a fragment that perturbs the economy – or transforms it” (qtd. in Motte 191). Although the given definition is a little bit harsh and subjective, the role of digression in the literature
cannot be underestimated. This rhetorical maneuver has been known since the ancient times. Great orators and politicians of Rome and Greece were using it in their speeches. The essence of digression as a rhetorical maneuver is that the author or a speaker changes the topic of speech from one to another. It is used for different purposes, i.e. in order to make the main idea clearer, turn the attention of listeners or readers to the topic of speech, give some additional information, make the speech more interesting and vivid, and so on. In the short story “Nobody’s Son,” Mark Slouka uses digression in order to make readers understand the essence of the telling better. He makes them feel what he feels and makes them think about some important things in their lives.

Digression as a rhetoric maneuver used by the author in “Nobody’s Son,” is worth analyzing. This is due to, first of all, it is used in an interesting way. The fact is that it is difficult to understand which parts of the text are used as a digression. It is evident that the aim of the author is to transfer his feelings and emotions, to teach people, who also have lost their relatives or close people, and that the life continues even after their death. However, digression is supposed to be a change of a plot of the story. Here there is a difficulty in the fact, which part of the text is supposed to be the plot, and which – a digression. Although, the aim of the author is to share his feelings concerning a special life event, the plot of this short work is built not on the basis of feelings but on the author’s recollection of this event and his father. Thus, the plot of “Nobody’s Son” is the author’s story about his father’s death. As digression, where the author tells about his feelings, the plot can be divided into several parts. In the first part, Mark Slouka tells about how his father died: “An old man… walked out of a restaurant in Prague… started making his way up the sidewalk… sat down on the stoop of 74 Vinohradska street, and died” (Slouka). The second part of the plot describes the author’s recollection of the last years, when he was spending a lot of time with his family. The author also tells about the house he had got after his father’s death. In the following part,
readers find out about the relationships between the author and his father before his death. The next part of the plot describes the way the author had learned about his father’s death. The readers learn about how the funeral passed. The last part of the plot transfers the author’s thoughts to the way how his father’s death has changed his life. As one can see from the very text of “Nobody’s Son,” every part of the story helps readers to percept the information easier. Every chapter supposes to provide different information. As for digression in the short story, it can be also found with the help of a special division. The fact is that, in general, each author’s digression is marked with a special sign. However, even in spite of such division between the plot and digression, which the author uses, it is still difficult to understand which parts belong to the plot and digression. The main reason for this is that the author’s digressions are about his feelings and emotions, which have been evoked by the death of his father. However, at the same time, the analysis of his feelings is included in some parts of the plot. Perhaps, it is so because the topic the author wanted to cover is difficult. Nevertheless, it is necessary to consider every author’s digression in order to understand the essence of this rhetorical maneuver and its function in the short story better.

The first meaningful digression is the beginning of the second chapter: “I thought of calling this piece ‘In Memoriam,’ because ‘in memoriam’ has always suggested a place to me—Memoriam, Oklahoma, say, or Memoriam, Tennessee—and because, to my tinker’s brain, ‘in memoriam,’ sounds like ‘in memory am’” (Slouka). Writing these words, the writer tells neither about his feelings nor about his father’s death. He speaks about an absolutely different thing. The phrase, which the author speculates about and its description in the form of digression, is important for understanding the author’s feelings. In Memoriam is translated as in memory of from Latin. This fact makes evident that the death of the author’s father is painful for him. Some of the writer’s digressions are expressed in the form of intrinsic speech. The phrase “Would it hurt less if I’d hated him more? Maybe, but I doubt it” (Slouka
n. p.) is an example of this maneuver. Incorporating the phrases like this in the text and doing it frequently, the author emphasizes that his feelings are strong, and he cannot get rid of them. The following citation is a general example of digression: “‘What’s the takeaway?’ a neighbor of mine is always asking his kids whenever they run into something harder than they are. Good question” (Slouka n. p.). Here, the writer changes the topic of the whole story completely and speaks about the absolutely different things. However, it is done intentionally. This phrase is followed by the author’s speculations on the topic. His thoughts help readers understand his feelings better. One more digression, which can also be called a typical example, is the following:

Graham Greene counselled that you should write with a splinter of ice in your heart, advice I’ve taken, well, to heart. Except that I’m fresh out of ice lately. My heart feels overfull, vulnerable, and part of me, nursing grief as a tribute, prefers it that way.

(Slouka n. p.)

This expression of the studied rhetorical maneuver is one of the most important ones in the whole short story. First of all, the writer changes the topic of the story completely and starts speculating about the ways how to write properly. These speculations seem to be unrelated to the topic. However, as one can understand in the following lines, the author just says about his grief with the help of this digression; and he makes this professionally.

Having analyzed digression as a rhetorical maneuver on the example of the short story “Nobody’s Son” of Mark Slouka, the following conclusion can be made. Rhetorical maneuvers are an inevitable part of speech and literature. Rhetoric has being used by people since ancient times. It is a main instrument of politicians, orators, professors at universities, businessmen, and ordinary people. Rhetoric is also used in the literature. The meaning of rhetoric cannot be underestimated because it performs a lot of functions. As for digression as a rhetoric maneuver, it is a widely used method among orators and authors. It helps to
understand the topic of the speech/text better, provide listeners/readers with more information, and make speech/text more interesting. In the short story “Nobody’s Son,” digression is one of the most important rhetorical maneuvers used by the author. With its help, Mark Slouka changes the topic of the plot, which is a recollection of details of his father’s death, life and funeral. He emphasizes his feelings and emotions. The usage of digression helps readers to understand what the author feels and what the idea of the short story is.
Works Cited

