



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 15
Number 1

Article 6

Fall 10-15-1988

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Recommended Citation

King, Don (1988) "The Rhetorical Similarities of C.S. Lewis and Bertrand Russell," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 15: No. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol15/iss1/6>

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The Rhetorical Similarities of C.S. Lewis and Bertrand Russell

Abstract

Analyzes the writings of the philosophically opposed Lewis and Russell to show how their similar use of rhetorical devices gives their popular writings a similarity of tone.

Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S.—Rhetoric—Relation to Bertrand Russell; Russell, Bertrand—Rhetoric—Relation to C.S. Lewis.

The Rhetorical Similarities of C.S. Lewis and Bertrand Russell

Don King

Everything, real or imagined, can be appraised by us [humankind], and there is no outside standard to show that our valuation is wrong. We are ourselves the ultimate and irrefutable arbiters of value.... It is we who create value and our desires which confer value" (Bertrand Russell from *Why I Am Not a Christian*, p. 48).

[The Tao] is the reality beyond all predicates, the abyss that was before the Creator Himself.... It is the Way in which the universe goes on, the Way in which things everlastingly emerge, stillly and tranquilly, into space and time.... It is the doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false" (C.S. Lewis from *The Abolition of Man*, pp. 28-29).

As these two quotes suggest, Bertrand Russell and C.S. Lewis are on opposite sides of the philosophical coin; indeed, on almost every issue they are at odds. Nevertheless, in spite of not sharing philosophical predilections, they often "sound" alike. That is, the tone of their popular works is very similar. The reason for this is that both employ time-tested rhetorical devices. The focus of this paper, therefore, will be to examine briefly how Russell and Lewis use rhetoric, and by implication, to suggest that this application accounts for the similarity of tone in their popular essays and books.

Rhetoric, according to Aristotle, is the "art of persuasion" and most often finds expression in deliberative (advocacy), forensic (legal), and epideictic (praise or blame) contexts. For the purposes of this paper I am going to focus primarily on examples of Russell's and Lewis' deliberative writing. In the development of any argument one must make certain appeals. In short, one can make an appeal to *ethos* (to the speaker's or writer's own moral character), to *pathos* (to the audience's emotions), and/or to *logos* (to reason and logic). While all of these come into play in any rhetorical situation, *ethos*, says Aristotle, is the most effective. His point may be expressed as follows: "If you can convince your audience that you are someone to be trusted, that you are fair-minded, that you have examined the issue from all sides, that you are not completely closed to the other man's argument, then you stand a very good chance of persuading them to your point of view" (note, by the way, that the speaker or writer may not be trustworthy, fair-minded, and so on although for Aristotle himself it was important that he be so). The writer's *ethos* or persona, as it is called today, is central to effective argumentation.

Russell and Lewis are old hands when it comes to projecting a winsome persona. For instance, in Russell's seminal essay, "Why I Am Not a Christian," he avoids a

shrill, strident, offensive persona and instead adopts one that appears to be tolerant, generous, and, if bemused, at least sympathetic. He begins by debunking what are to him what are watered down definitions of the word Christian. A Christian, says Russell, is not someone who lives a good life nor is he someone who lives in a certain geographic location:

I think... that there are two different items which are quite essential to anybody calling himself a Christian. The first is one of a dogmatic nature - namely, that you must believe in God and immortality.... Then further than that, as the name implies, you must have some kind of belief about Christ... at the very lowest the belief that Christ was, if not divine, at least the best and wisest of men. If you are not going to believe that much about Christ, I do not think you have any right to call yourself a Christian. (pp.13-14)

In making this preliminary remark Russell shows himself to be informed, certain of his object of argumentation, and enlightened. He does not begin his attack on Christianity by bashing the entire Christian faith with a verbal club. His persona comes across as someone worth listening to, regardless the audience's own stand.

In like fashion, Lewis adopts a persona in many of his essays that seems knowledgeable, friendly, cultured, unpretentious, and buoyed up by good humor; indeed, he often comes across as a jovial yet serious elder brother trying to get a problem sibling to "straighten up a bit and stop worrying mum and dad." For example, in the "Preface" to *Mere Christianity* Lewis also considers the meaning of the word Christian. For Lewis Christian means "one who accepts the common doctrines of Christianity" (p. 9). He anticipates then the objections of some who would fault him for judging who and who is not a Christian. May not many who cannot accept such doctrines "be far more truly a Christian, far closer to the spirit of Christ, than some who do?" (p. 10). Lewis counters with a friendly yet determined voice: "Now this objection is in one sense very right, very charitable, very spiritual, very sensitive. It has every amiable quality except that of being useful" (p. 10). To spiritualize the word Christian, says Lewis, will only serve to make it meaningless. At the same time, he recognizes the intent of the objection, so he adds: "It is not for us to say who, in the deepest sense, is or is not close to the spirit of Christ. We do not see into men's hearts. We cannot judge, and are indeed forbidden to judge" (p. 11). But in order for the word to have any real use in language Lewis says "we must therefore stick to the original, obvious meaning... to those who accepted the teaching of the apostles" (p. 11).

In both these instances Russell and Lewis make careful use of persona for their own rhetorical ends. It does no good in an argument to pontificate, harass, or browbeat an audience. To avoid this, both men adopt personas that reflect intellectual honesty, openness, and curiosity while maintaining their own strongly held views. This mixture of candor and urbane confidence works well; in fact, many in their audience that would not share their philosophical positions might at least for the moment grant each man a thoughtful hearing.

Audience awareness, not co-incidentally, is the second rhetorical element consistently used by Russell and Lewis to advantage. Once again Aristotle is instructive. While an attractive *ethos* or persona is the most effective appeal an arguer can make, *pathos* or an appeal to the audience's emotions is the most efficient. The reason for this is that an appeal to emotion can be volatile. In order to argue effectively, a writer must possess an intimate knowledge of who the audience is – its attitudes, beliefs, longings, prejudices, and tolerances. Here any honest rhetorician must strike a delicate balance between the desire to convince and a respect for the integrity of the audience. Failure to do so leads at best to paternalism and worst to manipulation. "God Save the King" or "Shoot the Capitalism Pigs" are different sides of the propagandist's coin. For the most part both Russell and Lewis maintain this balance. They use what they know of their audience to full advantage, yet they avoid dishonest manipulation.

Before I provide some examples of how each man uses his awareness of audience to best advantage, a word on how any effective writer must approach his audience. In a famous essay, "The Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction," Walter Ong notes that writing is addressed almost exclusively to a non-present person. The implications of this are twofold and contradictory. First, the act of writing itself is a kind of withdrawal; one can hardly imagine a writer sitting at his desk madly engaged in the writing process while his audience calmly sits before him – patiently waiting, perhaps humming a bit, even smoking a cigarette and drinking a cup of coffee. Second, and paradoxically, in spite of this necessary withdrawal, this forced isolation, the writer must attempt to write to or for a non-present person; writing for the wall, the chair, or even for one self in the context of deliberation is fruitless. In order to be successful, therefore, a writer must "fictionalize in his imagination an audience he has learned to know not from daily life."

The upshot of this is that a writer must develop in his imagination an audience to which he ascribes some kind of role; he may view them as entertainment seekers, sports enthusiasts, or even fantasy affectionados. To this end it seems to me that Russell and Lewis are most successful. The typical kind of person they fictionalize in their popular books and essays may be described as "common" – decently though not extravagantly educated, pragmatic, sharp but not overly clever, able to "smell a rat," and not terribly

patient. For this kind of person rhetoric had better be clear, cogent, concise, and convincing; otherwise, the book will gradually slide to the floor as a wave of narcolepsy sweeps over the reader's motionless, inert body.

Russell, a mathematician and philosopher, writes, like Lewis, both academic and popular books. Of the seventy odd books and pamphlets he wrote, more than half were addressed to the common man. Consider the following titles: *The Problems of Philosophy* (according to many this little book published in the Home University Library series is still the best introduction of the subject published in English), *Why I Am Not a Christian*, *Sceptical Essays*, *The Conquest of Happiness*, *A History of Western Philosophy*, and *My Philosophical Development*. In each Russell speaks clearly and enthusiastically; he earnestly attempts to persuade his audience of his way of thinking, yet he is typically fair and even-handed. In the "Preface" to *The Conquest of Happiness* we find Russell directly addressing his audience:

This book is not addressed to highbrows, or to those who regard a practical problem merely as something to be talked about. No profound philosophy or deep erudition will be found in the following pages. I have aimed only at putting together some remarks which are inspired by what I hope is common sense. All that I claim for the recipes offered to the reader is that they are such as are confirmed by my own happiness whenever I have acted in accordance with them. On this ground I venture to hope that some among those multitudes of men and women who suffer unhappiness without enjoying it may find their situation diagnosed and a method of escape suggested. It is the belief that many people who are unhappy could become happy by well-directed effort that I have written this book.

A number of things in this passage are noteworthy. First, Russell clearly establishes that his audience is not the intellectual elite but those guided by "common sense." In this way he attempts to underline the idea that he is "one of them," a chum, a mate, one of the crowd. Second, his advice to this audience is not based on theory or hypothesis but on his "own experience and observation" acted upon; that is, his is a practical, pragmatic, utilitarian advice. Third, he is addressing an audience not content to simmer in its misery, but one willing to utilize his "method of escape." He is aiming at an audience that is willing to act, to change, to grow. The overall tone of this appeal, consequently, is no-nonsense yet benevolent, grounded in personal conviction yet tolerant, gregarious yet individualistic. Russell aims squarely for an audience that may be described as a cross between John Wayne and Sam Gamgee.

Examples from Lewis' works that illustrate his awareness of audience and its particularities are almost too numerous to mention. In essay after essay he directly addresses his common sense readers. In *The Problem of Pain*, for instance, he wastes no time in appealing to his audience's conventional wisdom regarding the practical

implications of pain. Assuming that the primary responsibility of each human being is to "surrender itself to its Creator" (p. 90), Lewis goes on the suggest that pain is sometimes used to remind us of this responsibility:

The human spirit will not even begin to try to surrender self-will as long as all seems to be well with it. Now error and sin both have this property, that the deeper they are the less their victim suspects their existence; they are masked evil. Pain is unmasked, unmistakable evil; every man knows that something is wrong when he is being hurt. (p. 92)

Like Russell, Lewis speaks directly and sympathetically to his audience; every man, says Lewis, including himself, knows that pain is the least common denominator, the mathematical reduction that puts all of us on the same existential level. He adds later that pain is "impossible to ignore" (p. 93). This forthright candor goes straight to the heart of the audience so that even those not in philosophical agreement with Lewis can appreciate his point; after all, who among us has not suffered pain at some point and to some degree?

In *The Four Loves* Lewis again treats his audience as an equal, an intimate. About friendship or *phileo* he tells us: "You become a man's Friend without knowing or caring whether he is married or single or how he earns his living. What have all these with the real question, *Do you see the same truth?*" (p. 102-03). Throughout this book, and indeed in many others, Lewis speaks to his audience as if in confidence. It is as if he says: "Here, I've something to share with you that makes sense to me. Sit down, lean back, put off your shoes and take up a glass of wine. Let's work on this thing together." In fact, Lewis' use of the second person "you" throughout *The Four Loves* reinforces the familiarity he is trying to create between himself and his audience. Making a bridge to the audience for Lewis is all important; what good is the writer's persona or even his arguments if he ignores his audience's character?

The third kind of appeal a rhetorician can make is that of *logos*; that is, an appeal to reason. While Aristotle notes that the *ethos* is the most effective rhetorical appeal, he says that the rational appeal is the most important. Aristotle has a long list of specific *topoi* or heuristic probes that produce reasoned appeals: arguments based on definition, comparison, contrast, cause and effect, contradictions, paradox, irony, and analogy. Russell and Lewis of course use all these kinds of arguments. We have already seen, for example, how each uses the argument from definition in their concern with the word Christian. Both employ paradox extensively. About God's mercy Lewis writes: "The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and His compulsion is our liberation" (*Surprised by Joy*, p. 229). About "good" and "bad" Russell says: "A thing is 'good,' as I wish to use the term, if it is valued for its own sake, and not only for its effects. We take medicines because we hope they will have desirable effects, but a gouty connoisseur drinks old wine for its own sake, in spite of

possible disagreeable effects. The medicine is useful but not good, the wine is good but not useful" (*Human Society in Ethics and Politics*, p. 31).

However the *topoi* used most effectively by each writer is the argument by metaphor or analogy. Indeed, it is their facility to create startling metaphors and analogies that make them so attractive as deliberative writers. Briefly, metaphors and analogies are figures of speech or verbal constructions wherein the writer takes a somewhat difficult or unusual idea and tries to make it understandable ableableableable by comparing it to something the audience will be able to comprehend. Consider the following by Russell:

1. I regard [religion] as a disease born of fear (*Why I Am Not a Christian*, p. 27).
2. Our memories and habits are bound up with the structure of the brain, in much the same way in which a river is connected with the river-bed. The water in the river is always changing, but it keeps to the same course because previous rains have worn a channel. In like manner, previous events have worn a channel in the brain, and our thoughts flow along this channel (p. 71).
3. It has become clear that, while the individual may have difficulty in deliberately altering his character, the scientific psychologist, if allowed a free run with children, can manipulate human nature as freely as Californians manipulate the desert (p. 108).
4. Dealing with children is a specialized activity requiring specialized knowledge and a suitable environment. The rearing of children in the home is of a piece with the spinning wheel, and is equally uneconomic (p. 109).
5. Mathematics, rightly viewed, possesses not only truth, but supreme beauty – a beauty cold and austere, like that of sculpture (*Mysticism and Logic*, from Chapter Four).
6. Every man, wherever he goes, is encompassed by a cloud of comforting convictions, which move with him like flies on a summer day (*Sceptical Essays*, p. 28).

Selecting a series of Russell's metaphors and analogies is not as difficult as selecting a list of Lewis'; Russell, I assume, is not as well known to this audience as is Lewis. Therefore, I offer the following as only a representative list, impartial and personal:

1. The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts (*The Abolition of Man*, p. 24).
2. The Divine "goodness" differs from ours, but it is not sheerly different: it differs from ours not as white from black but as a perfect circle from a child's first attempt to draw a wheel. But when the child has learned to draw, it will know that the circle it then makes is what

it was trying to make from the very beginning (*The Problem of Pain*, p. 39).

3. [God's love for man is] persistent as the artist's love for his work and despotic as a man's love for his dog, provident and venerable as a father's love for a child, jealous, inexorable, exacting as love between the sexes (pp. 46-47).
4. [Pain] plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul (p. 95).
5. God made us: invented us as a man invents an engine. A car is made to run on gasoline, and it would not run properly on anything else. Now God designed the human machine to run on Himself. He Himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on (*Mere Christianity*, p. 54).
6. Pride is spiritual cancer: it eats up the possibility of love, or contentment, or even common sense (p. 112).
7. The safest road to Hell is the gradual one – the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts (*The Screwtape Letters*, p. 56).

To do each writer justice regarding his use of metaphor and analogy world obviously take much more time than this paper allows. The point I want to make here, however, is that Russell and Lewis rely on this kind of appeal to reason because of their audience; to an audience of common sense people it is wise to create comparisons and mental pictures when the subject under discussion begins to get weighty. The advantage of the metaphor or analogy is that it creates an immediate mental image in the audience's mind that helps hold and focus the argument being considered.

The thrust of this paper has been upon the rhetorical similarities in the popular books and essays of Russell and Lewis. Of their opposite philosophical positions little has been said. Russell, a materialist and atheist, argues for the centrality of scientific progress and human potential. He believes that the future is solely in the hands of mankind. Science, says Russell, should replace religion as the arbiter of human behavior, especially with regard to child development and human sexuality. Lewis, on the other hand, an idealist and Christian, argues for the necessity of natural law and human obedience. He believes the future is solely in the hands of an omniscient, personal God. Science, for Lewis, has its function as a tool of mankind, but it can never take the place of religion; it speaks only to the physical world while religion speaks to the spiritual. It is hard to find two men more out of sympathy with one another; *Why I Am Not a Christian* is as far from *Mere Christianity* as the Sun from Pluto.

My reticence at addressing in more detail their philosophical differences is not because I want to avoid the rather volatile nature of their opposing views; indeed, when I began working on this article I realized that an understanding of Russell's and Lewis' rhetorical skills would enhance an understanding of their philosophical views. What I have further discovered as a result of this paper is that Lewis may have been using many of Russell's views as a springboard for his own counter arguments. Earlier in this paper I spoke of the need for every writer to fictionalize his audience as a non-present person. I now believe that in many of Lewis' popular books and essays he may have been actually fictionalizing Bertrand Russell. And in a follow-up paper to this one I hope to show how Lewis may have had specific passages from Russell's work in mind as he considered a number of philosophical issues upon which he and Russell so clearly disagreed.

Be that as it may, I conclude by noting that each writer demands from us a fair hearing regardless our philosophical predilections. Each, through a careful application of rhetorical principles, manages to capture our attention and hold us for the moments we read their works. Each challenges us to pause, to consider, to cogitate, and to respond. Their success in persuading turns both upon the force with which they communicate their ideas and our own "cloud of comforting convictions."

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