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Today's Dissection in English Lab: Analytical Discoveries Through Classical Rhetoric

Author Biography

I have been a member of the regular faculty of Christopher Newport University's English Department for over thirty years, during which time I have taught a wide range of courses in literature and language arts. I frequently teach freshman writing seminars that emphasize the development of enhanced critical thinking, reading, and communicating strategies and skills. My scholarly interests include the novels of Patrick O'Brian and the poetry of Percy Shelley, Wallace Stevens, and Henry Taylor.

Abstract

This article describes a single class session in Fall Semester 2020 with my undergraduate freshmen, featuring a "lab" discussion of a poem by Sun Yung Shin. The "dissection" of her poem proceeds by means of an application of classical rhetorical tools -- particularly the appeals to *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* -- the "lenses" by means of which a process of critical analysis takes place. The intention of my article is to demonstrate how productively students can apply such rhetorical tools when they have been carefully trained in their use for several weeks in a semester. To shift the metaphor slightly, the dissection becomes an exercise in reverse engineering, one that produces original insights, or "inventions" that can lead directly to improvements in student writing.

Keywords

classical rhetoric, the three appeals, critical analysis, discovery

Today's Dissection in English "Lab": Analytical Discoveries Through Classical Rhetoric

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One of the best ways for high school and college English teachers to build their students' critical thinking skills through purposeful class discussions is to engage them in connective, question-asking, mental exercises that involve imaginative application of the classical rhetorical tools. As an example of this pedagogical strategy, recently students in one of my *Freshman Writing Seminar* (English 123 at CNU) classes were assigned to read, discuss, and analyze the rhetorical strategies exhibited in a brief poem by Sun Yung Shin. Prior to the in-class discussion the students also watched a *YouTube* video in which the poet discusses her word-crafter's interest in the connotative power of vocabulary choices as well as her sense of artistic mission: to create poetry that both contributes toward and critically assesses the norms of human society.

Before I describe the memorable occurrences in this class meeting, let me provide an overview of what had taken place earlier in the semester. In the first week my students were introduced to a syllabus which details a list of their reading, listening, watching, discussing, and writing assignments for the semester ahead. The range of "textual" assignments is rather broad: professional and scholarly essays from across the curriculum, excerpts from political and philosophical documents (including Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" from *The Republic*), recorded *TED Talk* lectures, selected poems by such authors as Langston Hughes and W. H. Auden, several short stories, and even a number of video recordings of musical performances combining vocal and instrumental virtuosity. The experience of assimilating each of these communicative endeavors is always framed by the course's central tasks: (1) to become proficient in applying the tools of classical rhetoric as a means to arrive at a richer understanding of each text, (2) to

recognize the universal applicability of those tools to the critical analysis of any communicative act, and (3) to develop a fuller understanding of the relationship between communicators and their audiences. I should also note that one of the vital texts in the semester's sequence is the profoundly influential lecture, delivered seventy years ago by Dr. Carl Rogers, "Communication: Its Blocking and Its Facilitation."

In order to facilitate my own pedagogical design, during the summer of 2016 I wrote an essay for my students entitled, "The Top Ten Tools of Invention and Critical Analysis: The Four *Topoi*, The Three Matters, and The Three Appeals." This roughly 4000-word document, continually revised and expanded in the past five years, introduces each of my Freshman Writing Seminars to the classical rhetorical *Topoi* of **Definition, Comparison, Causation** (often termed *Relationship*), and **Testimony**; the **Matters of Fact, Value, and Policy**; and the **Appeals to Logos, Ethos, and Pathos**. The weekly assignments move progressively through the "top ten" in sequence, and all of the students are expected to write at least six informal, analytical papers in which application of these tools is featured. The semester's more challenging, formal, documented essays proceed from the **Four Topoi** (essay one), to the **Matters** (essay two), to the **Appeals** (essay three), and conclude with the final exam composition, which requires that each student will exhibit satisfactory proficiency in applying all ten of the tools. The subject-matter of these informal compositions and formal essays – i.e., the focal "texts" – will vary from semester to semester, and generally the assignment sequence evolves from the close analysis of a single text to comparative studies, and, ultimately, to synthetic analytical efforts.

The class that was engaged in discussion of Sun Yung Shin's poem had become thoroughly acquainted with the first seven of the rhetorical concepts, and those students were used to the idea that our class sessions often involved what is typically called "interrogating a

text,” an activity I have usually defined metaphorically as “invention in reverse.” The specific session referred to in this essay was one that took place about nine weeks into the semester, and the students at this point were very familiar with the *Topoi* and **The Matters**. In the most recent class meeting they had brainstormed ways of using the **Three Appeals** as their “reverse engineering” tools in an upcoming, informal composition focused on a *TED Talk* lecture. So, the pump had been significantly primed for the analytical workout featuring Shin’s verses.

Inspired by a suggestion made by one of my FWS members last year -- a young woman planning to major in Biology, fittingly enough -- her class began to describe such discussions as “lab” experiments in which we worked together on “dissections” that required sharply honed instruments from the “Top Ten” toolkit. Subsequently, the intriguing metaphor has caught on with several classes, and that is the source of my title for this essay. In this particular hour’s meeting, the dissection subject “on the table,” so to speak, was Shin’s provocative poem, “(Riot Police)”:

This is you -- Titanus giganteus, your maw snapping pencils in half and cutting through human flesh. My encyclopedia chokes on your bulk. My camera, timid, afraid to look, as if you’re naked -- not one adult male but millions.

Few garments sound as fine as *flak jacket*, the best of the tagmata the thorax, more prime than brains as the body can keep mating, cracking its margins. Your shield like a wing, protects your bulletproof heart from the wind, your right arm black in the cloth of your brothers. Full face visor. Baby gladiator.

Beyond the screen, memorized -- jawbone like a scandal reflecting all the thieves and beggars. Insect lord, insect mind. This is my fear. You look like my brother, my son. You could kill me with your looks.ⁱ

With respect to the four classical *Topoi*, the students readily noted that this poem begins with a descriptive **Definition** of the *titanus giganteus* beetle, a seemingly odd subject to place foremost in a poem whose title leads the reader to expect something quite different. The poet’s first verse paragraph establishes the speaker’s state of awe and dread, presumably the effects of

what may have been a chance encounter with an encyclopedia entry which caused a series of stream-of-consciousness links to ensue, leading inevitably to an imagistic correlation between the insect and the subject in the poem's title. Under the rubrics provided by the **Three Appeals**, the class quickly moved onto discussing the ways in which the poet contrives to arouse emotional (**Pathos**) responses but also invites the reader to make a link-by-link, mental (**Logos**) journey of discovery with the speaker.ⁱⁱ In **Logos** terms, the students quickly became engaged in solving this intellectual puzzle: "Why does a huge beetle cause me/us to think about a cadre of law officers in body armor?" The poet's own emotional and intellectual faculties were evidently aroused by an illustrated definition in a reference book, one already amply filled with information of all kinds. Yet the volume now seems to "choke" on this single factual entry about the "titanic" insect and, even more importantly, its photographic representation. The potent verb that the poet chose, as one observant student noted, reinforces the **Pathos** element intensely, imaginatively suggesting that the book itself is incapable of containing and surviving the shock that the creature's size and threatening characteristics engender.

Hyperbole is a classical rhetorical concept, too, but Shin hardly exaggerates. As several of my students discovered by looking up *titanus* online in the early moments of our conversation, this beetle is the largest known to entomology, one specimen having been measured at nearly seven inches in length. Typically found in jungle, rain-forest habitats, these creatures possess powerful mandibles capable, as Shin writes, of slicing into human flesh. While the students manipulated these ideas under the rhetorical lenses of **Appeal to Logos** and **Appeal to Pathos**, they volunteered some excellent insights. One of my freshmen (call her Melissa) noted that Shin employs both precise, scientific and historical terms as well as vocabulary that elicits powerful feelings, illuminating many of the "surface" reasons why a phalanx of riot police and the beetle

are comparable. In terms of the all-black coloration and the protective coverings they share, and the intimidating effect of oversize bulk, this combination captures the reader's attention within the frame of the classical **Comparison topos**, but that is only the beginning. **Logos** and **Pathos Appeals**, according to Melissa, lead down a mental pathway to the crucial **Appeal to Ethos** that ultimately becomes the point of focus in the poem.

Several other students found Melissa's suggestion exciting. One proposed that we might locate more support for calling the **Ethos Appeal** Shin's most important rhetorical device by asking why she might have chosen to enclose the title's words in parentheses. In the space of about twenty minutes, a number of class members made provocative guesses, essentially in this order:

- The poet had begun her thought processes by thinking about a bug, but then another idea slid (or "crawled" as one student put it) into view, causing Shin to pause momentarily, just as a parenthetical phrase may identify one thought embedded or suspended inside another; further,
- this particular thought involves human beings who are sharing in a dangerous activity (**Pathos** again), so that the parenthetical concept soon displaced the "main," fear-inducing subject and assumed the titled position, inasmuch as the riot police are presumably to act as agents of the restoration of law and order (**Logos** once more) – and ultimately "domestic tranquility"; however,
- the bodies of the individual police are not invertebrate, so their vital organs are not protected by exoskeletons, and the black fabric of their uniforms, while contributing to the unifying image of their phalanx, does not shield them from harm as effectively as the

purely natural armor of *titanus* (**Logos** design not being sufficient to subdue **Pathos**' fear); consequently,

- their “tagmata” are not just pieces of interconnecting, shielding material, but they also represent the necessity for each individual member of the cohort to link tightly with the others, or else each devolves into only a “baby gladiator” and becomes quite vulnerable – one might say, pathetically so; finally,
- as the **Ethos Appeal** is growing steadily more central, the individual members of the phalanx, now not just features of a monolithic and fearsome entity, can actually arouse the compassion of the poem’s speaker; in fact, Shin starts to envision each as a “brother” or a “son,” protected only by the disciplined self-containment of their cadre, which is visibly symbolized in the parenthetically, oddly enclosed title. “And that’s merely a set of ‘We’re not very important’ punctuation marks!” concluded Melissa.

By the time our discussion had reached the **Ethos**-rich insights of step five, several of my students recognized how unexpected that outcome of our interpretive analysis was for them. After all, they agreed, their expectation was that the poet would simply call attention to the forbidding appearance of a body of riot police, whose mission is so easily identified -- in *Star Wars* terms, as another student suggested -- as “the dark side of the Force” in action. They did not find it at all unusual to hear a poet saying, “This is my fear,” after she had linked the image of the beetle with the human phalanx as the epitome of a robotic, merely instinctual, “Insect mind.” But they recognized that Shin does not conclude with a resolution wholly dependent on the illumination provided by **Appeals to Logos** and **Pathos**. Instead, she reiterates the existence of those human hearts within each “thorax” of the cohort’s members, themselves linked to every one of us by ties of blood and human vulnerability. Ultimately the parentheses indicate how

small and temporary are the shields that separate them from the other *homo sapiens* they have been dispatched to control.

These are the kinds of productive discussions that applying the traditional rhetorical tools can generate. Because the analytical ideas thus generated are, in effect, mirroring the creative inventiveness of a stimulating writer, this discovery process leads not merely to analytical answers that fill in the blanks of our understanding, it also produces sparks that can inspire the students to produce fresh and exciting ideas of their own. When time ran out on us, the class was still puzzling over Shin's last line, "You could kill me with your looks." The poem is obviously rich in many conceptual matters that needed further dissection, and several students continued to pursue the task in their individual compositions.

The weeks leading up to the display of fluency and eagerness that were evident in this "lab" session certainly had witnessed a fair share of reluctant class participation, as well as slowness on the part of some students to "buy in" where their written work was concerned. However, I have never ceased emphasizing to the members of these English seminars that "Top Ten" mastery has its payoffs not merely in my course. In numerous college classes, I stress, they are going to be asked to exercise critical thinking as they produce compositions that will receive – the magic word – *grades*. Usually by the end of the third week a couple of students will **Testify** (!) that they have employed our techniques in a history or sociology or psychology class and received commendations from their professors. Once that meme is released into a class's collective consciousness, a tangible increase in engagement follows, student by student, and enthusiasm for participation in "lab" discussions becomes a given instead of an occasional thing.

Indeed, it was not for nothing that the classical rhetoricians saw the *Topoi*, the **Matters**, and the **Appeals** as tools of both critical analysis and invention. Instructors can scarcely go

wrong by reminding their clientele that, as sophomores, and juniors, and seniors, their intelligent application of such rhetorical wisdom will have a recurring **Value** and frequent potential for reward. After all, there is important truth in what Dave Matthews has been singing for a number of years, in concert after concert: “So much to say . . . so much to say . . . so much to say . . . so much to say!”ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ My students accessed “(Riot Police)” at poetryfoundation.org, although it was originally published by Sun Yung Shin in 2012 in the collection, *Rough, and Savage*. The Poetry Foundation reprinted the poem by permission of Coffee House Press, www.coffeehousepress.org.

ⁱⁱ *The relevant excerpt from my English 123 informational essay for freshman students*, “A “Top Ten” List of The Tools of Invention and Critical Analysis: The Four *Topoi*, The Three Matters, and The Three Appeals”:

The first **Appeal**, to **Logos**, enlists the reader’s rationality. This **Appeal** is a natural partner to **Matter of Fact**; indeed, it is perhaps fair to say that the first element in rational discourse is the assumption that what’s truly factual really does “matter.” Yet an assortment of factual material offered up in a haphazard way is never likely to be convincing. That is where the **Appeal to Logos** enters the picture. It gains the reader’s respect through logical and artful design, a tone of reasonableness, and evidence of confident, thorough preparation on the part of the writer. It says, “I’m credible. Everything you’re reading here shows you that I’m knowledgeable and sensible, that I’m careful to organize what I have to say effectively, and that my command of the medium of language is complete.” *We homo sapiens* tend to be attracted to things that have pattern, organization, and clear design features -- so this **Appeal** is a sure winner.

By analogy, think in terms of the building of a house. A master builder will create one in which everything is plumb, level, and square. Whether we examine the house as a whole entity, sitting neatly on its foundation, displaying a clean, fresh, architecturally satisfying “picture” – or else appreciate the precise joints in the window trim and the snug fit of the doors – the evidence of know-how and craftsmanship can be seen from all perspectives. This kind of precision should be clearly evident, of course, in the writer’s *diction*, from first to last, so it is helpful to pay close attention to word choices, from title to concluding sentence.

The second **Appeal**, to **Ethos**, conveys an author’s sensitivity to community standards. And when the term “standards” comes on the scene, we can automatically infer that the **Matter of Value** is being addressed. A writer who stresses his or her solidarity with the reader in terms of ethical and moral convictions, and who impresses us as a decent, honest, humane person, is doing a good job with **Ethos** – and is putting **Value** in the forefront. “Not only can you believe me, you can *trust* me,” this author demonstrates, because he or she appeals to *conscience* as well as to *logic*. “Join me by affirming my argument,” this author declares, “and you’ll not only be smart, you’ll be good, too.” When communicators manage this **Appeal** effectively, they show that they have kept the idea of engaging their audience clearly in mind as part of the all-important “purpose for writing.” It’s no accident that *communication* and *community* share the same root in English.

When it comes to diction, the **Appeal to Ethos** also must be advanced by appropriate word choices, and it is worthwhile to recognize that the connotative effects of a writer’s vocabulary decisions are

perhaps as significant as the denotative precision of the chosen words. *Sensitivity* to community standards can be conveyed not only by what words literally mean, but also by the feelings that they evoke in readers' minds. And here is the place where audience-awareness can be a crucial thing. A writer who possesses a brilliant intellect can be capable of producing an oral or written presentation that is stunning in its logical coherence, sophisticated in its vocabulary, and awe-inspiring in its display of learning . . . and *yet*, well As the pungent old saying goes, "Nobody likes a smartass!" Careful attention to tone and style – intentionally avoiding a condescending, highfalutin manner – can keep readers and listeners from being turned off and tuning out, even when the subject-matter is challenging. No communicators should risk "talking down" to their audience. This is why the **Ethos Appeal** is one that deserves our keen attention, both as we studiously reverse-engineer effective essays that feature its wise use, and as we work to apply **Ethos**-awareness techniques of professional writers to improving our own writing.

The **Appeal to Pathos** comes last, but hardly least. It can be profoundly effective, and also profoundly abused. Appealing to **Pathos** has to do with generating feelings, arousing emotions, altering a reader's psychological state. At the risk of oversimplifying, we might say that the **Logos Appeal** goes for our brain and the **Ethos Appeal** goes for our heart and soul – while **Pathos** goes for our gut. A writer with an agenda (**Matter of Policy**) may often choose to put stress on this third **Appeal**, since people who are *stirred* into action tend to be more responsive than those who are just *intellectually* convinced. It is rare that we find a **Matter of Policy** being advanced without the assistance of the **Appeal to Pathos**.

It is also true that people who are in a good mood can be easier to persuade, so masters of **Pathos** may be gifted with a sense of humor as well. The ability to make readers chuckle might at times be the key to getting their attention and their assent. Humor is tricky, however. A few light touches of wordplay usually work much better than heavy sarcasm, which can backfire and alienate an audience very quickly. Once again, diction has a major role to play here.

Writers who evoke **Pathos** are especially interested in the connotative impact of words. They are typically striving to generate heat even more than to shed light. Their vocabularies will more often feature "hot button" choices rather than **Value**-neutral ones, although they could well prefer that you not notice how their words are shaping your responses *affectively*. Masters of **Pathos** would probably declare: "Reason, *reason* is my middle name!" Well . . . maybe, maybe not. Alert readers might disagree. Don't misunderstand. Although the **Appeal to Pathos** can be misused in disturbing ways, it would be foolish for any writer having an "agenda purpose" to neglect using it intelligently. Maybe Peter Parker is the right authority to cite on this one: "With great power comes great responsibility." (Feel the tingle?)

So that's the story of the **Matters** and the **Appeals** – almost. Although **Fact** and **Logos**, **Value** and **Ethos**, **Policy** and **Pathos** are natural companions, other matches are often seen. Moreover, marriages of such elements as **Ethos** and **Pathos** are frequent (as is the case where deftly applied humorous touches are concerned, for instance), and sometimes it may seem impossible to separate one completely from another. Perhaps that is why communication in words is so often likened to music. A great musical composition is a seamless thing, and as the poet John Keats reminds us, dissecting its elements is a bit like "unweaving the rainbow." The same could be said of a poem, a novel, or even a well-constructed, convincing, argumentative essay.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Dave Matthews Band's December 14, 2018 Central Park Concert version of "So Much To Say" was one of my students' optional subjects for a close critical analysis, featuring use of the **Four Topoi**, in a recent semester. As it turned out, the English 123 freshmen who chose that option produced some formal essays that were very enjoyable reading.