

A narrative analysis of the film the gr essay sample



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Instead of grand oratory meant to create access for a wide audience, competitive policy debaters speak at extremely fast paces that requires specific training to understand. In addition to the fast delivery, policy debaters also speak in abbreviations and use terms that are foreign to people who are not involved in the activity (Gerber 81-83). These concerns have been present in the competitive policy debate arena for a long time, but an increase in the amount of Urban Debate Leagues in the past decade has coincided with more frequent criticism about and activism against the subject.

Many individuals in the community have argued that the speed of traditional debate speech delivery and the use of debate jargon has excluded certain voices from participating in competitive policy debate. This argument has led to many debates not to focus not on the resolution, but instead on the exclusion of marginalia voices themselves. The goal of these debates has been to transform debaters from participants to empowered advocates. These arguments, which are attributed to what many call the “ DULL Movement” have been outstandingly successful.

In 2013, a policy debate team from Emperor University that consisted of two former JODI debaters became the first debate team ever to win both the CEDE National Tournament and the National Debate Tournament, all while advocating from their social locations and using narratives. (Emperor. Du) While the DULL Movement was gaining significant momentum in 2007, Dened Washington directed and acted in the award winning film The Great Debaters. The movie detailed the triumphs of the Wiley College Debate

team during the 1 sass. Wiley College was an all-black college, and hence typically only debated against teams from black colleges.

However, the film depicts one of Wiley College's most successful seasons, during which the team challenged and defeated a few white schools, most notably Harvard College. Some scholars have observed that the movie's release in 2007 was no coincidence, and that it played a part in the I-JDK Movement, initiating the revival of Oklahoma City University's debate program (Preston Jar.) This essay argues that *The Great Debaters* is a text that is not simply a story about Wiley College's debate triumphs during the asses, but that the film shares a temporal bond to the time in which it was released in.

Using a perspective developed from Paul Recover's *Time and Narrative* combined with more general elements of narrative criticism, I interrogate *The Great Debaters* as a text that is presented in 2007 along-side the DULL Movement. Applying Recover's assumptions about causality within narratives and the refrigeration of reality that occurs because of them, I will reveal the subtle and straight forward elements of the story told by *The Great Debaters* and how they influenced and contributed to the LID Movement's culture that promotes inclusion, empowerment and activism.

Method The practice of storytelling is part of human nature. Humans use storytelling to describe how they feel or relate to one another, and to make sense of the world around them. Stories about the past are often used to explain occurrences in the present, as narratives frequently provide timeless messages that attempt to explain why certain events happen. This project

first describes *The Great Debaters* with narrative criticism methodologies that dissect plot sequencing, theme and character development. Before discussing the more intricate details of this project's method of narrative analysis, it is important to first discuss what narrative is. Sonata Foss observes that narratives can be separated from other forms of rhetoric based on four unique characteristics. First, narratives are always comprised of two or more events. Second, narratives organize events by time order (but not necessarily chronological). Third, events within a narrative must share a causal relationship. Finally, a narrative is "about a unified subject" (Foss 308).

Certainly narrative rhetoric is distinguishable by these four characteristics, but the means by which stories convey their message or assertion help make the presence of a narrative apparent. For example most narratives repeat a theme in order to highlight a lesson to be learned from the story. Characters play important roles in stories, often portraying an ideal such as "good" or "evil" in order to illustrate what the narrative defines as right or wrong actions. Narrators adopt an importance in developing the meaning of stories, as the narrative voice can be used as evidence of the specific culture to which a story belongs.

As conventional criticism of rhetoric looks to use more typical means of analysis (such as using the five canons of rhetoric), narrative critics use signposts such as these to make their messages apparent. Many rhetorical critics acknowledge the narrative perspective as a useful tool in dissecting appropriate pieces, but some consider the narrative perspective as a communication paradigm. The original critic who coined the narrative <https://assignbuster.com/a-narrative-analysis-of-the-film-the-gr-essay-sample/>

paradigm as Walter Fisher, who believed that all forms of human communication can be analyzed as narratives because he believed that humans are by nature storytellers.

On human nature, Fisher notes that many root metaphors have been used to describe humans and their natural tendencies (e. G. Homo economics and homo politics) and suggests that homo anoraks should be added to that list as an extension on Kenneth Burke's definition of humans as symbol-using animals (Fisher 295) 5 Keeping in mind that humans are storytelling animals, the narrative paradigm also assumes that human decision making is derived from "good reasons" and that those reasons are generated from historical and cultural stories.

Humans are as rational as their awareness of narrative probability (whether a story is coherent) and narrative fidelity (whether a story is consistent with one's own experience). The overarching assumption is that the world is a collection of stories that demonstrate good reasons, and those good reasons become human rationality and are manifested in collective human decision making. If this is true, then critics should not look to any other form of criticism before considering the narrative perspective as the basis of all rhetoric and rational [297].

Fisher continually highlights that the narrative paradigm is not incompatible with other forms of criticism in this sense, just that public and social knowledge should be viewed from the narrative paradigm in order "to give public knowledge a form of being" [305]. Critics of Fisher have pointed to the personalization of rhetorical texts that occurs within the narrative paradigm.

Robert Rowland argued that that narrative criticism “ has little application to works that do not explicitly tell or clearly draw upon a story.

In fact, use of a narrative approach may obscure the critical significance of some works” [Rowland 39]. The impact of misusing narrative criticism by a critic would be that the critic “ might spend so much critical energy looking for the plot and characters in a work or applying tests of narrative fidelity or probability that he or she would miss a far simpler explanation of rhetorical effectiveness. ” [39] This is often why critics are cautious when analyzing rhetoric from the narrative perspective, as most scholars believe Fisher’s paradigm is far too general of a rhetorical tool in explaining meaning. Sailors and Crookneck 215] This analysis will not assume that the narrative perspective should be considered paradigm, but let Fisher’s work be a testament to how 6 significant and powerful narratives can be in the realm of rhetoric. This project references Fishers work to emphasize the influence exerted by The Great Debaters as a narrative on the GILD Movement and to justify that narratives have an influence on the culture surrounding them.

My reference to Rowland work functions simply to reveal that not all rhetoric should be viewed as narrative and that the decision to apply narrative criticism to The Great Debaters is intentional because the film fits the description of narrative given by Foss. There is little spite about the powerful influence that narratives exert on culture. How this influence overlays and is expressed in culture becomes a focal point of research, and one important critic to make advances on this subject was Paul Richer.

A French philosopher and anthropologist, Ricoeur made his name by contributing to the field of phenomenology, the study of how an individual's understanding of reality is formed by interactions with, and perceptions of, the world or external environment (University of Chicago). His life work took a turn in the 1950s when he began to combine his work in phenomenology with hermeneutic interpretation, or the art of interpreting texts. Ricoeur justified this turn in methodology by arguing that there is no projection of self or reality that is not mediated through some symbol or text (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

One of Ricoeur's most significant pieces that he wrote after his hermeneutic turn was *Time and Narrative*. Though *Time and Narrative* covers a broad range of concepts related to Ricoeur's anthropological roots, I focus on his discussion of mimesis, as it best relates to my criticism of *The Great Debaters*. Before his discussion of mimesis, Ricoeur challenges Aristotle's conception of plot in regard to its relationship to temporality. He asserts, "Aristotle's analysis of plot owes nothing to the theory of time, which is dealt with exclusively in his *Physics*."

What is more, in his *Poetics*, the 'logic' of employment discourages any consideration of time, even when it implies concepts such as beginning, middle, and end, or when it becomes involved in a discourse about the magnitude or length of the plot" (Ricoeur 51). Ricoeur takes issue with Aristotle's notion of employment arguing that he does not emphasize the causal link between events that occur as a plot develops. This causality is all important, as it is the cornerstone of Ricoeur's process of mimesis. In *Time and Narrative*, mimesis is divided into a three-step process.

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The first step is the preventative structure of experience, or proliferation. At this first level of mimesis, the focus is on the ability of individuals in a society to understand the symbol systems of their culture without effort.

Acknowledging the specific cultural symbols that are shared within a text and the surrounding culture develops a link between the culture and the text. William Dowling uses the example of recognizing the wealth of a neighbor who has a new Rolls-Royce in their driveway. In the context of our culture, this is a direct representation of wealth (Dowling 3).

These common understandings of symbols make up the proliferation stage of mimesis. The second level of mimesis is Recover's direct challenge to Aristotle's concept of employment. While Aristotle presents employment in its spatial form (beginning, middle, and end), Richer points out that a causal element exists that is all important to the development of a plot and the audience's relation to the text. This causal relationship between events in a narrative creates a "double temporality" for the audience of a text.

If audience members are viewing or reading a text, especially for the first time, then they are experiencing the events of the text as the characters are. In other words the audience is experiencing plot progression and events just as the characters experience them, so each occurrence is as much of a surprise to the audience as it is to the characters. The audience is also aware, however, that this text has already been written and understands that each event that occurred was inevitable.

While following the events in a story does nothing to imply that there is a conclusion to the text, the audience is aware of some tells, or ending, that is

to come from the story. These two realizations make up the paradox of double temporarily, and demonstrate a relationship between the past and present through the viewer or listener's following of the narrative (Dowling 8-9). Richer refers to the final stage of mimesis as "refrigeration" and consistently makes note of its complementary relationship with the first and second levels of mimesis.

At this level, the symbols and employment of the narrative begin to manifest in the consciousness of the culture surrounding the story. Richer argues that when a narrative has been patted or has become well known, a viewer or listener can grasp the piece as a whole while following plot development. In this naturalization of double temporarily, the "natural" flow of time can be inverted. He argues that, "In reading the ending in the beginning and the beginning in the ending, we also learn to read time itself backwards, as the recapitulation of the initial conditions of a course of action in its terminal consequences" (Richer 67-68).

Refrigeration implies an alteration of consciousness that occurs from a discovering of a new reality that emerges from following the events and existing in a narrative. In this sense it does not matter whether one already knows the ending of a story, but what does matter is the act of following causal events in a narrative and the temporal connection that stems from that reading. An example that William Dowling uses to clarify this realization is that of an astronomer who observes the sky through the Ptolemaic perspective, and then observing the sky years later having learned of the Copernican model of space.

This individual has had an alteration in knowledge and consciousness that cannot be unseen, a similar alteration to the result of narrative refrigeration (Dowling 15-16). The analysis that follows is a direct application of Recover's conception of mimesis to describe and interpret *The Great Debaters* in terms of its preventative structure, plot development and refrigeration. Such an interpretation should produce a sophisticated understanding of the film and the LID Movement's similarities and how they influenced each other. I now describe *The Great Debaters*, its plot, character and theme development.

A description of the entire plot of *The Great Debaters* is necessary because it allows any readers to experience Recover's double temporality through employment, which is important in understanding how the film is related to the LID Movement. I follow with a description of the LID movement, its purpose, and the arguments that are associated with it. Finally, I use Recover's concept of mimesis to explain the influence that the film and the Movement exert on one another. *The Great Debaters* Released in 2007, Directed by Denzel Washington's *The Great Debaters* was presented to the world in order to tell the story of Wiley College's debate triumphs.

While certain facts were altered for the sake of creating the film, such as the final debate being between Wiley College and Harvard rather than USC, the story of the Wiley College debate team has been a model of and for the LID Movement. The movie begins with a scene following Henry Lowe that is simultaneously overlaid with a speech given by Dr. James Farmer. The speech is directed at incoming students and covers topics such as maturity and discipline, preaching that " you must do what you have to do so you can

do what you want to do" (4: 08) Henry is attending a party at a barn where he finds himself in a fight with another man at the party.

He threatens to kill the man when he pins him to the ground. At the last moment, Melvin Tolstoy, a professor and director of the Wiley College debate team, stops Henry from harming the man further. Sometime after the fight, classes begin for a new year at Wiley College. Henry Lowe attends a class taught by Tolstoy. After they recognize each other from the fight, Tolstoy recommends that Henry try out for the debate team. Tryouts are held, and four students stand out. Henry Lowe is able to recite poetry off of the top of his head, James Farmer Jar. Hoecakes his critical thinking skills by revealing the irony in the name " Bethlehem Steel Corporation", and Shanty Booked courageously debates against Tolstoy. These three students and a student named Hamilton Burgess are chosen by Tolstoy to represent the Wiley College debate team for the year. An excited Farmer Jar. Runs home to his father in order to tell him the good news, only to have his father brush off the debate team as a possible distraction. The next scene shows the Farmer family on a drive in the country, where Farmer Sir. Accidentally runs over a pig that belongs to white farmers. The owners of the pig, confront Farmer Sir. ND demand twenty-five dollars from him, which is more than the pus worth. The white farmers are unintelligent, evidenced by their inability to understand the word " endorse" when Dry. Farmer speaks to them. As his son watches, Farmer Sir. Gives into the demands of the two white men by sacrificing an entire pay check. After the four debaters are shown practicing their speaking in various environments, including reciting lines out on a lake, a scene depicting a school dance follows James Farmer Jar. As he fantasize

about dancing with Shanty, he finally gets his opportunity when she asks him to dance.

However, Henry quickly intervenes and asks Shanty to leave the dance with him. Feeling rejected, Farmer Jar. Leaves the dance and heads home. On his way back from the dance, he sees Professor Tolstoy sneaking into the woods in farmer-like clothing. He follows Tolstoy out to a barn, where he witnesses a secret meeting between poor whites and blacks discussing the formation of a share cropper's union. Even though the meeting is perfectly legal, it is raided by local authorities. Farmer Jar. Is almost trapped in the barn during the raid, but Tolstoy rescues him and leads him back to safety.

He asks James to never speak of what he saw, which causes 11 trouble between James and his father when he returns home that night. Dry. Farmer screams at James to explain where he was, but James refuses to tell Talon's secret. The fight escalates when James questions his father's cowardice urine the pig incident, leading Dry. Farmer to slap him. The debate season begins with Wiley College challenging another African- American school, Paul Quinn College. The resolution is that welfare should be ended when the Depression is over, and Wiley College argues the negative.

Henry Lowe and Hamilton Burgess debate powerfully, but it is not until Henry argues by describing " the look in a mother's face when she cannot feed her children" that Wiley College appears to be victorious. After defeating Paul Quinn College, a montage ensues of the debate team going on an extensive winning streak. As tensions rise concerning Melvin Talon's radical politics, Hamilton Burgess quits the debate team so as to avoid being associated with

a possible Communist. This allows Shanty Booked to participate in her first competitive debate. The debate is against Oklahoma City University, a white college.

The resolution is that “ Negroes should be admitted to state universities”, and Wiley College argues the affirmative. Shanty uses historical references and a passionate speaking style in order to emphasize that, “... The time for justice, the time for freedom, and the time for equality is always, is always right now! ” (57: 15) Wiley College’s win over Oklahoma City University is regarded as an enormous triumph. At a celebration for the Wiley College debate team Melvin Tolstoy and Dry. Farmer have a discussion about Farmer Jar. that escalates to an argument about professor Talon’s politics.

Farmer Sir. Is concerned that Tolstoy may be involving James in his radical politics, which would put his son at great risk. 12 At a debate team meeting, tensions are high as James Farmer Jar. Is jealous of the romance between Shanty and Henry. He is also angry that he is the only debater that has not debated at this point in the season. An argument erupts twine James and Shanty, but is quickly ended as Professor Tolstoy is arrested in his classroom. The debaters follow Tolstoy to the police station where they attempt to speak to him but are denied by the authorities. Eventually, Dry.

Farmer arrives at the police station along with an angry mob. The sheriff and Dry. Farmer discuss the illegal raid that took place at the sharecropper’s meeting. Dry. Farmer asserts that witnesses said that the sheriff was at the raid and that he was guilty, not Tolstoy. Suggesting that the mob could become unruly, Dry. Farmer states that “ An unjust law is no law at all” (1 9)

and that if Tolstoy is leased, the mob will disperse. The sheriff gives in, releases Tolstoy, and the mob disperses. Dry. Farmer and his son make eye contact before leaving the scene, acknowledging the courage that Farmer Sir. Displayed.

At the next debate meeting, Professor Tolstoy announces that he has been blacklisted because of his politics and that schools are beginning to cancel their debates with Wiley College. However, Tolstoy uses an example from Greek mythology to demonstrate that defeat can only make the team stronger. He expresses interest in getting the team to debate Howard University in order to main the attention of Harvard University, the best team in the nation. During the team's drive to the Howard University debate, they come across a lynching. A group of white males are burning a black man they have tied up.

Traumatized, Tolstoy tries to reverse his car without being noticed. However, the lynch mob realizes that the car is occupied by African-Americans and begins to attack the car. The team narrowly escapes in the car and eventually arrive at a house for the night. Henry leaves the house to get drunk and returns with another woman, who he kisses in front of Shanty. Hurt, she closes the blinds on Henry while 3 James brings him to his bed. A drunk Henry becomes aggressive with James during an argument and holds him down on the bed. Henry screams about the lynching, explaining to James that he will never forget it.

James questions why they would do such a thing, and Henry exclaims that the man did not have to have done anything wrong because " In Texas, they

lynch Negroes! ” (1 : 52) James then questions the activity of debate, suggesting that ‘ W? re just a bunch of Negroes debating each other on subjects we all agree on” (1 22: 02), but Henry dismisses that notion and tells James he cannot think that way. The next ironing, they learn that Shanty has decided to go home early, which gives James the opportunity to debate. Wiley goes on to lose their first debate of the season against Howard University.

Upon returning from the trip, Professor Tolstoy is greeted by his wife. She hands him a letter that is an invitation to Wiley College to debate Harvard in Cambridge. The team meets to discuss the resolution and puts together their arguments, and then meet at the train station to depart for Boston. Here, Tolstoy reveals to the debaters that he cannot travel with the team due to the conditions of his release from jail. The trio of debaters then leave for Boston. The debaters are brought to their living quarters upon arrival in Boston. They are handed a letter that alerts them that their normal canned speeches, written by Tolstoy, are not allowed.

The resolution is changed to “ Civil disobedience is a moral weapon in the fight for justice” (1: 36: 58) and the Wiley College debate team is burdened with writing their own arguments for the first time all season. They spend hours researching and writing, and eventually arrive at a dispute about how to start the debate. This dispute turns into a vicious argument, leading to Henry angrily paving his partners to go drink away his frustration. Henry visits a bar where he sees an attractive girl smiling at him but instead of talking to her, he decides to go back to his teammates and finish writing their arguments.

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Henry decides that he wants James to debate in his place, giving him another chance after failing against Howard University. The next and last scene depicts the final debate against Harvard. James begins the debate by defining what the word "moral" means. He contrasts an army general upholding the law by slaughtering people in a crowd with an example of Ghanaian performing an act of non-violent civil disobedience that he deemed, "a moral victory" The Harvard debaters countered by stating that using violence to uphold the law can be moral if it avoids a great act of violence.

Harvard makes the argument that morals are determined by the majority, and Shanty counters by asserting that what is moral is determined by individual conscious. James gets the last speech in the debate, which he begins by detailing the team's experience with the lynching. He argues that the law does not protect victims of lynch mobs, and repeats the words of St. Augustine that he learned from his father, "An unjust law is no law at all".

He ends the speech by stating that between the options of violent rebellion and civil disobedience, the latter would be the best option to maintain peace and morality. Wiley College is declared the victor at the end of the debate.

The LID Movement Before beginning the description of the Urban Debate League Movement, I would like to establish that many of the observations and descriptions of the JODI Movement are from my personal experience in the intercollegiate policy debate community.

I competed in intercollegiate policy debate for California Polytechnic State University in 2012 and 2013, which gave me the opportunity to travel and

motet nationally. Through traveling to national debate tournaments, I was able to debate against and view some of the top debaters associated with the DULL Movement. At the CEDE National Debate Tournament, I witnessed Emperor University 15 win two of their rounds, one of which was the championship round against University of West Georgia.

For this description, I will refer to sources that accurately describe the history and intentions of the LID. However, will draw from my own experience as an audience member and competitor to aid my description of some the JODI Movement arguments and performances. Issues tit lynch mobs and explicit segregation are not nearly as prevalent as they were in the uses. However, the policy debate community has recognized an issue with exclusion that is related to the activity.

The majority of participants in policy debate are white males, and most observers attribute this to the norms of policy debate. It is believed that the activists norms such as quick delivery of speech and focus on arguments from authority research have marginalia groups of students who do not have access to the materials that students who belong to economically healthy programs have (Gerber 84-85). If this is true, then it is keel that the education generated within a given policy debate round lacks the perspective of those marginalia voices.