

# Military Rhetoric and Its Different Implementation in the Literary North and South of the USA

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## Abstract

This paper examines the connection between military (persuasive) rhetoric and literary culture in American fiction. Despite obvious references to the military and martial virtues, little scholarly attention has been directed to exploring the possibilities located within this connection. This paper is an alternative view on rhetorical theory and pedagogy that draws on close reading and philology, as well as performance and metaphor theory. In building on the history of American literature, the authors introduce a concept of “war rhetoric” that expands on understandings of the American literature about wars. The highest level of the use of military rhetoric (both terms and devices) is found in the literary works about American Civil War. Interestingly, both Northern and Southern antebellum writers employed religious imagery for their persuasive purposes, their specific rhetoric differed: Timrod pictured the South romantically, as the revival of Camelot even after the Confederacy’s death; Stowe, heavily influenced by her personal background, enacted emotion accompanied by an appeal to ethics in her fictional apologetic for the end of slavery in “Uncle Tom’s Cabin”. Although history handed both authors the opportunity to affect the nation’s trajectory, only Stowe achieved this feat, and she owes her triumph over Timrod, the victory of the North over the South, to her military rhetoric and emotional narration concerning slavery. This victory manifests itself in the comparison between Timrod’s underwhelming influence on Southern literature and Stowe’s indisputable effect on American history.

## Keywords

Rhetoric, literature, culture, military rhetoric, human nature, American fiction, persuasive rhetoric, North, South, Timrod, Stowe, ideology

## Introduction

Both literary and military rhetorical genre theories have a long history, and both have recently begun developing new conceptions of genre. Genre has been a significant concept for both literary and military rhetorical study at least since Aristotle, who defined literary kinds in “The Poetics” and delineated the kinds of oratory in “On Rhetoric”. The traditional notion of genre that developed after Aristotle, however, treated genre as a formalistic classification of types of texts. Redefinitions of genre have been developing within rhetoric-composition since the 1980s, drawing from Halliday’s systemic functional linguistics, Bakhtin’s dialogism, and more recently Anthony Giddens’s structure theory and Russian activity systems. The work developing from these different theorists (and others) has taken quite different directions, ranging from studies of how children learn narratives (e.g., Kress) to the ideologies underlying scientific articles (e.g., Bazerman Shaping). Such different approaches and objects of study have helped genre theory in rhetoric-composition develop a sophistication and complexity of perspective. Underlying most such work, however, is a core of agreement about the social (literary) and military rhetorical bases. Often deriving their definition from Carolyn Miller’s use of Halliday and Lloyd Bitzer in “Genre as Social Action,” new rhetorical genre theorists tend to agree in treating genre as typified social action rather than as conventional formulas, as rhetorical use of symbols in frequently encountered contexts in order to accomplish writers’ and readers’ purposes.

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According to rhetorical theory, the aim of every speech is to convince the audience to support the cause of which the speaker is an advocate. In the case of a court speech (*genus iudiciale*), the aim will be to convince the judges of the defendant's guilt (in the case of *accusatio*) or innocence (in the case of *defensio*). In an advisory speech (*deliberativum*), the politician delivering his text will try to persuade the audience (the senate or a popular assembly) to vote for (*suasio*) or against (*dissuasio*) the motion submitted. The situation will be similar in the case of the third type of speech – *epideictic* (*demonstrativum*).

This research is much supported by Emerson's view on human's nature, literature and rhetoric. "The world," Emerson insists, "is a battle-ground (10: 87). "War is the natural state of man and the nurse of all virtues" (5: 421). The individual is "born into the state of war" and "culture" must attend to "the arming of the man" (2: 148). The "warlike part" of human nature is "always the attractive, always the salient part" (2: 241). Emersonian "self-trust" is "the state of the soul at war," its ultimate objects, Emerson writes with Manichean melodrama, the defiance of "falsehood and wrong" and the cultivation of "the power to bear all that can be inflicted by evil agents" (2: 149). Man's inner life is a perpetual psychomachia, his relationship with his world the conflict of counterbalancing powers. "This floor holds us up by a fight with agencies that go to pull us down. The whole world is a series of balanced... antagonisms" (11: 371). "Victory over things is the office of man. Until it is accomplished it is the war... of things over him" (10: 127).

Thus, any research on military rhetoric, as well as literature as a reflection of human's nature, seems to be urgent and tends to widen the borders of the modern life's philosophy.

### **The concept of "war rhetoric"**

When the Roman Senator Cato the Elder wanted Rome to declare war on the North African state of Carthage, he would include the phrase "Carthage must be destroyed" in all of his speeches. This was typical of war rhetoric, the persuasive methods by which leaders who want to go to war convince both other leaders and the nation's citizens of a conflict's necessity. The same situation is observed in literary works. Writers can include presenting a country as an imminent threat to the nation, accusing those opposed to war as working against the nation's interests, and frequently repeating the necessity of war.

War rhetoric focuses on a reason why a nation must go to war against another country. This could be that the enemy country poses a direct military threat to the nation, that the country is helping those who wish the harm the nation and its people, or that the country is damaging the nation's economic interests. The writers who want to create support for going to war among the citizens of a nation will typically cite the country's present actions, as well as any wrongs the country has dealt the nation in the recent or distant past, as evidence of their claims. In war rhetoric, such evidence is frequently exaggerated or fictional. Writers who engage in war rhetoric often emphasize that their nation's military is more capable than that of the enemy country. This generally has the effect of stirring up nationalism, the belief that one's own country is better than other countries, among its citizens. Creating this feeling of superiority over the other country can lead people to believe that their victory in the conflict is a certainty, and eases concerns about the potential costs of the war. War rhetoric in many literary works pressures citizens to support wars to prove their patriotism.

The literary advocates of war usually take rhetorical steps to marginalize or discredit critics who are against their nation initiating a conflict. This commonly takes the form of attacks on the patriotism or personal courage of those individuals.

The literary advocates may also portray opposition to war as hurting one's own nation and aiding the enemy country. Casting opposition in this light typically pressures citizens to support the war to prove their patriotism.

Repetition is a key component to war rhetoric. Writers who try to convince their readers to go to war often repeat their claims about the conflict's necessity to citizens through a variety of media outlets. These can include speeches, opinion editorials in newspapers, and interviews on radio or television shows. The more often these writers, or their personages from the book, repeat their claims, the more likely readers are to accept the claims and support a declaration of war.

### **Military rhetoric of the southern and northern writers**

The ability to use literature as persuasive rhetoric often separates a good author from a great one, and distinguishes a revolution that receives only a passing mention in a history textbook from a revolution that dictates reality and changes the course of history. An American Revolution without "Common Sense" by Thomas Paine or a 1970s

Civil Rights Movement without a “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. might have appeared much differently without the influential rhetoric that inspired their audiences to action. Similarly, the era of the American Civil War felt the power of the pen as literature waged an ideological war of rhetoric. As they endorsed their respective sides while condemning the other, Northern and Southern authors, alike, joined the Civil War. With authors as soldiers and soldiers as authors, the American Civil War weaponized literature and its rhetoric.

While both Northern and Southern antebellum writers employed religious imagery for their persuasive purposes, their specific rhetoric differed: Southern poet Henry Timrod pictured the South as the revival of Camelot, God’s perfect, idyllic society, even after the Confederacy’s death; Northern author Harriet Beecher Stowe, heavily influenced by her personal history, enacted emotion accompanied by an appeal to ethics in her fictional apologetic for the end of slavery in “Uncle Tom’s Cabin”. Although history handed both authors the opportunity to affect the nation’s trajectory, only Stowe achieved this feat, and she owes her triumph over Timrod, the victory of the North over the South, to her emotional rhetoric concerning slavery. Timrod’s poems have mainly exerted influence on the future of Southern literature; on the other hand, Stowe’s novel essentially changed a nation and started a war. Therefore, the political and social influence of her novel, politically and socially, provides evidence for her victory in the war of rhetoric. With this victory, Stowe earns her place among America’s greatest authors, while Timrod falls victim to relative anonymity.

### **The South: The Poems of Henry Timrod**

The Civil War inspired many unique voices to surface. Like the North, the South used religion to further its causes; however, unlike their Northern counterparts, Southern authors utilized a certain idyllic nature, or images of a perfection no longer achievable, when referring to the time during and after the Confederacy. Many renowned Southern poets favored this rhetoric as they pictured the South as an “Edenic paradise” (Barrett, 2012, p. 187). These themes gave rise to an air of Romanticism for Southern authors, who also put a large emphasis on scenery, especially nature, in their poems. During the South’s time as the Confederacy, the general Southern public viewed their newfound secession with an air of awe, believing that their new nation represented a small part of heaven on earth. Even after the South’s fall, authors pictured the Confederacy with a mythic quality to it, longing back to earlier days. No Southern poet mastered this longing voice better than Henry Timrod.

Henry Timrod served as the most influential poetic voice for the Confederacy. Scholars have often linked Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Timrod, with his contemporary, author Maud Dickson, calling Timrod “the Tennyson of South Carolina” (as cited in Henderson, 2013, p. 19). Tennyson himself named Timrod “the poet laureate of the South” (as cited in Henderson, 2013, p. 19). Because of Timrod’s poetic prowess, his poems serve as a microcosm for Southern Civil War rhetoric.

Timrod’s personal history remains relatively unknown until the start of his professional career. Timrod found his voice, like the famous poet Walt Whitman, in the years leading up to the Civil War, publishing his first collection of poetry entitled *Poems* in 1859 (Henderson, 2013). The poet fully supported the Confederacy and their split from the North from the beginning and remained faithful even until the war’s end. After the war, Timrod found himself in extreme poverty because he traded all of his American currency for the currency of the Confederacy. In a correspondence with a friend, he admitted to being “so poor at present as to put even the petty cost of a photograph utterly beyond [his] means” (as cited in Robillard, 1961, p. 130). Timrod’s personal history and career indicate his commitment to the South, making him the perfect candidate for the position of a poet with the potential for widespread power.

Because of cotton, according to Timrod, the South would be unable to ever fall:

*It shall not end  
As long as rain shall fall and Heaven bend  
In blue above thee; though my foes be hard  
And cruel as their weapons, it shall guard  
Thy hearth-stones as a bulwark; make thee great  
In white and bloodless state. (lines 122-127)*

This imagery allows Timrod to enlist the powers of nature to stand in the ranks of the Confederate army. Author Faith Barrett (2012) enforces nature’s fighting role in this poem: “The poem represents cotton as a mystical

substance that contains whole worlds within its strands that will weave the continent together in pastoral peace and natural plenty" (p. 191). Timrod's rhetoric clearly establishes the South as superior because of the natural entity of cotton—an entity that the North notably lacks. He included this imagery for more than just decoration and showcase his artistic abilities; he hoped to proclaim the superiority of the South.

Timrod (1861b) uses similar tactics to Howe's for the advancement of the South in "Ethnogenesis"; he argues that God fights with the Confederate army because of, rather than in spite of, their practice of slavery. Timrod features religious imagery in many of his poems, but his most thematic and well-written defense of the South lies in "Ethnogenesis." Throughout his poem, Timrod argues that God aligned Himself with the Confederacy as a metaphorical soldier: "And, under God, whose thunder need we fear? / Thank Him who placed us here" (lines 8-9). Timrod argues that God sides with the Confederates because their social customs, including both their treatment of women and African Americans. As humans exist "under God," so slaves and women exist under white men. These social restrictions, argued Timrod, all contribute to what author Christina Henderson calls "God-ordained social hierarchy" (2013, p. 23). The Union presented the South with a threat to their God-ordained society, which essentially transformed the North into workers of the devil, the enemy of God; specifically, Timrod describes the headquarters of the North as the source of an "evil throne . . . [warring] with God" (Timrod, 1861b, line 35). Timrod hoped to convince his audience of the propriety of the South through this rhetoric of religion, as he tapped into the deeply religious nature of America.

In a technique that differed from Northerners, Southern poets uniquely imagined the Confederacy as the rebirth, or second coming, of the legendary Camelot. Timrod found some of his greatest strengths as a writer in constructing a Camelot in the seceded South, and he showcases this theme in "Ethnogenesis," as well. This poem, originally named "Ode on Occasion of the Meeting of Southern Congress," written about the birth of the Confederacy, features Timrod's belief that the newly seceded South was destined for mythical greatness (Henderson, 2013). Timrod, who admitted to finding much of his inspiration in Lord Tennyson, identified four qualifications for remaking Camelot: "a just cause, an oppressive enemy (the North), the favor of Heaven, and the capacity to bless the world" (p. 23). In addition, the two nations also shared similar social orders. Therefore, Camelot reincarnated finds a home in the South.

However, his military rhetoric remained unable to move a nation, as a whole, into any kind of consequential action. Author James Reitter postulates that some of the most artistic American poets, Paul Hamilton Hayne, Sydney Lanier, and Timrod, all Southern Civil War poets, struggled to gain notoriety because of their inability to produce any poems with rhetoric that caused any significant reaction from the public. Instead, especially when contrasted with their Northern counterparts, these authors fall to "side notes in the canon of American poets" (Reitter, 2008, p. 78). Timrod's major downfall as a poet does not lie in a lack of technical abilities, but a lack in content. Though his poems included beautiful language that called back to a mythical country with luscious landscapes, he failed to provide a tenable defense, or even somewhat informed response to, the problem of slavery (Reitter, 2008). His Camelot metaphors, complete with their social codes, did nothing to persuade a nation into action.

### **The North: Harriet Beecher Stowe and Uncle Tom's Cabin**

Since the novel's publication, Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1850 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has served as a vital piece in the conversation of American Civil War literature. This fictional narrative features two of the most memorable characters in American literature, namely the villainous Legree and the borderline angelic Uncle Tom. This compelling narrative follows a few slaves and their mistreatment by their masters, all of which was allowed under the American institution of slavery. The practice of slavery affects the characters personally, causing some of their deaths, and within the context of community, stunting their relationships with their families. In the end, Tom sacrifices himself on the behalf of others, allowing Cassy and Emmeline's escape, only to be beaten to death before his own rescue. George, another slave who achieves his freedom, thematically remarks of Tom after his death, "So, when you rejoice in your freedom, think that you owe it to that good old soul . . . Think of your freedom, every time you see Uncle Tom's Cabin; and let it be a memorial to put you all in mind" (p. 406). This statement would prove very prophetic, as the power of rhetorical devices in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* would, in part, lead to a war that instigated the liberation of slaves.

Stowe's place in history as a social reformer did not begin with the publication of her famous novel; rather, the philosophy that she showcased in her novel finds its roots in her personal background. In particular, her

interaction with religion and rebellion against New England logic and gender norms all influence her book and work together to create the great apologetic that is *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Though she enacted an emotional plea in her novel, Stowe almost strayed away from these emotional tendencies: important people in her life, namely her father and husband, almost stifled her embrace of emotional rhetoric. When the Beecher family moved to Ohio for her father's job, Lyman Beecher took the opportunity to introduce Harriet to Calvin Stowe, an associate professor at his university, and the two were wed in 1834 (Seiler, 1949). Her marriage to Calvin Stowe seemed to repress her imagination and emotion in some ways. For example, in 1849, when Stowe received a letter from her husband saying that he had fallen ill and did not expect to see her once more before he died, she reacted in a rather cold-hearted manner, writing, "I read the letter, poke it into the stove, and proceed" (as cited in Seiler, 1949, p. 134). Though Calvin Stowe's sickness did not claim his life, this anecdote provides some insight to the changing attitude of Mrs. Stowe.

However, Stowe would regain her emotional tendencies after the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Law, one of the immediate causes of the Civil War. Issued in 1850, the Fugitive Slave Law required those who lived in Free states to honor slave-holders by returning their runaway slaves. For many Northerners, allowing slavery to continue in the South, a seemingly far-off land was tolerable, but to force them to participate in slavery by returning fugitive slaves trespassed into immoral territory; therefore, this legislation marked the turning point for many, including Stowe, in their attitudes toward anti-slavery efforts. Shortly after the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Act, Mrs. Edward Beecher, Stowe's sister-in-law, wrote to her in a letter, "Hattie, if I could use a pen as you can, I would write something to make this whole nation feel what an accursed thing slavery is" (as cited in Seiler, 1949, p. 134). According to Stowe, almost immediately after reading the letter, she sat down and penned the death of Uncle Tom, one of the most emotional scenes in her novel (Seiler, 1949). Upon finishing the scene, Stowe embarked on a work that would leave American history forever changed.

## Conclusion

The respective Northern and Southern American writers who used military rhetoric or its elements in their literary works (exemplified in this paper by Harriet Beecher Stowe and Henry Timrod) features similarities, like the employment of persuasive genre, religious language, and differences, like Timrod's motif of Camelot and Stowe's emotionally charged plea for the abolishment of slavery.

In general, American writers tend to widely use the elements of persuasive genre if they insert military terminology and themes into their books. Their shared use of this technique along with religion are the characteristic features of the whole of American prose (and, sometimes, poetry as well).

Though both authors analyzed in this research paper attempted to exert influence on culture through their carefully constructed rhetoric, the Northern author Stowe proves more effective than Timrod, as evidenced by the large historical, cultural impact of "*Uncle Tom's Cabin*". The Civil War era gifted both Stowe and Timrod the opportunity to play an integral role in American history, but only Stowe, equipped with the military rhetoric of the North, fighting against slavery through emotional, logical, and religious pleas for the end of slavery, rose to the challenge; therefore, just as in the actual war, the North reigns victorious in the battle of Civil War rhetoric.

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