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## **A neo-Aristotelian critique of “Jimmy’s World”: New ideas in a long-debated journalism fabrication**

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**ABSTRACT:** The “hows” and “whys” of Janet Cooke’s fabricated “Jimmy’s World” have rumbled through the professional and scholarly realms since its publication on September 28, 1980. This rhetorical criticism of Cooke’s article sheds light – through gestalt comparing and contrasting – on how Cooke skillfully paired legitimate characters with fictitious characters in order to create a sense of realism throughout the article which resulted in the story being accepted as authentic.

**KEYWORDS:** Journalism, fabrication, lying, narrative, reality, and responsibility

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At first glance, the name Herbert A. Wichelns, neo-Aristotelian criticism, and Janet Cooke – the infamous 1980 *Washington Post* reporter – may have as much in common as classical music and reggae. But if one combines Wichelns' (1925) groundbreaking views on neo-Aristotelian criticism with the five canons of classical rhetoric – memory, arrangement, invention, delivery, and style – and applies it to Cooke's fabricated story of an eight-year-old heroin addict, an interesting layer of rhetorical truth emerges. And any form of truth is long overdue when one considers Cooke's concoction entitled "Jimmy's World." It rocked the journalism world in the fall of 1980, when Cooke created a world starring Jimmy that promptly captivated millions of readers throughout the United States and around the world only to leave them feeling duped a few months later.

The article, which appeared in *The Washington Post*, was partly fact but mostly fiction, and this makes it ripe for a neo-Aristotelian criticism, primarily because the five canons of rhetoric – when viewed in a gestalt-like manner – frame an unseen level of truth in this largely fabricated story, and re-conceptualizing what constitutes truth should be a key objective for mass communication students and professionals alike (Wiggins, 1998; Quinn, 2007). Cooke's downfall occurred because she passed off her article as factual journalism, and since the story was awarded the Pulitzer Prize (journalism's highest honor), it has remained particularly infamous in media history.

### **Research Statement, Literature, and Methodology**

Blame has always been in great abundance when discussing the "Jimmy's World" case. Cooke certainly was to blame. Key editors at the *Post* were at fault. Even the highly competitive, awards-driven culture of the newspaper was at fault. This essay will not consider how these individuals or the organizational climate may have contributed to Cooke's sham, nor will it deal with the numerous fabrications that have occurred since: Jayson Blair, Stephen Glass, Rick Bragg, Jack Kelley, Patricia Smith, Mike Barnicle, and the most-recent campus rape story in *Rolling Stone*, to name a few. Instead, this article will highlight a little-studied aspect of Cooke's infamous fabrication: the story itself and how a deeper understanding of it can empower present-day media professionals and academics by illustrating how truth can morph based on the type of discourse within which it is embedded. Therefore, this article will consider the following research statement: *When analyzed in a neo-Aristotelian rhetorical fashion, "Jimmy's World" reveals secrets – and a level of truth – that Janet Cooke herself was perhaps not aware of when she wrote the article.*

Even a close rhetorical analysis of "Jimmy's World" will never answer the vital *why* question. Cooke has avoided discussing the fabrication. She has granted only one in-depth interview in the past 30-plus years. During that interview, she hinted at her strict upbringing as a contributing factor, as well as an overwhelming urge to be a part of the *Post's* grand narrative for investigative reporting which included, most notably, the Watergate investigation by Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, which resulted in a Pulitzer Prize for the pair (Sager, 1996). As Cooper (1996) has suggested, this "Watergate model" could have inadvertently protected Cooke. Other research has noted that numerous editors at the *Post* may have had too much faith in a fellow professional (Boylan, 1981; Anderson, 2004). Even Hollywood briefly showed an interest in the story

when TriStar Pictures, in 1996, paid more than \$1 million<sup>1</sup> for the movie rights (Busch, 1996). Though much literature deals with Cooke and lying (Borden, 2002; Eason, 1986; Shapiro, 2006), there is a dearth of research on how “Jimmy’s World” functioned on a rhetorical level, and this essay begins to fill that gap. Immediately, one may ask: Why an Aristotelian analysis of a 20<sup>th</sup>-century journalistic fabrication?

The manner in which “Jimmy’s World” was written provides subtle hints at the truth, and, perhaps more important, how the article functioned on societal and audience levels, all significant components of mass media studies. A neo-Aristotelian critique is an effective analytical tool because it illuminates key pairings of real and fabricated sources and shows how those pairings ultimately affected (and persuaded) the broader audience of readers, the *Post* as an organization, and society in general, since the *Post* was (and still is) a major media outlet in the United States. Cooke effectively camouflaged her fictitious characters by blending them with factual news sources, such as agents from the Drug Enforcement Administration or counselors from various rehabilitation institutes.

Cooke used a gestalt method of positioning to tell her story. She focused on Jimmy or artifacts in his life to bring his addiction to the forefront, then backed away to look at the overall picture of addiction or the other secondary characters who directly affected Jimmy’s life. How these characters are positioned in the story and how they ultimately sympathetically frame Jimmy as the focal point could be major reasons why the article was so readily accepted as fact. Wichelns’ work, in conjunction with the five canons of classical rhetoric, illustrates how Cooke skillfully recast reality and played it out before a background of fiction.

Wichelns was the first critic to differentiate rhetorical criticism from literary criticism, suggesting that the former is “... not concerned with permanence, nor yet with beauty” as is the latter. Rather, rhetorical criticism “is concerned with effect” (Wichelns, 1925, as cited in Foss, 1996, p. 25). To focus on effect, Wichelns instructed the critic to concentrate on a myriad of elements including: the character of the speaker, the public’s perception of the speaker, the audience, the ideas presented in the speech, the motives to which the speaker appealed, and the arrangement of the speech. Wichelns likened these elements to the five canons of rhetoric that Aristotle (1978) frames in the *Rhetoric*: memory (to speak well), arrangement (to select and assemble an effective argument), invention (to discover the available means of persuasion), delivery (to effectively use voice, gestures, images, etc.), and style (to present that argument in an eloquent manner). All of the canons are present within “Jimmy’s World,” some more than others.

A neo-Aristotelian criticism is not above criticism. Edwin Black (1978), for example, noted that, “even in its most faithful executions, neo-Aristotelian criticism cannot be certain of serving the purposes of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* (pp. 32-33). That said, the canons provide a new lens through which “Jimmy’s World” can be viewed and the clarity gained creates a deeper understanding and guidance for contemporary media professionals and academics. The specific process for a neo-Aristotelian critique involves two steps (Foss, 1996): First, learn about the rhetor, which in the case of Janet Cooke has been debated for the past three decades; and, second, apply the five canons, which will be the primary methodological tool for this essay. In this case, invention is arguably the most debatable of the canons in that Cooke’s *invention* was the use of fiction, and this

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<sup>1</sup> Other sources set the figure as low as \$700,000 and as high as \$1.7 million. The project never went beyond the script stage.

should be kept in mind throughout the analysis. Since “Jimmy’s World” was published, *memory* becomes more of a strategic challenge on Cooke’s part since she had to use both real and contrived components to assemble her story. *Arrangement, delivery, and style* become the most effective of the canons.

### **A Brief History**

Cooke got away with her journalistic sham for several months. “Jimmy’s World” was published on Sunday, September 28, 1980. The story was 2,256 words long and 892,220 copies of the *Post* were published that day. The primary headline above the story read: “Jimmy’s World.” Below it, a subhead tempted readers with: “8-Year-Old Heroin Addict Lives for a Fix.” When “Jimmy’s World” suddenly fused with reality, thousands around the Washington, D.C., area demanded the child be found and helped. Then-Mayor Marion Barry quickly announced that city officials knew who Jimmy was and that he was in treatment. That statement was soon retracted. Later a task force of police and social workers was formed in hopes of finding the boy and obtaining medical treatment for him (Maraniss, 1981).

In spite of the public pressure to find Jimmy, he was never located. When questioned about his whereabouts, Cooke first feigned actual searches herself and then suggested that Jimmy’s family had moved to Baltimore. Few doubted her and those who did never followed up their suspicions with action. Eventually the questions and the public outcry calmed, and Cooke temporarily got away with her lie. Ironically, Cooke’s downfall came at the moment she hit journalism’s highest point: The day she won the Pulitzer Prize. On April 14, 1981, six and a half months after “Jimmy’s World” was published, a headline on the *Post*’s front page proclaimed: “Post Writer Wins/Pulitzer for Story/On Child Addict.”

When The Associated Press circulated the news of Cooke’s award, the *Post* received a startling call from Vassar College questioning Cooke’s biography. She claimed to have graduated from the college but did not. Soon other inconsistencies turned up. Editors at the *Post*, including Benjamin Bradlee, then-executive editor, began to wonder: If Cooke had lied about parts of her past, could she have fabricated parts of “Jimmy’s World”?

A cadre of editors — including Bob Woodward (of Watergate fame) and David Maraniss, a deputy managing editor — interrogated Cooke for hours the evening after the Pulitzers had been announced. Rather than celebrate, Cooke was asked for proof of Jimmy’s whereabouts, proof of her interviews with other characters in the story, and proof of her claim that she was fluent in two foreign languages. She was unable to back up any of the claims.

When more *Post* editors began to doubt the validity of the article, Woodward and Maraniss interviewed Cooke at length in an attempt to find the truth. At 1:45 a.m., April 15, 1981, Cooke confessed to Maraniss. The next morning, at the urging of Bradlee, Maraniss asked for and received Cooke’s resignation. In longhand, she wrote:

“Jimmy’s world” was in essence a fabrication. I never encountered or interviewed an 8-year-old heroin addict. The September 28, 1980, article in The Washington Post was a serious misrepresentation which I deeply regret. I apologize to my newspaper, my profession, the Pulitzer board and all the seekers of the truth. Today, in facing up to the truth, I have submitted my

resignation. Janet Cooke (Green, 1981, p. A14).

### **The Introduction of Jimmy: Arrangement, Delivery, and Style**

Cooke's article bluntly introduced Jimmy as "... a third-generation heroin addict," which mesmerized and effectively persuaded the audience right from the start. Immediately there are numerous conflicting (and skillfully arranged) narratives at play, most notably the narratives of addiction, race, and socio-economics. The vast majority of the *Post's* readership lived and worked within or near the Beltway of Washington, D.C. The city was predominately African American as were Jimmy and Cooke. But the manner in which Cooke profiled him consistently placed his innocence in the foreground and his race in the background. By constructing her main character in this fashion, Cooke stylishly framed his innocence as an embraceable entity for all readers. Race became an afterthought throughout "Jimmy's World."

Cooke presented the area of D.C. in which Jimmy supposedly lived as a culture of drug addiction and drug dealing. Fast money and death were apparently common in Jimmy's neighborhood, but they never actually occurred in Cooke's story; they were merely *hinted* at. These inner-city realities directly competed with the upper-class Beltway culture of government workers, lobbyists, lawyers, and politicians. Jimmy was presented as a victim of this drug-infested neighborhood, and his age further emphasized his dire situation. Being only eight, Jimmy transcended the color barrier because readers saw him as a victim of innocence lost. He was more than a main character; he was the delivery mechanism for Cooke's story since Jimmy (the fictional character) was based on a real addict.

Jimmy was rich only in the temporary manner in which drug dealing could provide. Death was an inevitable reality in his world, a constant (and perhaps inevitable) consequence of selling drugs. But this hazard was something Jimmy recognized and accepted. In just the fifth paragraph, Jimmy noted his dreams and aspirations and also hinted at the importance of education:

I want to have me a bad car and dress good and also have me a good place to live. So, I pretty much pay attention in math because I know I got to keep up when I finally get me something to sell (Cooke, A1).

Within these first five paragraphs, Cooke provided an up-close look at her creation. Arrangement was key to the construction of this section, but the vivid description also contained several contradictions. For example, in the second paragraph, Cooke described Jimmy as nestling in a "large, beige reclining chair in the living room of his comfortably furnished home in Southeast Washington." In the next paragraph, the child clasped his hands behind his head and discussed his fancy running shoes and the striped Izod T-shirt he was wearing. He boasted about owning six of the stylish shirts.

These precise details succeed in describing Jimmy's world in a poignant fashion, certainly through invention, style, and delivery; however, when one considers the fact that Jimmy had supposedly been an addict since he was five years old and his mother was a prostitute, it seems unlikely he would care about such materialistic things as expensive running shoes and T-shirts. His next fix would seem the paramount concern. One even has to question whether Ron — Jimmy's mother's live-in lover and dealer — would be so generous with his drug profits.

To put "Jimmy's World" into the proper perspective, it must be reiterated that

Cooke had learned about an actual eight-year-old heroin addict in the months before she wrote her fictitious account. She learned of the factual child from a drug rehabilitation counselor in the D.C. area. When she told her editors of the child, they pressured her to find him and write a story. The counselors understandably would not release the child's identity under any circumstances, and they eventually stopped taking Cooke's repeated calls.

When editors at the *Post* told Cooke she could write the story without using the child's name, it set into motion a series of events that resulted in the majority of "Jimmy's World" being fabricated. Researchers have concluded that Cooke recognized the holes in the gatekeeping system at the *Post* and "gambled that she could sneak through" (Isaacs, 1986, p. 64). Her ultimate goal of winning the Pulitzer ended up being her downfall. Cooke's inability to control her chronic lying led to her eventual journalistic disintegration.

In her detailed look at Jimmy and the other addicts with whom he interacted, Cooke reflected a very regimented and arranged lifestyle. The addicts casually bought the heroin from Ron in the dining room of Jimmy's home. Cooke continued:

They "cook" it in the kitchen and "fire up" in the bedrooms. And every day, Ron or someone else fires up Jimmy, plunging a needle into his bony arm, sending the fourth grader into a hypnotic nod (p. A1).

These images, though made up by the author, painted a vivid and stylized mental picture of the life of inner-city drug dealers and users. And at the center of this picture was young Jimmy. He became a key delivery device for Cooke. Rather than playing the games of a traditional fourth grader, Jimmy was planning for his future life as a drug dealer.

Eleven paragraphs of "Jimmy's World" began on the front page of the *Post*. Within those 11 paragraphs, Cooke carefully moved from the present (where she introduced Jimmy and described him as "a precocious little boy with sandy hair, velvety brown eyes and needle marks freckling the baby-smooth skin of his thin brown arms"), to the future (where Jimmy dreamed of selling his own "stuff"), and to the past (where Ron described the first time he helped Jimmy get high). The reader essentially got all the key components of this touching and tragic human-interest story within that front-page section. This was an unwitting use of arrangement on the part of the *Post's* editors and, no doubt, on the part of Cooke, who infused levels of invention, style, memory, and certainly delivery to make her story as compelling as possible.

### **Fiction Camouflaged by Fact Through Invention, Arrangement, and Style**

This pattern of present, future, and past continued throughout the article. For the most part, Cooke relied on the present, and this stands to reason, since she was creating the scenes of Jimmy's addiction and the characters surrounding him (invention and arrangement). In fact, Cooke's mixing of fictitious characters with factual characters further points to how the article was ultimately accepted as fact. The comments from these factual characters enhance and ultimately camouflage the fictitious ones.

Jimmy, the central character in Cooke's article, was created. His addiction may have been based on an actual child addict, but the scenes in which he was injected or those in which he discussed his past, present, and future were fabricated (invention and arrangement). Andrea, Jimmy's mother, as well as Ron, also were created by Cooke.

It is not until the 15<sup>th</sup> paragraph — nearly half way through the article — that Cooke introduced the reader to David G. Canaday, a special agent in charge of the DEA’s office in Washington, D.C. Canaday commented on the daily influx of “Golden Crescent” heroin from Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. This was also the first juncture of the story in which Cooke actually quoted facts, stating that Washington, D.C., was “... fourth among six cities listed by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency<sup>2</sup> as major points of entry for heroin in the United States” (p. A-9).

In addition to Canaday, Cooke made reference to only four other factual characters: Dr. Alyce Gullatte, director of the Howard University Drug Abuse Institute; Dr. James L. Luke, D.C.’s medical examiner; Dr. Dorynne Czechowisz of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, and Linda Gilbert, a social worker from Washington’s Southeast Neighborhood House. All other characters — the numerous addicts that parade in and out of Jimmy’s house as well as the scenes involving Ron, Andrea, and Jimmy — are fabricated. The manner in which Cooke intermingled her created characters and scenes with the factual characters — through the canons of memory, invention, and arrangement — gave the story an eerily authentic and stylized feel. The fact that it was presented (which was a contemporary form of Aristotle’s canon of delivery) in a newspaper with a reputation as solid as the *Post’s* further enhanced its believability.

Early in the story, Cooke created within Jimmy many of the same interests and dreams shared by other eight-year-olds. He talked about clothes, money and the Baltimore Orioles. But at this point — just in the story’s second paragraph — Cooke separated him from all other boys. She noted, after the aforementioned interests, that heroin was also one of Jimmy’s primary curiosities [and *needs*].

Within this significant 11-paragraph introduction, Cooke infatuated her reader through several vivid descriptions of Jimmy’s home life as well as his addiction. These descriptions also contain inconsistencies which should have cast doubt on the article’s authenticity had most editors not been consumed by Cooke’s direct appeal to human emotion (via the canon of style).

For example, Jimmy’s mother was a prostitute with a \$60-a-day heroin habit. Yet in the second paragraph, Cooke described their home as “comfortably furnished.” Jimmy was a well-clothed child, even though he had been addicted to heroin for three years and his mother for a good deal longer. He rationally discussed what subject was most important to him at school (math) and compared taking heroin to the rides at King’s Dominion, a nearby amusement park (Cooke, 1980). While all this was taking place, a “parade” of addicted individuals (some known, others unknown) walked through the house buying and using heroin. Cooke never mentions, however, the sites, smells, and confusion associated with this many people buying, selling, and using drugs in this “comfortably furnished” house. With so many people coming and going, it seems as though the house would instead be in a state of total disarray. The two images are disconnected.

Perhaps one of the most notable inconsistencies involved Andrea’s opinion of her son’s addiction. In the final paragraph on the front page, Andrea admitted she did not like

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<sup>2</sup> Cooke’s article quotes the U.S. Drug Enforcement “Agency”; however, according to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration’s website, the organization was established by executive order in July 1973 by then-President Richard Nixon. It is logical to assume that the use of “Agency” was an error on the part of Cooke.

to see Jimmy use heroin. “But you know,” she continued, “I think he would have got into it one day anyway. Everybody does” (p. A-9). Later she — and at this point it is vital to reiterate that Cooke was *fabricating* these quotes — boldly states: “Drugs and black folk been together for a very long time” (p. A-9).

At first, these two statements seem congruent and believable. Jimmy’s mother was uncomfortable watching her son use heroin. Her comment about African Americans and drugs might be consistent with someone living in a drug-infested, inner-city neighborhood. Additionally, near the end of the story, Cooke recounts that Jimmy was the product of a rape. Depressed and discouraged after his birth, Andrea recalled:

I didn’t even name him, you know? My sister liked the name Jimmy and I said “OK, call him that, who gives a fu--? I guess we got to call him something, don’t we?” (p. A-9).

If one looks at Andrea as being part of an inner-city drug narrative rather than a victim of drugs (which was how Cooke portrayed her), her situation becomes significant to Jimmy as a character and to the story as a whole. This illustrates a breakdown in Cooke’s arrangement of the story. First, Andrea appears to care about her son. Then, later in the story, she essentially admits to never having cared for him. Add to this the fact that she was both a heroin addict and a prostitute and suddenly the “comfortably furnished” home Cooke initially referred to in the story becomes incredibly unlikely. Cooke’s story would have been more powerful – in terms of arrangement – had she developed one consistent image of Andrea instead of the conflicting, multiple images that are present in the story.

A person who doubted Cooke’s story from the start was Bob Maynard, a former assigning editor at the *Post*. A few years prior to the publication of “Jimmy’s World,” Maynard had served in various positions at the *Post*, including ombudsman, before moving to the West Coast to purchase the Oakland Tribune and assume the editorship. While visiting friends in the *Post* newsroom just prior to the publication of “Jimmy’s World,” Woodward told him about the story and introduced him to Cooke.

The first thing that caught Maynard’s attention was Cooke’s immaculate manner of dress. A seasoned, street-wise African American reporter, he thought: People dressed as she was would set off a 57-decibel alarm on the streets where addicts live (Isaacs, 1986, p. 67). But Maynard never verbalized his misgivings to his former colleagues. Though he doubted the story, he respected the larger journalistic community (of which he was part of):

These were editors of The Washington Post doing their jobs. I once lived there, but now I was editor of the Oakland Tribune and a guest. I could only listen (p. 67).

### **The Power of The Article’s Construction**

Something about the construction of Cooke’s article – a clear use of pathos on her part – captivated the editors and resulted in a temporary unhinging of the newspaper’s usual stringent ethical standards. This was in stark opposition to the Watergate investigation, not even 10 years earlier.

That investigation anchored itself in journalism’s *telos*, or purpose. The *Post* accepted the responsibility of being a watchdog on governmental abuses of power and to provide the public with the information needed for self-governance. But in order for this



watchdog arrangement to function properly, a balance was needed. Bradlee was that balance. Numerous times, as depicted in *All the President's Men*, Bradlee kept Woodward and Bernstein focused on their *public* obligation. At one point, Bradlee said he had a general idea of who the key sources were, but that information, up to that point, had come about in a second-hand manner.

The Watergate narrative worked in two ways: Certainly it spurred the *Post* and the profession of journalism as a whole to become active watchdogs over the nation's power structure. But another component of the story — perhaps a romantic dimension — was the rise of Woodward and Bernstein. They were two young, relatively unknown, police-beat reporters who were able to ascend to the highest status of their field. Less than a decade later during the period of “Jimmy’s World,” the former part began to fade away, but the latter part (the romantic dimension) lived on in the hearts of all young Woodward and Bernstein wannabes, most notably Janet Cooke.

She had told close friends she wanted to win a Pulitzer Prize by the time she was 30 (she was 25 when “Jimmy’s World” was published). When she started at the newspaper, she toiled in relative obscurity in the *Post*'s zoned editions, an area where many entry-level reporters proved themselves. Cooke frequently told co-workers that the best way to get out of the zones was to break a story that editors on the city desk could not resist (Sager, 1996). “Jimmy’s World” ended up being that story, and the unwitting mechanism for perpetrating the story were the five canons of rhetoric.

From the high point of Watergate came the corresponding low point of “Jimmy’s World.” This largely concocted account was a historical moment of embarrassment, not only for the *Post* but also for journalism as a whole. Once the fabrication was exposed and Cooke resigned, the newspaper essentially extricated itself from the perpetrator, but the damage lingered for decades. In fact, today — 30-plus years later — the *Post* still is occasionally questioned about the existence of safeguards to prevent a similar occurrence.

By nature, writing tends to be a reflection of an author's ego, but the serious infraction Cooke committed was disregarding the delineation between factually based reporting and fiction. Even the most detailed journalistic reporting involves observing reality, decomposing that reality, and then recomposing it through language. The end result is never a mirror image, since the observed reality is filtered through the mind (and memory), but each reporter attempts to make his or her representation as close to reality as possible. Those reporters' foundational ethics are what keep them focused on the larger picture of what is best for the profession (and society) as a whole.

Cooke's focus was clearly personal. Winning a Pulitzer and making a name for herself were, by her own admission, more noteworthy to her than upholding the larger issues of journalistic ethics, responsibility, integrity, and credibility. In an absurd manner, she succeeded in making a name for herself, but it was for selfish reasons.

### **Jimmy as a Representation of Cooke: An Abstract Level of Arrangement**

Juxtaposing “Jimmy’s World” and Cooke's childhood reveals a number of similarities and differences that unconsciously could have been driving forces behind the construction and arrangement of the article. Cooke's childhood was the complete opposite of Jimmy's. Her father, Stratman Cooke, was an educated man. He settled in Toledo, Ohio, earned an engineering degree and worked as an air-conditioning repairman for Toledo Edison. The company's president was impressed with Stratman and urged him

to continue his education. Eventually he studied law and opened a private practice while continuing to work at Toledo Edison (Sager, 1996).

Perhaps Stratman Cooke's most damaging legacy to his oldest daughter was his strictness. Janet and her sister, Nancy, had to have a valid reason for leaving the house. Going out with friends or shopping were unacceptable but going to a museum or the library was permissible. Reading also was strongly urged. Soon Cooke began fantasizing about living in Paris and being away from Toledo forever. Education seemed one way to achieve her dream (Sager, 1996).

Within her protagonist, Jimmy, Cooke also placed a similar yearning, and this could have been unwitting on her part. Although his situation was diametrically opposed to Cooke's childhood, the manner in which he fantasized about his future was similar. For Jimmy, being a part of the dangerous drug trade was his life objective, and the means to achieve that objective (selling drugs) were present in his daily life. Learning math well offered him an avenue to achieve the most success in his future field.

The overbearing presence of heroin in "Jimmy's World" could also metaphorically stand for Stratman Cooke. No matter what young Janet said or did as a child, the ultimate determining force was her father. In much the same way, heroin ruled Jimmy life, as well as his mother's life and the lives of everyone who entered Jimmy's home. Heroin was an invisible force with a distinct style and delivery – an absurd father figure of sorts – that touched each character in Cooke's story. Similarly, although being a *visible* father to his family, Stratman Cooke also exerted an enormous amount of *invisible* power that touched all the members of the Cooke family and stayed with them, even after they had left Toledo.

Cooke had written numerous *Post* stories about the inner-D.C. drug trade prior to "Jimmy's World." The foundational elements of her fabrication were in place: Since she knew of an actual eight-year-old heroin addict and had seen other drug addicts and dealers in action, she knew the natural sympathy that combining these elements would elicit. When she added – through invention – the compelling connecting, stylized pieces such as emotional quotes and a believable setting, her story took on a life of its own. It became larger than its creator when the compassion of the audience blended with the story, another example of Cooke's skillful use of pathos.

Cooke indirectly applied the canons (especially invention, arrangement, style, and delivery) in order to be hired at the *Post*. The newspaper was actively recruiting African Americans when she initially wrote to Bradlee on July 12, 1979 (Sager, 1996). He was highly impressed with her credentials — though many were later found to be lies — and the *Post* hired her immediately.

Within the tight culture of a newspaper, trust tends to be a given, and Cooke apparently recognized her chances of pulling off her hoax (Isaacs, 1986). After Cooke resigned, Bradlee ordered an intensive examination of the stories she had written between the time she was hired and "Jimmy's World" published. No other fabrications were discovered (Patterson & Urbanski, 2004). Perhaps, though, Cooke had tested the waters even prior to joining the *Post*. Several of her early stories at the Toledo Blade relied on composite characters and unnamed sources (Sager, 1996).

Just as Jimmy used heroin as a means to satisfy his addiction, Cooke used the story as a vehicle to secure her future within the *Post's* grand narrative of first-rate investigative reporting and storytelling. Success, in many ways, was a "drug" for Cooke.

She sampled it with some of her early stories on the drug trade in D.C. – these stories were a way of getting noticed – and enjoyed the entrancing full effects of success after “Jimmy’s World” was published.

The realization that her story was nominated for a Pulitzer also must have been a sustained success high, even though it was short-lived. Eventually Cooke faced much the same fate as most drug addicts: The corresponding low that follows the high. Once her hoax was exposed, Cooke essentially experienced — from a professional standpoint — a form of death. Many of the drug dealers about whom she wrote died in a physical sense. Cooke’s death was a professional expiration. She was displayed as a textbook example of a liar and forever banished, even though numerous other writers since, have committed similar infractions. Cooke’s fabrication undoubtedly received (and continues to receive) more notoriety because of her involvement with a newspaper as prestigious as the *Post*, which historically was synonymous with ethically based journalism. Add to this the mystique associated with a Pulitzer Prize, and it was no wonder that Cooke was ostracized in such a swift manner.

### **Jimmy’s Addiction as a Rhetorical Device**

Coincidentally, Cooke used the issue of drug use in an enthymematic manner. For the bulk of the article, she wrote about people entering Jimmy’s house who appeared high. She also reflected Jimmy’s own views on heroin and various other drugs, but it was not until the final three paragraphs that Ron actually injected Jimmy. Until this final scene, Cooke allowed her audience to imagine Jimmy using heroin.

But Cooke included this final, extremely vivid scene directly following information she had gleaned from actual interviews she conducted with a social worker and a doctor from the National Institute on Drug Abuse. “He might already be close to getting a lethal dose,” said Dr. Czechowicz of the drug abuse institute (Cooke, 1980, p. A-9). Presumably she was referring to the actual addict child that Cooke had first learned about. Since Cooke had never interviewed the child or received any facts surrounding his case, one can assume that Cooke had lied to the doctor, telling her that she had witnessed the child being injected.

The manner in which Cooke ends her story was both poignant and tragic. She skillfully moved the reader from the present and pointed them (through arrangement and style) to an uncertain future for Jimmy. She created a dramatic scene of Ron entering the living room:

He grabs Jimmy’s left arm just above the elbow, his massive hand tightly encircling the child’s small limb. The needle slides into the boy’s soft skin like a straw pushed into the center of a freshly baked cake. Liquid ebbs out of the syringe, replaced by bright red blood. The blood is then reinjected into the child. Jimmy has closed his eyes during the whole procedure, but now he opens them, looking quickly around the room. He climbs into the rocking chair and sits, his head dipping and snapping upright again, in what addicts call “the nod.” “Pretty soon, man,” Ron says, “you got to learn how to do this for yourself” (p. A-9).

Cooke’s protagonist, in one final, powerful scene, clearly entered the world of a drug addict. Throughout the story, he had only talked about drug use and how it was intertwined with his past, his present, and his future. The most compelling vision — the

one that undoubtedly remained with readers the most — Cooke saved for last, a use of style and arrangement that produced the greatest rhetorical effects.

Freelance artist Michael Gnatek Jr. drew the illustration the *Post* used for the story. It depicted Jimmy with long, skinny arms, wearing an Izod shirt and jeans. Gripping his small arm was the huge right hand of Ron. His left hand held a syringe, about to inject heroin into Jimmy's arm. This visual representation of Cooke's narrative completed the connection with the audience.

The references to cake, red blood, child, and rocking chair all created vivid mental images of children and innocence. Ron's final comment about Jimmy learning how to inject himself snaps the reader into the realization that innocence was something Jimmy probably never knew. The world of hard drugs was his only mirage-riddled reality.

### **Conclusion**

The objective of this neo-Aristotelian critique has been to bring additional understanding to a long-debated journalism fabrication. For decades, Cooke's scandal has been viewed via a systematic approach: A reporter made up a story, passed it off as fact, entranced her readers, won the Pulitzer Prize, and then saw it all crumble. There are most definitely moral and ethical dimensions to Cooke's fabrication. These have been debated and will be debated for decades, as well they should. At the risk of sounding trite, if mass media professionals do not learn from the past, they are doomed to repeat it.

What this essay has attempted to do is to start a different conversation. Critiquing "Jimmy's World" in a rhetorical fashion uncovers new abstract connections between Cooke and her story that are perplexing because they suggest things that Cooke herself may not even have realized as she concocted the story. This level of truth is, at best, abstract, and, no doubt, somewhat controversial since it delves into a psychological level (on Cooke's part). But assembling this abstract level of truth is useful because judging from the numerous concoctions that have resulted since "Jimmy's World," media professionals can never be reminded enough to simply tell the truth. This basic concept of journalistic truth is only one value of this research. This rhetorical criticism of "Jimmy's World" benefits academics more than professionals in that it begins a conversation on what constitutes truth on both tangible and intangible levels. This vital academic debate should continue – indefinitely. Hopefully, this rhetorical criticism will spur others that will forge even deeper into the relationship of how the unseen informs and shapes the seen.

This research does not want to inadvertently short shrift the professional realm either. Though 30-plus years old, Cooke's fabrication still has a great deal of relevance among 21<sup>st</sup> century professionals since her story (though contrived) received journalism's highest honor, the Pulitzer Prize. By professionals challenging themselves to recognize the abstract link between the seen and unseen – especially on the levels of editing and story construction, where obvious breakdowns occurred at the *Post* – they can become ever more cognizant of what constitutes effective, ethical storytelling.

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