

Rhetoric: What's It Good For? Absolutely Everything!

A description and defense of rhetoric, its meaning and uses

by Corrina McKenna

When one works at a tree farm in Georgia, work has a way of following one home at night. On days we took cuttings to propagate new trees, I would close my eyes after hours of clipping and snipping and see tubs and tubs of leaves and sticks. Even at bedtime, before I would pass out in exhaustion, my last visions were of tree cuttings.

The same thing happens to a person teaching at Rockbridge. After days of grading papers, if I happen to go to the movies, my mind refuses to rest. I will automatically “grade” the movie on Content, Arrangement, and Style. I don’t mind it half as much as I used to mind the leaves and sticks.

What goes through the rhetoric-saturated mind as the movie plays? Say the script is awkward or convoluted, too repetitive or cheesy (Style: minus 10). Say the sequence of events is disjointed or drops some of the story line (Arrangement: minus 10). Say the movie is pretty enough, but the message is superficial, hackneyed, or inconsistent, the jokes are lame, or rely too much on potty humor (Content: minus 10). What if you can see the set microphone at the top of the film!?! (Mechanics: minus 10. Yes, I have seen that before).

A good movie? Say the special effects are well-crafted, the scenery is beautiful and well-integrated with the plot, the colors are carefully chosen to reflect the mood, and the

costumes are authentic and quality (Style: plus 10). Say the narrative is easily followed, with no missing links or dropped narrative threads (Arrangement: plus 10). Say the lines are adapted from a novel with care and integrity, the vocabulary is educated, the dialogue clever and realistic, the themes timeless,

The word “rhetoric” seems like such a grand and lofty term. Scholastic and even obtuse, it is, at the very least, intimidating.

poignant, thought-provoking, and they reveal some truth about life or worldview (Content: plus 10).

Taking rhetoric from the classroom to the movie theater is exactly the point of the class. The word “rhetoric” seems like such a grand and lofty term. Scholastic and even obtuse, it is, at the very least, intimidating. It should not be; it is just an old, out-of-use word. It is simply finding all the available means of persuasion for any given situation. For example, the movie makers were trying to persuade you to *like* the movie, *agree* with the message, and ultimately *enjoy* the movie. Did they accomplish this goal? That is where rhetoric comes in, to help you evaluate how well the movie was made. Everybody does this as soon as they walk out. “Yeah, I liked it” is a rhetorical response. Someone trained in rhetoric should be able

to tell *why* they liked it with some precision.

Rhetoric is not a subject to be studied for its own sake. It is a skills class, a “how-to” class: how to research, how to find arguments, how to write an article, or a paper, or book review, how to organize your thoughts, how to critique and analyze, how to spearhead a project, how to lead, how to understand how to help other people. Rhetoric class is a generic skills class, widely applicable to arguably every field of work and study. Rather than intimidating and obtuse, it very well may be the most practical,

down-to-earth class one could take in high school.

Students write a lot in rhetoric class. You can learn a lot about yourself by trying to write well and persuasively. Can I put myself in the background? Can I speak rationally about something I love passionately? Can I hear both sides of an argument? Can I put in the effort to argue my position with evidence and careful thought? What do I believe? Why do I believe it? Do I have a duty to persuade others to this belief? The list goes on. Then there is the actual process of writing. Whenever somebody says, “I know what I mean I just can’t say it,” it is not necessarily true. Making yourself understood, using clear communication, is a necessary part of a life well lived. Rhetoric class is the place to take the time to

continued on next page

Rhetoric: What's It Good For? Absolutely Everything!

continued from page 5

discipline yourself to learn how to communicate what you really think and reason, and instruct others in the best way to live according to those principles. It is a good place to work out your faith with fear and trembling.

As a side note, rhetoric does not work alone. Aristotle said it is the counterpart to logic. A student could not “skip” to rhetoric without having had logic—one skill depends upon the other. The critical thinking and analysis skills learned in logic are essential and practiced simultaneously in rhetoric. Just as rhetoric is not a subject to be learned for its own sake, logic is also a means, rather than an end, for learning. The difference in the two skills is found in their persuasive aspects. Logic

alone will convince a few stoics, but for the rest of us, there needs to be consideration for every other facet of the human experience, that is, rhetorical considerations.

The ultimate goal for students of rhetoric is not only to critique art, but to produce it themselves. All people in all forms of art and employment utilize rhetoric, consciously or unconsciously. I recently heard a sermon in which the pastor

exhorted parents to encourage their children to pursue the arts. If the worldliness of the art and film culture is repulsive to Christians, we have only ourselves to blame. We gave Hollywood over to the world, therefore it is worldly. We must repent of this, the pastor said, and reclaim Christ's rightful place as the Lord of all areas of life. He used the same argument for the practice of law. Lawyers have a notoriously bad reputation. It is the Church's shame. Secular culture serves secular ends. Again, this is the function

and follow your opinion. Only Christians can claim this confidence and be right. Only Christians can have the kind of selfless love trustworthy enough to lead others for Christ and not themselves, because it is not *their* love, it is God's. Christians frequently complain that it is everyone *but* the Christians doing the persuading in our culture. Rhetoric for Christians is about facing the enemy unafraid and letting our light shine in that darkness.

While rhetorical thinking seems excessively relentless while

Again, this is the function of a Christian rhetoric class: to equip students with the skills to reclaim the whole earth and everything in it—from movie-making to the law to the business world—for Christ.

trying to enjoy a movie after hours of grading, one can appreciate being able to recognize how people try to persuade them and also learn

of a Christian rhetoric class: to equip students with the skills to reclaim the whole earth and everything in it—from movie-making to the law to the business world—for Christ.

This rhetoric apology assumes a Christian worldview. The word “persuasion” assumes that you have a concept of right and wrong, good or bad, firm enough to be confident to persuade others to believe you

ways to think about persuading others. The alternative is passively letting people persuade you, and haphazardly trying to convince others of the truth.

When the Bible tells us to speak the truth in love, it does not mean by accident.

Corrina McKenna is in her third year teaching rhetoric, literature, and journalism at Rockbridge Academy in Millersville, Maryland. Corrina holds a BA in literature with a minor in classics from Hillsdale College in Michigan. Using experience gained as a guest contributor of articles and reviews to her Hillsdale college newspaper, The Collegian, Corrina contributes articles about the school to local papers and edits the student section of the Rockbridge Reporter. She is currently working on a Rhetoric Manual and a Thesis Manual for the school curriculum.