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Experience and Exclamation: Exploring Unexpected Rhetors

In order to understand a rhetorical situation, it is very important to take a step back and understand the rhetor(s) of the discourse. Keith Grant-Davie wrote a scholarly article about four main aspects of rhetorical situations, or more simply put, any discourse we encounter in life. In this piece, Grant-Davie defines rhetor as “those people, real or imagined, responsible for the discourse and it’s authorial voice” (269). Knowing about the rhetor and the rhetor's approach to the situation is very important in forming an overall analysis and conclusion of the discourse and rhetorical situation. There is a plethora of opinions involved in the recent situation of the shooting of Michael Brown and the events that have followed.

In order to display this analysis and understand rhetor in the Ferguson, Missouri discourse, I chose two rhetors that take a different medium and approach to the situation. The first example and author analyzed is Sunil Dutta who published an online article on August 19 through The Washington post called "I'm a cop. If you don't want to get hurt, don't challenge me." The second is a cartoon by Mary Engelbreit called "In The USA." Both pieces are very interesting and their rhetors will be just as interesting to explore. These texts will help us examine the rhetorical situation component of rhetor because they give us two very different authors who represent different perspectives and discourses on the issue. At the same moment, these rhetors give us the chance to compare unexpected rhetors within the Ferguson situation. Comparing Dutta’s straightforward, self-inclusive article and Engelbreit’s exclusive, mysteriously rooted cartoon allow us to understand each rhetor’s approach to adding meaningful discourse to the Ferguson situation. Their backgrounds will also help show an unexpected light into their motivation to comment on the Michael Brown shooting.

Dutta’s piece is a short article in which he talks about his experience as a police officer, relates his experiences to the experiences of officer Wilson, and uses that to not necessarily defend Wilson, but to present that it is very possibly not Wilson who is in the wrong in the shooting of Michael Brown. Dutta also adds in ways to avoid issues with police if any of his readers should ever have a run in with the law (Dutta). This part is almost second though to his initial comparison of his experience, and that experience and relation to the Brown shooting is what stands out most about the article.

Every rhetor has a background. Sometimes rhetors will attempt to hide or show off their background depending on which will help them better convey their discourse. For example, Dutta makes it very clear that he has a background as a cop in order to let readers know that he has first hand experience by writing, "Working the streets, I can't even count how many times I withstood curses, screaming tantrums, aggressive and menacing encroachments on my safety zone, and outright challenges to my authority" (Dutta). With this quote, Dutta is very openly displaying that he has experience with the issue, and he wants to make sure he has a voice of authority in his text that will standout to his audience. He uses this experience to help bring some sympathy to law enforcement by highlighting what he and others had and have to experience on a daily basis to maintain the peace. With statements like this the author is also setting a tone of straightforwardness, as was also apparent in his title “I’m a cop. If you don’t want to get hurt, don’t challenge me” (Dutta).

While Dutta is very straightforward about being a cop, he doesn’t try to shove much else about his background in his audiences’ face. One less noticeable thing about Dutta is his race. Dutta is Indian (Dutta). While he is also not black, keeping him from pulling potential support from a large population who seems to support the Brown family’s view on the issue, he does not fit into the typical mold that the Ferguson situation and many other similar situations, such as the Sean Bell shooting, tend to focus on. This allows his background to potentially give him a small chance of having authority with audiences who identify with the Michael Brown family and those who believe Darren Wilson was in the wrong. Even despite this attempt, there has still been a lot of backlash from that particular audience. I believe Dutta decided not to input his cultural origin into the article in order to keep his argument focused and to the point. This allows him to hone in on his focus that cops are not the bad guys in situations like there. However, the fact of his ethnicity and race is obviously not completely hidden. At the beginning of the article, there is a small picture next to his name allowing the more attentive members of the audience to catch just a glimpse of Dutta.

The subtle lack on Dutta’s part of outwardly projecting parts of his background is very relatable to our next rhetor, Mary Engelbreit’s. Engelbreit is definitely more reserved about her background than Dutta. By the same means, much like Dutta’s lack of attention to his race, she is not hiding her background. However, because she is a cartoonist, it is hard for her to really portray her background in her work without having the audience do some extra work researching her online and looking through her other cartoons. In this situation, research into her background would highly affect readers in showing why she chooses the stance she take within the cartoon. Engelbreit is a white mother of two boys and has resided in St. Louis for the majority of her career. Another thing that adds to her background and authority within her cartoon is that she also lost a son at a young age. Her son Evan died of a gunshot wound at the age of 19 in 2000 (Peterson).

It is very easy then to see where her exigence in creating the cartoon comes from. At the first glance, her cartoon “In The USA” seems to be a deviation from her normal happy, Hallmark type work. It takes a more subtle side of the argument, but is easily identified as being on the side of the Brown family. The cartoon depicts a crying black mother holding her young son. The son has his hands in the air with a small newspaper in front with the headline reading “Hands Up. Don’t Shoot.” The cartoon has these words across the front: “No one should have to teach their children this in the USA” (Engelbreit). This depiction is clearly showing that the cartoonist is identifying with the Michael Brown supporters. It is using the very strong relationship of mother to son to show the sadness of the situation and draws upon strong family ties and emotions to evoke similar feeling in the audience.

This family aspect is actually what draws Engelbreit’s piece back to her typical work and helps explain more so how she may have found the comfort and desire to publish, this seemingly uncharacteristically controversial cartoon. A simple Google search of “Mary Engelbreit” yields much of her work depicting happy scenes with lots of family and children and inspiring words. Despite the family aspect connecting her “In The USA” piece and the rest of her work, “In The USA” still stands alone as unique display of Engelbreit’s talent.

One unique thing about our two rhetors is that they both are unexpected in a sense within the discourse. Yes, Dutta is a cop, and Engelbreit is a family woman, but the fact that neither fit a mold makes them stand out. Dutta is not the stereotypical white officer that seems to be involved in a lot of these similar stories, allowing him to make a unique impact with his article. To the same extent, Engelbreit is not part of the black community. Her stance through her art shows that she has a unique exigence that goes along with her support. These unexpected rhetors help us as audiences and rhetors ourselves to lean away from the idea that there is a clearly defined supporting race or group of people on either side of the Michael Brown Shooting. This analysis can extend to almost any discourse in life. There is not much black and white in today’s texts, speeches, and conversations. We cannot say Dutta is just a white cop trying to justify the actions of the white officer Wilson. At the same time we can also not say that just the black community are supporters of the Brown family. This interesting lack of fitting the mold is a guiding light in both rhetorical pieces.

Besides the approaches and sides that each rhetor takes, their choice of expression determines their personal level of inclusion with their pieces. Dutta is obviously very much a part of his article. He takes a very active role in his piece by letting us know his stance that “Even though it might sound harsh and impolitic, here is the bottom line: if you don’t want to get shot, tased, pepper-sprayed, struck with a baton or thrown to the ground, just do what I tell you. Don’t argue with me, don’t call me names, don’t tell me that I can’t stop you, don’t say I’m a racist pig, don’t threaten that you’ll sue me and take away my badge” (Dutta). Dutta is very clearly using his personal experience to try to portray that we need to respect cops. We need to respect his authority, and if we do not, he will take action. This is a very active role for Dutta and shows us a very strongly worded personal tie with the situation as a police officer.

Engelbreit takes a much different role within her own discourse. It is much harder to portray a sense of inclusion of rhetor within a cartoon piece. The art has to seemingly stand-alone. We have had a chance to see Engelbreit’s background, but only through addition research, and this creates a sense of exclusion of rhetor from the piece. This works both for and against Engelbreit. It allows for her audience to just see the work for what it is. It partially excludes her from coming under fire for her piece and allows her audience to see the cartoon by itself. At the same moment, this exclusion can also prevent the audience from getting everything possible out of the discourse. Knowing Engelbreit’s background would allow the audience to potentially sympathize with her and understand why she chose to do the piece, even if they did not agree with her views. If she had more inclusion, it could allow her to have more authority in the Ferguson situation.

These two texts helped us examine Ferguson and rhetor because they gave us different perspectives on the issues going on in Ferguson from rhetors with different backgrounds and forms of expression. These rhetors, put together into one analytical essay, gave us the opportunity to compare unexpected rhetors and inclusive versus exclusive rhetorical pieces of work. Dutta’s straightforward approach and Engelbreit's mysterious background help shed understanding on peoples approach to adding meaningful texts to any situation. This is important because it allows us to better understand how to analyze rhetors and take an in depth look into any text we might come across. It promotes us to ask questions and ultimately gain a deeper understanding of the text as a whole. This analysis will overall lead to a more informed and comprehensive experience with any text or discourse we might encounter in our lives. Often though, analysis can leave us with more questions than we started with.

Works Cited

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