

Rhetorical comparison of wollstonecraft and douglass



Aristotle's triangle of rhetoric: ethos, pathos, and logos, is often regarded as the basis for a rhetorical argument. The argument must employ each edge of the triangle in order to be persuasive. However, sometimes it can be beneficial to purposely omit or emphasize one edge of the triangle in order to appeal to an audience. Frederick Douglass and Mary Wollstonecraft were both heroes of moral and social reform, and fought for the rights of slaves and women, respectively. Douglass' autobiography and Wollstonecraft's philosophy both convey their radical ideas through strong rhetorical devices, which persuade the reader of their radical views. Although both Douglass and Wollstonecraft employ parts of the Aristotelian rhetorical triangle in order to successfully convey their controversial messages, both works have distinctly opposite tones due to the time period in which they were written and which points of the triangle were emphasized. Wollstonecraft wrote her piece during the Enlightenment, when the importance of logic was emphasized in all forms of intellectual expression. Because women of Wollstonecraft's time were thought of as irrational, Wollstonecraft purposely leaves out the pathos, or the emotional appeal of her argument, in order to prove to her audience that women can detach from emotion and be rational thinkers. She focuses on logos, and maintains a strict argument employing cause and effect examples, giving her piece an assertive, matter-of-fact, and sometimes ironic tone. In contrast, Douglass writes his autobiography during the Romantic Period, when emotions were looked at with new value. He takes on a strong expression of pathos, and appeals to his readers' emotions through vivid imagery and heartfelt, painful personal anecdotes. This gives his autobiography an impassioned and emotive tone. The intentional use of these tones makes these authors' works very successfully persuasive and

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appealing to the audience, allowing their message to be received with an open mind.

Wollstonecraft emphasizes logos and ethos in her argument for women's rights, which enables her to appeal to her Enlightenment audience and prove her credibility as a woman. By purposely omitting the use of pathos, Wollstonecraft appeals to her Enlightenment audience who valued the use of logic and reason and did not find value in emotion, and who also believed that women were illogical because they were overcome with emotion. Her use of logos to create a cause and effect argument gives her piece an assertive and matter-of-fact tone. Wollstonecraft opens her introduction of her most famous work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, by stating her argument that because women do not receive adequate education, they are unable to rise to their full potential as rational thinkers. But before she does this, she tells her audience that she has "turned over various books" (697), alluding to the fact that she is well-studied and credible, demonstrating ethos. By doing this, Wollstonecraft ensures her audience that she has authority in stating her argument. She writes, "The neglected education of my fellow creatures is the grand source of the misery I deplore," stating that because women are not given education, they act irrational and are valued only to please men. By stating that lack of education is the cause of women's behavior, Wollstonecraft presents a clear cause and effect argument using logos, which supplies her audience with a solution to the problem at hand. Throughout *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Wollstonecraft puts aside emotional attachment to this issue and instead emphasizes logic and reasoning to prove her argument. In addition, she offers her inquisitive and

speculative Enlightenment audience concessions, by anticipating their objections to her argument. She writes, “ In the government of the physical world, it is observable that the female in point of strength is, in general, inferior to the male. This is the law of nature” (698). By acknowledging the role of nature in her argument, Wollstonecraft appeals to the logical, Enlightenment thinkers of her audience, who were most likely male. By offering the opponents of her argument a concession, Wollstonecraft is able to create an even more persuasive argument. In addition, the tone created from such a logical argument is very assertive and matter-of-fact which, coming from a woman, would captivate an audience of Enlightenment men. By excluding any emotion from her argument, Wollstonecraft demonstrates that women can be rational thinkers.

Douglass’ use of ethos, pathos, and logos, allows him to successfully argue that slavery is dehumanizing. His strong use of pathos appeals to the emotional side of his audience, revealing the hardships of slavery through moving personal anecdotes and gory, vivid imagery. His credibility, ethos, is clear from his life experience as a slave. Douglass’ use of logos, where he creates an argument with multiple supporting examples, his own personal anecdotes and stories, makes it clear that slavery is a dehumanizing force to both slaves and slaveholders. This form of argument gives his autobiography an emotive, impassioned tone, which appeals to his audience of the Romantic Period. Douglass essentially “ re-humanizes” slaves by proving that they have deep feelings and they are abused in slavery. He vividly describes what it was like to be sold and for families to be divided to different slaveholders. He writes, “ Our fate for life was now to be decided...A

single word from the white man was enough-against all our wishes, prayers, and entreaties-to surrender forever the dearest friends, dearest kindred, and strongest ties known to human beings" (266). Douglass paints a picture of the terrible emotional abuse that slaves underwent, and therefore appeals to his Romantic audience by emphasizing emotion. While working for Mr. Covey, the plantation Douglass lived on was very near the Chesapeake Bay, where he often watched the sails on the water and yearned for freedom. Overcome with emotion, Douglass describes his thoughts while watching the boats, employing a powerful metaphor comparing sailing to freedom: " You are loosed from your moorings, and are free: I am fast in my chains, and am a slave!...left in the hottest hell of unending slavery...there is a better day coming" (279-280). In this passage, Douglass expresses a deep yearning to be free, creating a highly emotionally charged tone that reflects this hope. By employing emotion, Douglass is able to appeal to his Romantic audience. Douglass' ethos, or credibility, is clear throughout his autobiography. His experience as a slave makes him the best source to make a statement about slavery, having experienced it firsthand. By employing all three corners of the Aristotelian triangle, but with an emphasis on pathos, Douglass is able to present his powerful argument against slavery by appealing to his Romantic audience's emotions.

Although both Douglass and Wollstonecraft employ ethos in their arguments, Wollstonecraft's lack of pathos and Douglass' emphasis on pathos give the pieces distinctly different tones. Wollstonecraft's tone is assertive and logical, with little emotion, while Douglass' tone is both poignant and shocking. The use of pathos, or lack thereof, allows both authors to present

extremely persuasive arguments concerning human rights for their own kind. Wollstonecraft lived during the Enlightenment, when people valued logic and reason. By utilizing a cause and effect argument without pathos, she crafts writing that is extremely persuasive to her audience. By stating that women are only incapable because they are not educated, Wollstonecraft arrives at a solution to the problem derived from evidence. Like Wollstonecraft, Douglass had a strong grasp of who his audience was: Romantic thinkers, who valued emphasis on emotion. By using powerful personal anecdotes and dramatic, emotive tone, Douglass creates an equally efficient argument, but with a very strong emphasis on pathos.

Both authors manipulate the Aristotelian triangle to suit the needs of their audience. Douglass does this by emphasizing pathos (emotion) and appealing to his Romantic audience, while Wollstonecraft omits emotion and instead emphasizes logos with a strong cause and effect argument. This gives each piece a distinct tone. When reading Douglass, it is easy to be pulled in by his vivid, gory imagery and powerful personal anecdotes. In contrast, Wollstonecraft's piece can seem less exciting to us, even though she was one of the most revolutionary people of her time with her ideas on women's rights. To many, Wollstonecraft's argument raised just as much controversy as the idea that Douglass emphasizes: the immorality of slavery. Both Douglass and Wollstonecraft demonstrate the power of written prose and rhetoric to advocate for human rights, whether it be during the Enlightenment, Romantic Period, or today.