

Rhetoric & Media Studies

Sample Comprehensive Examination Question

Criticism

State of the Union addresses of United States' presidents have traditionally been important pieces of rhetoric for our nation. Reading over past addresses allows both a glimpse of the facts of history—what was going on in the nation at the time—and an understanding of how the public and the leaders of the nation felt about those events. George W. Bush's address that followed a few months after the September 11 attacks and during a time when the United States had large troop deployments in Afghanistan was critically important to a nation still feeling very vulnerable.

Examining such a speech through various rhetorical lenses can yield insight on a number of levels. It can allow for an understanding of the national events that occurred in the past year. It can expose the feelings and perspectives of contemporary American culture. And finally it can provide an understanding of how rhetoric is being practiced and what its function is in society at the time. This essay will give a brief preview of possible insights that might be gleaned by thorough rhetorical analysis of Bush's State of the Union address. It will consider the address in terms of its metaphors, the narrative it suggests, and the way its argument is constructed.

The study of metaphor has a long and varied history dating back to classical times when Greeks and Romans like Aristotle, Plato, and Cicero considered it as a linguistic trope. Even their conceptions varied from viewing it as a dangerous and slippery comparison (Plato), to an ornament for producing delight (Cicero), to a genius above all which alone

could not be taught (Aristotle). In the 1930's I.A. Richards made the bold statement that metaphor is the omnipresent principle of thought. In the 1980's, Lakoff and Johnson took that viewpoint to a new level. They asserted that metaphor is on the cognitive level—that it consists of conceiving of one thing in terms of another. The metaphors that appear in language are merely evidenced of the deeper, cognitive metaphors we live by. These metaphors emerge from experiences, and because they are at the semantic level, they affect the way we conceive of our world and also the way we react to it. Thus, as Wayne Booth and Susan Sontag have suggested, an analysis that exposes the metaphors in a piece of rhetoric important to a culture may expose the values and viewpoints of that culture.

One of the major categories that Lakoff and Johnson note in their examination of metaphor is that of ontological metaphors—those that conceive of some concept or event in terms of a concrete object or entity. One subcategory of the ontological metaphor is personification, whereby some abstract concept is understood as a person with certain human traits. President Bush consistently makes use of the STATE AS PERSON metaphor when he refers to the United States. The “true character of this country” suggests that the United States is one single person with one personality and that personality has changed because of September 11. It used to be that America had a personality that was “weak and materialistic,” but now she has awakened to her “responsibility” to “fight freedom’s fight.” This metaphor plays on the sense of unity that the nation felt directly after the terrorist attacks. It highlights the surge of patriotism that was uniting American citizens in displaying flags and attending candlelight vigils. It also emphasizes the fact that September 11 did significantly change many people’s lives. However, what a metaphor hides is equally as important as what it highlights. This metaphor suppresses the fact that there are differences

between Americans and that their personalities are by no means all the same or all reformed to the pious character marked by “courage, compassion, strength, and resolve.” It hides the fact that there are disagreements about what caused September 11, the fact that much of the national character has turned to a desire for vengeance, and the fact that much of American life (aside from higher airport security, lingering flags, and mourning by those who lost loved ones in the attacks) has returned to the way it was before the attacks.

The metaphor President Bush uses to characterize the perpetrators of the attacks is also worthy of note. Instead of personifying them, he casts them as “terrorist parasites who threaten their countries and our own.” This metaphor suggests that the terrorists are not human and must be “eliminated.” It, like the historical use of cancer as a metaphor for communism suggests drastic measures. Parasites are not negotiated with. They are killed, and sometimes that procedure is painful to the body (person-state) they inhabit. This suggests that a war waged against terrorists is justified in harming the country where they are located as long as it gets the parasite out. The parasite metaphor highlights the fact that the terrorists are not necessarily associated with any government (with any other person-state). But in doing so, it hides the fact that there may be large-scale resentment in other nations toward the U.S. It also masks any responsibility the U.S. may have in creating an atmosphere of hatred and any support or sympathy other governments might have for the terrorists. Clearly no person-state would willingly be inhabited by a parasite or share its goals, so no government must agree with any of the terrorists’ ideals. In other words, the U.S. is portrayed as having the support of the international community by this metaphor.

Another way of looking at Bush’s State of the Union address is through the narrative paradigm suggested by Walter Fisher. Fisher contends that humans are story-telling

animals—*Homo narrans*—and that they talk about and experience life as a series of stories competing with one another for acceptance. Cultures have certain stories that order and explain historic events for them. Like any storybook, these cultural and historical narratives have narrators, characters, plots, settings, and themes. Examining these elements and the stories as a whole that a culture accepts can tell one quite a bit about that culture. Bennett and Edleman suggest that narratives can be particularly important in politics and that certain storylines tend to be repeatedly privileged in a given culture. They suggest the only way for a society to move forward and to stop repeating its mistakes is for fresh narratives to be introduced.

President Bush's address and the narrative it offers clearly have importance in the political realm. Not only so they set the tone for the nation in terms of how the public will view events post-September 11, but they also represent the view the administration subscribes to and will likely act on in terms of foreign policy and military action.

An important characteristic of Bush's speech is the naming of characters. There are the American people who stand for "courage and compassion," and who are composed of "heroes," "families," and "rescuers." They represent the "greater good" which will overcome both adversity and evil. On the other side, there are "our enemies" who are "terrorist parasites." They stand for "tyranny and death" and "send other people's children on missions of suicide and murder." The creation of these two categories of character is typical of governments at war. In trying to convince people that fighting is necessary—in justifying our presence in Afghanistan in this case—and in reassuring a shocked and shaken public, leaders often paint the scene as black and white with no room for complexities. George Bush

does this effectively by contrasting a parasite with a peace- and compassion-loving public. As President Bush once said rather bluntly, “you are with us or against us.”

The plot of the narrative is rather simple as well. It actually begins long before the speech takes place—on “the day of our founding” when we, as a nation, first affirmed “freedom,” “the dignity of every life,” “respect for women,” and “religious tolerance.” On that day, a pious nation was formed. It endured some testing in its 200 years of existence and in that testing has come to know “freedom’s price.” But on September 11, that virtuous nation was attacked viciously by terrorists. It responded with “millions of acts service and decency and kindness” and by adopting a “new creed.” In essence, it took even that horrible tragedy and turned it into a learning experience—“a unique opportunity” to embrace a “new culture of responsibility.” And its new role as a responsible culture leads it to the task of “fighting freedom’s fight” worldwide in its “war on terror.”

This simple narrative with its highly contrasted characters has two major consequences. It blocks out any chance for a competing narrative that might not be so simple and might cast the United States in a slightly less pious role where it might share responsibility in the state of international affairs. It does not allow in the fresh narratives that Bennett and Edleman call for and thus limits the possibility of finding a novel solution to the problem. It also has the effect of unifying the American public and the polarizing the international community.

A third and final way to examine Bush’s speech from a rhetorical perspective is to consider the way it is structured as an argument. Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca suggest that the starting points of practical argument can be either facts, truths, and presumptions or values, hierarchies and loci. If the latter three are chosen, they must be

values accepted by the intended audience and they must be ordered in such a way that the audience will accept.

President Bush tries to ensure that the values he appeals to in his State of the Union address will be accepted by the American public by choosing traditional American values. These include ideals explicitly listed in or implied by our constitution like “freedom of speech,” “private property,” and “religious tolerance.” They also include those values that the American public has recently demonstrated and accepted as important such as “sacrifice,” “brotherhood,” “bravery,” and “generosity.” By choosing these values and listing them in opposition to “tyranny and death,” President Bush leaves virtually no room for auditors to disagree with the starting points of his arguments. His inclusion of the more general values of “courage, compassion, strength, and resolve” also indicate that his argument would probably be acceptable to a very wide group of people—perhaps Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s universal audience, which is the greatest measure of an argument’s worth. This is probably partly due to the fact that, besides the American people, the international community will also be part of the audience for the State of the Union address. Simply appealing to American values would likely not be sufficient for this larger audience, and President Bush acknowledges this.

Bush’s appeal to values is skillful. It is also ethically questionable. Considering the context—the nation has recently been shaken to the core by terrorist attacks, many members of the international community are wavering about whether to support an expanded war on terrorism via military action—Bush’s value appeals play on the most vulnerable parts of the audiences’ psyche and polarize the situation to the extreme. He basically eliminates peaceful options for action with his rhetoric.

Overall, the frameworks of metaphorical analysis, narrative paradigm, and argumentation theory all point out that President Bush over-simplifies the situation with respect to the war on terror. This both suppresses viewpoints and options for action that are novel and justifies possibly drastic military action. Bush's rhetoric in the State of the Union address is not used as Aristotle would have hoped—to clash ideas against one another in the search for truth—but rather as Plato feared—to privilege one version of the story as it suits the rhetor.