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Art of Rhetoric
Essay 2

The Rhetoric of Memoirs

Rhetoric can be found everywhere around us, from television, advertisements, billboards, novels, movies, etcetera. The way we speak and write are forms of rhetoric and even the way we form and store our memories can be considered rhetorical. Memories are a huge part of what build our character and shape the people we are. The memories we hold, whether they are positive or negative, influence us in ways we may not realize. Certain occasions throughout our lives, significant or not, mold our personalities, philosophies, and attitudes towards life in general. Those with life changing memories tend to write them down, therefore creating a memoir. Memoirs are not just autobiographies, but life stories based on the perspectives of the writers. They are more than facts written down to share with the world. They are rhetorical pieces of literature that give first hand accounts of the intimate details of a person's life; thoughts and feelings very much included. Throughout memoirs, the memoirist usually tends to write about their entire life span in order to develop a story on how they became the person they are. In some cases, the writer develops how they discovered some truth in their lives. In order to narrate their story in a way that reaches out to their audience, memoirists can use certain rhetorical theories such as aspects of Aristotle's Rhetorical Triangle, focusing on the pathos and lacking in the logos, as well as identification and personal agency.

Jeannette Walls is a memoirist whose childhood story is spectacular. Her memoir is *The Glass Castle*, and I am using this story as an example of how memoirs are excellent pieces of rhetoric through her use of pathos, personal agency and identification. *The Glass Castle* is a story about Jeannette Walls and her siblings living with poor, abusive, dysfunctional and selfish

parents who love them in a unique and untraditional way. Their philosophy of life is a free spirited, live for yourself kind and leaves their children fend for themselves. Growing up with an alcoholic father, enthusiastic and manipulative, and an artistic free spirited mother, the Walls children learn to take care of themselves and each other throughout their lives. Their states of poverty and endless travel with no stable home confuses them but they make the best out of their situation, at least when they are of a young age. Their father makes their life seem like an adventure and refers to their future as something to look forward to. He promises to build a glass castle for them to live in someday and I read this glass castle as a metaphor for empty promises as the story unfolds. In this story, Jeanette trusts her parents, whether she agrees with their lifestyle or not, and there is a certain loyalty to her family. We see a transformation in Jeanette as she enters into her teenage years which is when she is mistreated by her parents the most with neglect. As a young child, Jeanette was way beyond her years. When she was three she recalls her tragic experience being burned while trying to cook hotdogs over an open fire and having to stay in the hospital for a significant amount of time. She loved staying in the hospital where she was constantly attended to, unlike at home. The following day, her younger brother fell off the couch and cracked his head open. The parents decided that one child in the hospital was enough and did not take him in for the care he needed. These are perfect examples of the abandonment and abuse the Walls children went through but somehow their father manipulates the situation into some sort of adventure. Feasting off of margarine like vultures, having to craft homemade braces for the desire of straight teeth, and sleeping in cold, hard cardboard boxes are just other instances of the tortures these children grew up with. Rex and Rose Mary Walls focus on their own lives and spent the little money they had on alcohol or art supplies. Memories such as these create the art that is *The Glass Castle* and rhetorical beauty is found on each page.

Memoirs not only tell a story about a person's life based on facts and events, but also they engage the writer's feelings and perspectives throughout. Aristotle's rhetorical triangle can be examined when understanding what a memoir does as a genre. Logos is lacking in memoirs because, even though it is fact to the memoirist, it is a memory from the perspective of the writer only. Ethos is seen though because only they can have authority about their personal life experiences. Their writing is credible based on the fact that the events they write about are first hand. At the same time, ethos can be argued as lacking because of the fact that it is only their perspective and no one else's, so who's to say what they are saying is true? An undeniable tactic that is used in memoirs and especially in *The Glass Castle* is pathos, appeal to audience. Pathos is a very strong element of memoirs because of that distinction between memoirs and autobiographies; they are stories about a memory where the writer reaches out to the audience and gives explicit details about their feelings at each moment throughout the book. The detailed explanations of how Jeannette felt when she was in the hospital after being burned or how angry she was at the moment her father let her go in the hot spring when teaching her how to swim, invite us into her life and allow us to understand her emotions. Her innocence is portrayed when she writes about her thoughts as a child when she continues to love her parent's despite their poor decisions and bad parenting. One thing Jeannette continues to do is forgive her parents while they continue to disappoint. When describing the violent feuds she overheard her parents have while growing up, we understand the fear and confusion of an eight year old girl in an unfortunate situation. Her father continues to promise her the glass castle, the glass home he plans to build for his family, and we see the young Jeannette put her love and trust in him at the same time as we see how he breaks her heart. This heartbreak written in words breaks the hearts

of her readers. It is the goal of a memoir to do this and Walls does so successfully without writing for pity from her audience.

Together with the appeal to the audience's emotions, identity works as another aspect of how memoirs are rhetorical. We all have memories that build our personal identity. Within a memoir, we as the readers are able to identify with and at the same time remain detached from the writer. As they develop their story, they are forming their own identity, and throughout, we can relate to that personality discovery. What we are most able to identify with are the basic human emotions of fear, discontentment, and confusion. Through the writer's overall tone we can get a sense of how they feel and with their expression of emotions, we can take our own memories and match how we felt then with hers. We all have very different journeys in life but at some time or another, we feel the same types of emotions. These emotions may be for different reasons and caused by different things, but it is human nature to feel and therefore have sympathy and empathy for other people. This is what a memoir does. The writer uses pathos in their stories to help the reader identify with whatever emotion is being expressed in their certain memory. Because we all live different lives and have a plethora of differences, we are unable to identify completely with the memoirist. I remain completely detached from the dramatic memories of Jeannette Walls because I have never experienced the things she has in life. My parents were not vagabonds traveling the desert promising nothing but suffering and lost hope while I starved and lacked any glimpse of normality. Identifying with the audience is important for a memoirist to accomplish so that the reader is engaged in the story while connecting to it. Although it is crucial for them to tell their story in a way that the reader does not fully identify because there needs to be that certain disconnect for the reader to empathize.

Throughout a memoir, the writer usually develops their story in search for some truth. This discovery of personal truth is revealed while the story unfolds. In rhetoric, this search for truth is personal agency and Jeannette Walls uses this in *The Glass Castle*. The memoir starts out with Jeannette in the backseat of a taxi in New York City where she glances out the window to find her mother picking for garbage in the streets. Jeannette's parents continue to live in poverty, by choice, and we see the shame and embarrassment Jeannette feels towards her parent's way of life. Beginning her story like this tells us that she will explain how she got to feel the way she does towards her parents. It is through her memories that she comes to an ultimate truth about where she stands in her relationship with her parents. Even though Jeannette grew up with barely enough food traveling around constantly with so much as an old rock as her only possession, Jeannette struggles with how she feels about her parents. She moves to New York City after her older sister Lori when she turned seventeen and eventually, years later, her parents end up there too. Wall's parents not only physically follow her, but they also mentally and emotionally follow her throughout her life. Jeannette comes to realize they are her parents no matter what and there really isn't much she can do to get rid of them. Jeannette's strongest attribute is her ability to forgive. Jeannette Walls could easily tell her story with self-pity and hatred for her parents but she chooses a different route. If that were the case, *The Glass Castle* would be a completely different story. After she learns that her father is going to die, she thinks about what her life would be like without him, chaos and all. She admits that even though he was a destructive parent, he loved her very much. The last thing her father said to her was, "Have I ever let you down"? It was at that moment that she walked away, content with the fact that her parents were who they were and with effort or not, helped her become the woman she is today.

The Glass Castle is a great story and is an example of how memoirs as a genre are significant in a rhetorical sense. The fact that memoirs focus on reality makes it appeal to readers by inviting them into the very personal memories of the writer's lives. Memoirs focus on the emotion and personalities of the writers, which allows the reader to connect and empathize with them. We are always so fascinated with reality and people's true stories. Reading a memoir is like sitting with the writer over a cup of coffee. We get a real sense of how they felt throughout their lives and we have the privilege to know how they grew into the person they are.

Works cited

The Glass Castle. New York: Scribner. March 2005. ISBN 0-743-24753-1.