



RESEARCH ARTICLE



SCALING POWER AND TRAGEDY: A GRADUATION ANALYSIS OF GRAHAM MCNEILL'S *A THOUSAND SONS* THROUGH APPRAISAL THEORY

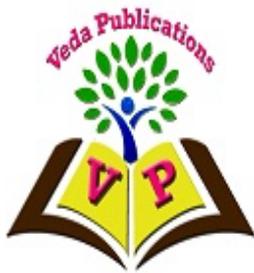
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ABSTRACT



This paper analyzes Graham McNeill's *A Thousand Sons* (2010) through the lens of Appraisal Theory, focusing on the Graduation subsystem. Graduation examines how language amplifies or softens meaning, shaping readers' perception of power, inevitability, and tragedy. Using examples from the novel, this study demonstrates how McNeill employs force (intensity and quantification) and focus (sharpening and softening) to dramatize the *Thousand Sons*' fall from enlightened scholars to damned heretics. The analysis reveals that Graduation resources are central to building the epic scale of the narrative and the moral ambiguity of the protagonists, deepening the reader's emotional engagement.

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INTRODUCTION

Graham McNeill's *A Thousand Sons* tells the tragic story of the Thousand Sons Legion: warrior-scholars whose quest for knowledge ultimately leads them to ruin. Set in the rich universe of Warhammer 40,000, the novel explores themes of power, hubris, and destiny.

To analyze how McNeill crafts the narrative's emotional and thematic depth, this paper applies Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005), focusing on the Graduation subsystem. Graduation concerns how authors scale meanings— using force to amplify or soften intensity and focus to sharpen or blur category boundaries. This linguistic scaling shapes how readers perceive characters, events, and moral dilemmas. The paper aims to show that McNeill's strategic use of Graduation resources contributes to the sense of grandeur, inevitability, and tragic complexity that defines *A Thousand Sons*.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Appraisal Theory, part of the systemic functional linguistics framework, describes how language expresses attitudes, negotiates interpersonal meanings, and scales those meanings (Martin & White, 2005).

Graduation, as a subsystem, comprises:

- Force: Amplifies or diminishes meaning by adjusting intensity (e.g., "very," "extremely") or quantification (e.g., "hundreds," "countless").
- Focus: Sharpening or softening categorical boundaries (e.g., "true hero" vs. "sort of hero").

While previous scholarship has applied Appraisal Theory to political discourse (Coffin, 2006), news media (White, 2012), and literary texts (Bednarek, 2008), there is limited research on speculative fiction, particularly the Warhammer 40,000 series.

This paper contributes by showing how Graduation shapes epic narratives and tragic themes in speculative fiction.

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative textual analysis of Graham McNeill's *A Thousand Sons* (2010). Steps:

1. Selected significant excerpts (based on thematic weight and narrative prominence).
2. Identified Graduation resources: force (intensity and quantification) and focus (sharpening/softening).
3. Interpreted how these choices affect narrative tone, reader alignment, and thematic resonance

ANALYSIS

Force: Intensity

Force (intensity) increases or decreases emotional and narrative impact. Example 1:

"Magnus burned with a hunger for knowledge that could never be sated." (p. 43)

- "Burned" intensifies Magnus's desire, suggesting consuming obsession.
- "Never be sated" conveys limitless, dangerous ambition.

This scaling makes Magnus's quest feel both heroic and tragic, foreshadowing catastrophe.

Example 2:

"A scream that shook the bones of the earth." (p. 399)



- “Shook the bones of the earth” amplifies the destructive force, signaling cosmic-scale tragedy.
- It positions the fall of the Thousand Sons as more than personal failure: It’s a universe-shaking event.

Example 3:

“His voice boomed like thunder rolling across a dying world.” (p. 221)

- “Boomed” and “thunder” add sonic intensity; “dying world” adds grim scale.
- The force amplifies not only volume but the... Force: Quantification

Quantification scales meaning by describing magnitude or number.

Example 4:

“Countless thousands gathered in the great square.” (p. 351)

- “Countless thousands” creates an image of overwhelming, unstoppable crowds.
- Suggests the spread of cultic belief beyond control. Example 5:

“A tide of sorcery that dwarfed anything seen before.” (p. 418)

- “Tide” is a metaphor of magnitude; “dwarfed anything” explicitly scales the event as unprecedented.

Such quantifiers frame the Thousand Sons’ power as both magnificent and catastrophic.

Focus: Sharpening

Sharpening intensifies prototypicality or moral clarity.

Example 6:

“Magnus alone, of all his brothers, truly understood the warp.” (p. 98)

- “Alone” and “truly” sharpen Magnus’s role as uniquely knowledgeable.
- The sharpening isolates Magnus, making his fall feel more tragic.

Example 7:

“They were scholars first, warriors second.” (p. 55)

- Positions the legion firmly in a sharpened identity: intellectual, unlike other legions.
- Emphasizes their tragic mismatch with a violent universe.

Focus: Softening

Softening blurs boundaries, introducing ambiguity.

Example 8:

“Almost gods, yet still tragically human.” (p. 275)

- “Almost” softens the claim to divinity; “tragically” blurs heroism and flaw.
- Highlights moral ambiguity: powerful yet vulnerable.

Example 9:

“Perhaps it was fate, or perhaps it was their own hubris.” (p. 432)

- “Perhaps” softens causal claims, inviting readers to question inevitability.
- This openness reinforces tragedy by refusing a single, certain explanation.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of *A Thousand Sons* through the Graduation subsystem of Appraisal Theory reveals how Graham McNeill linguistically constructs an epic narrative that is both grand in scale and deeply human in its tragedy. By systematically using Graduation resources—force and focus—McNeill



shapes the reader's emotional alignment with the Thousand Sons Legion and, in particular, with Magnus, their primarch.

Firstly, the repeated use of force through intensifiers and extreme quantification magnifies the scope of events and emotions. Words such as "burned," "never be sated," and "shook the bones of the earth" do not simply describe desire or destruction; they elevate these experiences to an almost mythic level. Similarly, phrases like "countless thousands" and "a tide of sorcery that dwarfed anything" ensure the reader perceives the Thousand Sons' power and downfall as beyond ordinary comprehension. This linguistic scaling is essential in speculative fiction, where conveying the cosmic scale of events is central to the genre's appeal.

Secondly, the strategic use of focus sharpens or softens characterizations to build moral complexity. By sharpening Magnus's status as the only one who "truly understood the warp," McNeill isolates him, positioning Magnus as a tragic hero whose unique insight becomes both gift and curse. Meanwhile, softening phrases such as "almost gods" and "perhaps it was fate" prevent the narrative from offering simple moral judgments. Instead, the reader is encouraged to grapple with ambiguity: were the Thousand Sons doomed by forces beyond their control, or by their own fatal flaws?

Thirdly, the interplay of force and focus supports the novel's central themes: the double-edged nature of knowledge and the tragic inevitability of hubris. The Thousand Sons' intellectual pride and pursuit of forbidden truth are linguistically intensified, while their humanity and vulnerability are never entirely obscured. This balance makes their fall both

understandable and profoundly tragic, echoing classical tragic structures found in literature.

Finally, these Graduation strategies contribute to building what Bednarek (2008) describes as "emotional prosody," an overarching pattern of scaled meanings that guide the reader's affective response across the entire narrative. In this case, the emotional arc is one of awe, pity, and ultimately, sorrow—key components of tragic storytelling.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that Graham McNeill's *A Thousand Sons* achieves much of its emotional power and thematic richness through carefully crafted Graduation resources as defined in Appraisal Theory. The novel uses force to intensify and enlarge events, emotions, and cosmic consequences, ensuring readers feel the grandeur and horror of the Thousand Sons' fate. Through focus, McNeill sharpens Magnus's isolation and the legion's scholarly identity while softening absolute moral judgments, allowing the narrative to sustain ambiguity and complexity.

The findings underscore how language choices—beyond plot and character—create narrative scale and guide reader interpretation. This suggests that Appraisal Theory, and Graduation in particular, offers valuable tools for analyzing speculative fiction, a genre that often relies on the interplay of cosmic scale and human frailty.

By making readers both admire and mourn the Thousand Sons, McNeill's language ensures the legion's story resonates as more than a tale of betrayal or corruption—it becomes an exploration of ambition, responsibility, and tragic destiny.



Ultimately, this analysis shows that even in a fictional universe as vast as Warhammer 40,000, it is the subtle scaling of language that makes grand narratives deeply human and emotionally compelling.

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