

The difference between classical and modern rhetoric essay sample



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There is a famous quote attributed to Abraham Lincoln which claims

“ You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you can not fool all of the people all of the time .” (Lincoln).

It could be considered however, that the aim of rhetoric, the not always so gentle art of persuasion, is to do exactly that. The dictionary definition of rhetoric ‘ 1. The study of the technique of using language effectively. 2. The art of using speech to persuade, influence, or please; oratory (Collins) may be static, but the way in rhetoric, itself is utilized within society has evolved considerably since it’s original conception.

While the word rhetoric itself is said to have be coined by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato (Wikipedia) and originates from the ancient Greek word *rhêtôr*, meaning orator, or one who is especially ‘ practiced and skilled in giving formal, ceremonial, or persuasive public addresses’ (Encarta) today it is also used on occasion as a semi-derogatory term for language that is considered to be overly pretentious, for flowery speeches or overly descriptive passages of written text that have no true value to the piece but are simply included because the author has considered that they ‘ looked good on paper’.

Interestingly, this particular aspect of rhetoric bears close correlation to Plato’s own definition of sophistry, which originally, far from holding today’s rather more negative meaning described a group of traveling self styled ‘ teachers’ who claimed to teach virtue to their students. Plato however disputed this claim, and is said to have considered that in reality the

Sophists were merely 'flattering' their charges by teaching them not virtue, but exactly what they wanted to hear. (Wikipedia)

The more 'persuasive' aspect of rhetoric however, still widely exploited in everyday life, although the method of delivery is much changed from Plato's time.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle (whose teacher and mentor Plato also first famously outlined the differences between what he deemed to be 'true' and 'false' rhetoric) famously authored a lengthy treatise on the subject named 'The Art of Rhetoric', in which he first states that rhetoric is complementary to dialectic in that both are '*concerned with both sides of an opposition*' also that they both '*rely on the same theory of deduction and induction.*' (Rapp)

In this treatise Aristotle sets forth to describe rhetoric in terms of a civil art, or technique and describes what he sees as the different types of 'civic rhetoric' including items readily recognizable today such as forensic rhetoric (concerned with determining the truth or falsity of past events), deliberative rhetoric (concerned with determining whether or not particular future actions *should* or should not be taken), and epideictic rhetoric (concerned with praise and blame) (Wikipedia)

Perhaps more notably, Aristotle defined what he termed as the three types of rhetorical 'proof'. The first of these 'proofs' being *Ethos*, which deals primarily with how the (seeming) character and credibility of a speaker can exert influence on how an audience assigns him (or her) credibility, and could for example include the automatic respect given to one who either has empirical knowledge of the subject, or is otherwise in a position whereby he

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is able to speak knowledgably (and truthfully) on the subject in hand, perhaps from being a professor of the subject, or otherwise being connected to (and having absorbed the relevant information from) someone who is experienced in the matter in question.

Pathos, the second 'proof' could perhaps be considered less concerned with the apparent veracity of the given subject and more with the strategic use of language designed to create an emotional response in the listener and so alter their judgment by encouraging them to think with the heart rather than the head. The third such Aristotelian 'proof' is *Logos* (from whence we derive the more modern term *logic*) which deals with the use of reasoning, both deductive and inductive to construct an argument. Traditionally, inductive reasoning employs the use of hypothetical, mythical or historical examples to draw conclusions and so demonstrate the relevance and veracity of the argument, whilst deductive reasoning (enthymeme) relies more on a generally accepted set of propositions to derive a specific set of conclusions i. e. my mother and father had brown eyes, my partner and I have brown eyes, ergo our children will also have brown eyes.

While the Greeks had a tendency to view rhetoric as a means of human betterment, and considered public speaking a virtue not only for the good of the orator himself, but also for the enlightenment it brought to the audience, the Romans, (for whom public speaking was considered an important fact of life) expanded upon Aristotle's work, widening the definition to embrace a more robust style, encouraging the art of argumentative debate as an art form in itself rather than as a means of achieving a higher state of wisdom.

Quintilian, arguably the most influential Roman teacher of rhetoric, who began his career as a pleader in the courts of law organized his studies of rhetoric into five areas (or canons) namely *Invention* qualified as 'the process that leads to the development and refinement of an argument.' (Wikipedia), *Dispositio* (disposition, or arrangement) used to determine how it should be organized for greatest effect, (ibid) the two styles referring to the structure of the speech itself, namely *Elocutio* (the style of the speech) and *Pronuntiatio* (The method of presentation.) *Memoria* (or memory) is vital as the speaker must recall each crucial element required for the overall success of the speech, while the finale *Actio* (delivery) the mastery of which serves to guarantee that the presentation of the speech is handled in such a way that it will be pleasing to the audience, regardless of content.

Through the centuries, countless scholars have agreed with, disagreed with, expanded upon or disregarded the classical views as befitted the climate and culture of their age. Petrus Ramus the sixteenth century educational reformer and logician, for example, was a scathing critic of the Aristotelian systems and is rumored to have presented a thesis along the lines of "All the things that Aristotle has said are inconsistent because they are poorly systematized and can be called to mind only by the use of arbitrary mnemonic devices." (Ong)

Ramus himself was to prove pivotal in influencing the future shape of rhetoric by encouraging writing on the subject in the vernacular (i. e. German, French or English) rather than classical languages such as Greek or Latin.

Another shift of the usage of rhetoric had occurred by this time, whereas the Greeks and Romans had been more concerned with utilizing rhetorical skill as a tool for the advancement of mankind, be it through enhancement of reason, wisdom or the development of law, by Ramus' time much rhetoric was employed not so much with the view of expanding peoples levels of wisdom and encouraging free thought or enlightenment, but instead was confined to a more secular level, with theology, especially the teaching thereof, the number one subject. England during the seventeenth century had even seen the theatres closed by the puritanical 'Protector' Oliver Cromwell, but following the restoration, creativity was free to thrive once more.

Ramus had paved the way for those more used to writing in English and was in turn followed in the Seventeenth century by such notable luminaries as John Milton, Francis Bacon, Thomas Sprat and the noted dramatist and poet John Dryden, who was of the opinion that the that the style of the piece (be it play, poem or speech) should be proper "to the occasion, the subject, and the persons." (Dryden) As such, Dryden strongly advocated the use of English words whenever possible instead of foreign ones, and was also a proponent of the use of the vernacular syntax, rather than the Latinate. Dryden's views, as well as his exceptional work proved to be so influential on the literature of Restoration Era England that the period came to be known as the 'Age of Dryden' (Britannica)

Dryden's influences on the molding of the more 'modern' English language were to have wide ranging effects not just on vernacular English, but also on the way we use rhetoric today.

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Although many people today, if asked, might be hard pressed to explain the actual meaning of the word 'rhetoric' its effect upon modern society is immense, and, thanks to the modern media, all encompassing.

Whereas, in days gone by, news traveled by word of mouth, or by letter and could take days or even weeks to reach the nearest town, the inventions of radio and television have turned helped to dismantle the barriers to information and enable us to communicate as never before.

If you were to ask the average person in the street to identify the speakers of a series of one line quotes taken from famous political speeches, although that person might at first profess to have little or no knowledge about such things, it is highly likely that when faced with '*I have a dream...*' '*Four score and twenty years ago...*' '*Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few...*' or '*...by any means necessary...*' they would be able to reply that they words were uttered in turn by Martin Luther King Jnr, Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill and Malcolm X.

Such is the power, and proliferation of the modern media, that we are able to recognize parts of speeches that in many cases were made decades before we were born. Such instances of rhetoric are so widely recognized that they have almost become a part of our social culture, yet this applies not merely to politics but to entertainment also. Ask the same person to identify famous lines from speeches in the movies evidencing rhetoric such as '*What we've got here is failure to communicate...*' '*... I will have my vengeance, in this life or the next...*' or '*You ask me if I have a God complex? Let me tell you*

something – I AM God. A large proportion of the cinema going public of recent years will recognize 'Cool Hand Luke' 'Gladiator' and 'Malice'.

The general public is now so immersed in multi-media that snippets such as these sink into their consciousness for retrieval at a later date, normally with little or no knowledge that such lines are even being stored within their memories; Quintilian's *Memeoria* is still at work.

It is perhaps for this very reason that rhetoric, the original 'art of persuasion' is the key to advertising success. Modern advertisers no longer need to shout at you from the village square, extolling the virtues of their plague busting healing tonics, they need not even knock on your door and demonstrate the real life benefits of their vacuum cleaner or salad slicer. Why should they when all they need do is whisper in your ear that all the advantages that go with their product can be yours.

In fact, modern advertising media works on so many levels that often the actual item being advertised is barely referenced at all. You might see a snippet or two of a partial view of a car, interspersed between frames tastefully depicting beautiful women and a desirable lifestyle whilst an actor informs you that 'gorgeous' is worth it and hardly realize at first that it is in fact a car advert, yet in your heart you *know* that 'Gorgeous' could only mean the new Jaguar.

Modern methods perhaps, but it's central core could be traced back to Aristotle – *pathos* – such adverts have you thinking with your senses rather than with your head – logically you know you cannot afford such an item, so you should not consider such things, but the advertiser's job is to make <https://assignbuster.com/the-difference-between-classical-and-modern-rhetoric-essay-sample/>

certain that your heart rules your head – it is lust, pure and simple, illogical, perhaps, but pathos deals in feelings, not logic.

As a society we are constantly bombarded by information – music, prose, radio, television, films, emails, text messages, letters, telephone calls – all give ingress to the human mind, is it small wonder that Kenneth Burke, who defined the human being as the “symbol-using animal,” also defined rhetoric as “the use of symbols to induce cooperation in those who by nature respond to symbols.” (Wikipedia)

The advent of social and behavioral sciences so allow rhetoric to be tailored to suit specific age ranges and tuned to appeal more to one particular gender, yet, at its heart, many of the basic principles remain the same as they were in Classical times. Thanks to innovators such as Dryden, we are more used to mnemonically friendly admonitions such as ‘Clunk, click, every trip’ (A British Safety campaign advertising motorists to use the car safety belts) but the underlying message behind the campaign, that safety belts are built into cars for the purpose of preventing the motorist from harm in case of an accident, ergo not to use them could, theoretically result in death or serious injury can still be traced back to *logos*.

Whether the rhetoric of today be for the purposes of political advancement, advocating human rights, environmental campaigning, for entertainment for advertising, or in a court of law, whether as McLuhan says ‘the medium is the message’ and we know is by the name television, media, tabloid, film, press, photography, whether we recognize it from a buzzword or sound bite,

whether we call it semiotics, sophism or spin – we are a society steeped in rhetoric as none before.

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