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# *Elements of a Storm: The Rhetoric Behind a 7<sup>th</sup> Grade Poem*

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*Produced in Adele Richardson's Fall 2014 ENC 1101*

When I was twelve, a monsoon swept across central Florida, bringing lightning and wind that wreaked havoc. While I played on the desktop computer, I heard a howling wind that sounded like the squealing breaks of a train-cart. The palm trees whipped around and bent sideways amidst the gray sky; there was a crash mixed in with the wallow of the wind. As any twelve-year-old expert on natural disasters, I ran to the back room where my younger siblings played and screamed, “*Get down!*”—silence followed, from both the room and what lied beyond the walls, until an eruption of laughter from them ensued. My fear was justified, however, when we learned a microburst—a vertical column of rain accompanied by an intense down draft containing winds up to 100 miles per hour—engulfed my neighborhood and bent the hinges on our fence backwards, blew off multiple shingles, and threw a trashcan 100 feet from the neighbor in front of us to our backyard; though it was not a tornado, my little heart pounded.

Out of fear of getting laughed at once more, I sat down at my desk and let out my feelings through poetry. I described the sights and sounds, putting everything I sensed within those few, short seconds onto paper. I asked the basic questions: should I make it rhyme? How many lines should I write? Should I use couplets or quatrains? What words should I use? Today, however, I ask *why*? Specifically, how did this rhetorical situation help shape my poem? I now wonder about my exigence, who all was involved in writing this, what influenced my writing, what constraints developed, who *really* was my audience, and if I was the only rhetor. Through this essay, I will discover how the creation of this poem was contingent on the rhetorical situation and what factors influenced my writing.

When I initially wrote the poem, I wrote it for my eyes only. I had no intention of sharing this with one anyone else because I expressed all of my emotions through the lyrics. However, as I formulated each verse, I tried to make it flow and bleed into each subsequent line, only to pause after the end of the quatrains. I originally thought that I was the only audience allowed to give praise and criticism; by being my own audience, I didn't have to impress anyone other than myself. However, the true audience—whether I intended it to be or I subconsciously understood it—was ultimately my future self. I wanted to remember each specific detail of the event, generating intense imagery that would make me feel as powerless as I did back then.

As I thought about the episode, I was able to relieve it over and over again, experiencing the fear repeatedly. Though the scare factor helped push me to write, it was the fact that I felt there was no one to share this experience with which generated the urge, thus creating exigence. At this time in my life, writing poetry helped me express how I felt and created an outlet to alleviate the fear. My fear was not because I feared death, but rather the sheer power of nature—the display of something so extremely powerful wasn't something I wanted to forget, so writing about it (I hoped) would solidify the memory forever. I remember being faced with the urge to not exaggerate or fabricate the incident; I wanted to try to stay true to the memory, but wind was hard to elaborate on. This constraint made it increasingly difficult because some imagery that you would typically

picture during a horrific storm was absent, like lightning, thunder, hail, and the image of a mile-wide tornado ripping through a vacant field. Though a poem about a devastating tornado may have been more powerful, the point of this poem was to capture what I saw and communicate it through lyrics that would help me reimagine the fateful day. Now that I ask questions that analyze the rhetoric behind my writing, I am able to see that the discourse contained both primary and secondary objectives. The compulsion to remember every detail was an underlying reason of writing that was not clearly stated in the discourse, even though fear was obviously expressed in the lyrics.

When I began to write, I was bombarded by questions regarding the structure, such as the number of lines I should have, the type of rhyme scheme and the length of the lines. After writing and rewriting samples of the beginning of the experience, I finally decided that couplets would work best within five quatrains; it gave me an introduction, an ending, and lots of imagery in between. From then on, I was confined on using specific words in order to make the end syllable rhyme, limiting my availability of creative descriptions. This constraint was then accentuated by my seventh-grade vocabulary. Not knowing the plethora of expressions and language and the ways of

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which I could use them hurt the quality of the finished project. Ignorance is bliss, however, and I did not feel or understand the lack of quality, thus still achieving my rhetorical objectives. Although this piece was not meant to *persuade*, it was meant to *convey*; I wanted to have the same feeling reading this poem that I had during the initial event. These constraints unknowingly did affect the situation when I wrote by making it less relatable, therefore influencing my response to the poem in a way that did not impact me as much (Grant-Davie 357). What I thought was powerful language in the seventh grade is now less than impressive.

The sights and sounds of the storm was not the only influence of my emotions; my younger brother and sister played a huge part in the development of my fear. I was originally afraid of the consequences the storm may have produced, but I was not afraid for my life. Instead, I was afraid for the lives of my siblings, unknowingly playing in the back bedroom. As I watched the trees bend and break and hearing the frightful wind, I automatically jumped to the conclusion that a twister threatened my home. From watching past documentaries on natural disasters, specifically those on the destruction of tornados, I realized how quick something so devastating can arise and what evil it could produce. The audience and readers of situations and texts “construct meaning by building multifaceted, interwoven representations of knowledge,” and prior texts can impact the overall meaning of the current situation (Haas and Flower 413). By having past knowledge, it allowed me to construct a falsified meaning of the situation, which concluded that imminent destruction was upon us. After staring out the back window for what seemed like hours, I realized I was not alone and started to focus on how to survive. I ran into the bedroom and yelled, “*Get down!*” in order to save them (as I relay this experience, it may seem as if we were in the midst of a severe storm; however, my emotions and the interpretation of meaning blinded me to the reality that we were in Florida, not Kansas, and tornados strong enough to devastate were more rare). My brother and sister, therefore, partly became the rhetors. Because they were present and feared for their safety, they were responsible for the discourse and how I perceived the meaning of the situation. Looking back, I guarantee I wouldn’t have been so scared during those few seconds if they were not there.

Delivery, one of the canons of rhetoric, also helped shape my writing. I wanted this experience to specifically be in a poem consisting of a rhyming scheme in order to try to convey the overwhelming emotions I felt. Simple prose, I felt, wouldn’t be able to project the intensity and power I witnessed. I also attempted to relate the nature to divine properties, like God and heaven,

to represent how miraculous this event was. After writing it on a scrap piece of paper, I decided to type the poem on my computer, fit with specific fonts and colors; this example of graphemics, “the display of material on the printed page” (Covino and Jolliffe 343), offered another creative outlet to help formulate the delivery. The specific way I wanted my finished product to look was based around the idea of destruction; I wanted the paper to look torn and battered, so I burned the edges of the paper with a handled lighter. The font for the title appeared to be post-apocalyptic as well, colored in sepia to make it look old and forgotten about. After completing my work, I was able to relate not only the words of the poem to the memory, but also the image of destruction that took place.

Throughout the analysis of the factors that influenced my writing, I have the ability to establish the rhetorical constituents that shaped my writing process, ultimately reaffirming that rhetoric is situationally contingent. Audience (my future-self), exigence (need for remembrance and catharsis), constraints (structure and limitations), the construction of meaning (past knowledge), and the delivery (creating the medium) all played large roles in how I wanted to convey my poem. Analyzing rhetorical constituents allowed me to be aware of how much effect simple, menial occurrences and thoughts impact the end product of a piece of writing. I now understand that changing one aspect during my experience could alter the outcome of my writing completely. If I had not been exposed to the severity natural disasters could cause, I would not have been able to construct the same meaning from my experience. This would make it so I would not have been as frightened and there would be no need for me to remember it—ultimately killing the exigence that forced me to write. As I write for the future, I will now be knowledgeable of the elements that create rhetorical situations and how I would be able to control them and use factors, such as constraints, to my advantage. Though this was not a persuasive piece and I had no reason to influence an audience, I know the components needed to influence those on the receiving end. Being aware of the rhetorical situation will help me create a persuasive and relatable piece.

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