Sample rhetorical analysis

**Blood, Toil, Tears, Sweat** – Winston Churchill - May 13, 1940

On Friday evening last I received from His Majesty the mission to form a new administration. It was the evident will of Parliament and the nation that this should be conceived on the broadest possible basis and that it should include all parties. I have already completed the most important part of this task.

A war cabinet has been formed of five members, representing, with the Labour, Opposition, and Liberals, the unity of the nation. It was necessary that this should be done in one single day on account of the extreme urgency and rigor of events. Other key positions were filled yesterday. I am submitting a further list to the king tonight. I hope to complete the appointment of principal ministers during tomorrow.

The appointment of other ministers usually takes a little longer. I trust when Parliament meets again this part of my task will be completed and that the administration will be complete in all respects. I considered it in the public interest to suggest to the Speaker that the House should be summoned today. At the end of today's proceedings, the adjournment of the House will be proposed until May 21 with provision for earlier meeting if need be. Business for that will be notified to MPs at the earliest opportunity.

I now invite the House by a resolution to record its approval of the steps taken and declare its confidence in the new government.

The resolution:

"That this House welcomes the formation of a government representing the united and inflexible resolve of the nation to prosecute the war with Germany to a victorious conclusion."

To form an administration of this scale and complexity is a serious undertaking in itself. But we are in the preliminary phase of one of the greatest battles in history. We are in action at many other points-in Norway and in Holland-and we have to be prepared in the Mediterranean. The air battle is continuing, and many preparations have to be made here at home.

In this crisis I think I may be pardoned if I do not address the House at any length today, and I hope that any of my friends and colleagues or former colleagues who are affected by the political reconstruction will make all allowances for any lack of ceremony with which it has been necessary to act.

I say to the House as I said to ministers who have joined this government, I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat. We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many months of struggle and suffering.
You ask, what is our policy? I say it is to wage war by land, sea, and air. War with all our might and with all the strength God has given us, and to wage war against a monstrous tyranny never surpassed in the dark and lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy.

You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word. It is victory. Victory at all costs - Victory in spite of all terrors - Victory, however long and hard the road may be, for without victory there is no survival.

Let that be realized. No survival for the British Empire, no survival for all that the British Empire has stood for, no survival for the urge, the impulse of the ages, that mankind shall move forward toward his goal.

I take up my task in buoyancy and hope. I feel sure that our cause will not be suffered to fail among men. I feel entitled at this juncture, at this time, to claim the aid of all and to say, "Come then, let us go forward together with our united strength."
Analysis

Occasion
Before you start analyzing a speech, you must make yourself aware of the occasion in which it was held. Who is speaking, to what audience, and with what purpose? By considering the context in which the speech was held, we gain information that may be crucial for our understanding of it. It can be helpful, for instance, to find out how the original audience of the speech reacted to it. Was it a success or a failure? If we don’t know that, it is difficult to say whether the speaker’s strategies are well-chosen or not.

This was Churchill’s first address to parliament as prime minister. Hitler had invaded France only days earlier, and Chamberlain – whose non-aggression policy towards Germany had been found wanting – had been forced to resign. Churchill was a conservative like Chamberlain, but had argued for a long time that Germany had to be fought more actively. He had not been elected but appointed prime minister by the king, on the suggestion of Chamberlain.

This is important to keep in mind as we read the speech: Churchill being new in the office cannot count on the audience having trust in him from the outset, but must win their confidence through his speech.

As the message he wants to convey is that the war against Germany must intensify, his primary aim must be to create a sense of unity within the country, since internal tensions could prove fatal in a war. He must also instill the notion that the war can be won, and therefore must be able to turn a growing sense of despair into a sense of hope.

An analysis of the situation in which the speech was given should also include a consideration of what genre the speech belongs to. By settling that question, we get important information about the purpose of the speech. If the main purpose of the speech is to bestow praise or blame on a person or phenomenon, we are dealing with an epideictic speech; if it is to defend or accuse someone, it is a juridical speech; if its aim is to give advice for the future by arguing for or against a specific cause, it is a deliberative speech. What we are dealing with is thus a deliberative speech: Churchill is arguing that Britain must unite in an effort to win the war against Hitler.

Disposition
The exordium is made up of the first paragraph; the exordium is the very beginning of the speech (the introduction of the introduction, as it were), the function of which is to prepare the audience to hear the speaker’s arguments in a favorable frame of mind. In this part of the speech, the speaker needs to overcome three potential obstacles: the risk that the audience questions his authority, the risk that they question his trustworthiness, and the risk that they suspect him of not wanting what is best for them.

Churchill elegantly overcomes these obstacles by beginning with reminding the audience that he has been given the job of forming a new administration by the king – no question about his authority, then. He continues by making clear that in performing this task, he is following the order not only of the king, but of the “evident will of the Parliament and the
nation.” Stressing this point is a way of minimizing the distance between himself and the Parliament. In practice, Churchill suggests, “I am working for you as much as for the king; indeed, we are all working for the Nation” – that is, for an abstract entity which functions as an ideological ideal around which every citizen can rally, irrespective of political creed or social status. He concludes the exordium by stating that he has “already completed the most important part of this task.” The audience is thus reassured that Churchill is a person who deserves their trust: he presents himself as someone who gets things done, always with the greater good of the nation in mind.

The exordium thus is designed to establish Churchill’s ethos as that of a person who is knowledgeable, trustworthy, and efficient.

That this is indeed the case is borne out by the narratio, which comprises paragraphs 2-3. The function of this part of the speech is to set the stage for its proposition or thesis. Churchill basically reports the facts of the case, but at the same time manages to impress us with his own role in these matters – “I have” done this and that. He also makes a point of stressing the urgency of the situation – “necessary”, “in one single day”, “yesterday”, “tomorrow”. Against this back-drop of frenzied activity Churchill once again underscores that he has the public good in mind by saying that he “considered it in the public interest” to summon this meeting.

This particular narratio is thus largely composed of a factual description of what Churchill has done up till this point – he is arguing primarily by means of the appeal of logos.

Having thus reassured the audience that measures are being taken to ensure a new, stable government as soon as possible, Churchill finally puts forward the proposition in paragraphs 4-6: “That this House welcomes the formation of a government representing the united and inflexible resolve of the nation to prosecute the war with Germany to a victorious conclusion.”

To win approval for a proposition, one generally needs to make likely that what one proposes is feasible and good. Few people will support a proposal if they think it cannot be executed; inversely, no matter how practicable a suggested course of action is, few people will support it unless they think that it is right to act that way. The speaker, thus, should ideally appeal both to the head and the heart of audience.

In ordinary circumstances, it would take a great deal of persuasion to make people “welcome” a policy of war. In this argumentatio, however, Churchill daringly makes short work of the rational arguments in favor of such a policy, choosing instead to rely on the audience sharing his sense of the urgency of the situation. Instead of providing us with an argument in favor of the proposed policy, Churchill in effect argues (in paragraph 7) that the already ongoing action (in Norway, Holland, the Mediterranean) makes the need for reflected arguments superfluous. There simply is no time to dwell on the “complexity” of the undertaking, he is suggesting, it being a time for action rather than
reflection. Paragraph 8 drives home the same point: it being a “crisis” there is little time for talk: action speaks louder than words.

That action, he goes on to argue in paragraphs 9-12, will not be easy. Rather than trying to assuage the audience by telling them that everything will be alright in the end, Churchill chooses to underscore the gravity of the situation through such phrases as “blood, toil, tears, and sweat,” “an ordeal of the most grievous kind,” and “many, many months of struggle and suffering.” This strategy has the rhetorical benefit of excluding all alternatives. Churchill’s vision of the near future is so stark, we are prone to believe that he would have suggested some alternative to it, had there been one.

Having received the notion that there is no alternative to war (not only from Churchill’s words, it is important to remember, but from the historical situation as such), the audience is likely to accept the speaker’s answers to the rhetorical questions asked in paragraphs 10-11 enthusiastically. I am prone to look upon these paragraphs (together with the two concluding ones) as part of the peroratio, or conclusion, of the speech, although a case could also be made for the conclusion being made up only of the final paragraph. At any rate, paragraphs 10 and 11 jointly expand on the two parts of the thesis – waging war on Germany (10) and bringing about victory (11). Paragraph 12 then reminds the audience of the argument in favor of this proposed line of action, which is simply that there is no alternative to it, that there can be, as Churchill puts it, “no survival” without it. In the concluding paragraph, finally, Churchill stresses that he feels hopeful despite the situation, and again repeats that the situation is such that it requires a united effort.

This concluding part of the speech differs considerably from the earlier ones in terms of its tone: here the language is full of pathos, which is only to be expected, since a speaker who wants to persuade an audience needs to win their emotional as well as their intellectual support.

Elocution

The style of the speech fluctuates between plain and middle – at the beginning the tone is terse and to the point, but in the second half the language becomes markedly more stylized. The higher style of course reflects the more heroic sentiments that Churchill is trying to evoke at the end.

The language throughout is clear, and there are hardly any tropes, unless we count “the dark and lamentable catalogue of human crime” as a metaphor for evil. But this is not to say that Churchill is not aware of the power of words: alliteration and parallel structures abound, especially in the peroratio. There are many examples of anaphora, a scheme in which the same word or phrase is repeated at the beginning of successive phrases, clauses, or sentences:

We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many months of struggle and suffering.
You ask, what is our policy? […]

You ask, what is our aim? […]

No survival for the British Empire, no survival for all that the British Empire has stood for, no survival for the urge, the impulse of the ages, that mankind shall move forward toward his goal.

This last example combines anaphora with climax: it is not only the British Empire that is at stake, but the values it stands for, values which are implicitly identified with a universal human longing to improve the world.

When one studies elocutio – the manner in which the speaker makes use of language to persuade us – the essential thing to remember is that identifying the tropes and figures employed is only the first step of the analysis. What is really important is to consider the function of language used. In the figure of climax identified above, for instance, we have already seen how the speaker uses it to reinforce the notion that British values are tantamount to universal and therefore by implication good values.

It could be well to ponder the function of Churchill’s insistence that there is “no survival” without victory, as well. Literally speaking, this is hardly true: the Germans would not have executed all the inhabitants of Britain had they won the war. But what Churchill wants the audience to understand, is that what is at stake is not only their lives, but their British identities. It is for the sake of the nation and the ideals that are connected with it that people are expected to give their lives.

Note also the antithesis that is set up between paragraph 11 and 12, by the repetition of “victory” in the former and “no survival” in the latter. From a grammatical point of view, paragraph 11 could just as well have read: “Our aim is victory – at all costs, in spite of all terrors, however long and hard the road may be, for without it there is no survival.” But by repeating the word, the passage becomes something of an incantation: victory, victory, victory, victory, victory – that is the word Churchill wants to impress upon the audience; that is the word through which he hopes to turn a sense of despair into a sense of hope.

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I trust the above analysis has given you some idea of how one may approach a speech analytically. As you can see, it is a potentially time-consuming activity – I’ve only commented on some aspects of Churchill’s speech, and still my comment is twice as long as the speech itself.

As with all things, it takes time to learn how to analyze speeches and other cultural texts – but it’s fun!

A few more words to clarify what I expect you to do when you analyze the speeches: if you look upon it from the perspective of Inventio and Elocutio, your primary task is to
consider how the speech has been adapted to the particular situation. I haven’t included any information about that, but I trust you will be able to find out the relevant facts by searching the Internet, or consulting a librarian in the library about relevant sources. Once you know the what the situation was, your task is basically to explain why and in what ways this particular speech could be said to meet the requirements for a successful speech in that particular historical situation. Why did that speaker present that thesis to that audience at that moment in time? And why did s/he use that style, those words, those figures of speech? In what way are the stylistic devices adapted to the occasion? To what extent does the speaker draw on logos, ethos, and pathos, and again, how could the use of these appeals be explained in terms of the occasion?

The procedure is similar if you look at the speech from the point of view of its disposition and elocution, only then you begin by asking how the speech is divided. Where does the exordium end and the narratio begin. What (and where) is the proposition? How does the exordium establish the speaker as knowledgeable, trustworthy, and of good will? How does the narratio prepare for the proposition? Where does the argumentatio begin and end, and what are the arguments? How do they support the thesis? What does the peroratio consist of? How does it repeat the main point, and add emotion? Or doesn’t it? If not, why is this? When you study style, note not only what figures of speech are employed, but where they are employed. Why a metaphor here, anaphoras there, an antithesis here etc. What is the function of the stylistic devices in context? To what extent does the speaker draw on logos, ethos, and pathos, and how could the use of these appeals be explained in terms of the disposition? Does any one appeal dominate in any part of the speech (exordium, narratio, propositio etc), and if so why might this be?

These are things you should try to answer when you analyze the speeches, and then convey your results as persuasively as possible to your audience, that is, the rest of the class.

/ Magnus