

4-12-2006

# The Enthymeme's Role in Modern Discourse

Ryan Meehan

*University of South Florida*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd>

 Part of the [American Studies Commons](#)

## Scholar Commons Citation

Meehan, Ryan, "The Enthymeme's Role in Modern Discourse" (2006). *Graduate Theses and Dissertations*.  
<http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/3852>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [scholarcommons@usf.edu](mailto:scholarcommons@usf.edu).

The Enthymeme's Role in Modern Discourse

by

Ryan Meehan

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of English  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Joe Moxley, Ph.D.  
Joyce Walker, Ph.D.  
Deborah Noonan, Ph.D.

Date of Approval:  
April 12, 2006

Keywords: debate, argument, rhetoric, politics, memes

© Copyright 2006, Ryan Meehan

## Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Introduction	1
Defining Enthymeme	4
The Enthymeme Exemplified	7
Putting The 'Meme' In Enthymeme	11
The Media	16
The Enthymeme In The Classroom	25
Conclusion: Consider The Enthymeme	30

## The Enthymeme's Role in Modern Discourse

Ryan Meehan

### ABSTRACT

In this paper, I wish to demonstrate how enthymemic argument pervades modern discourse. First, I will define the enthymeme in Aristotelian terms and compare its qualities to its sibling, the syllogism. Next, I will attempt to demonstrate how the enthymeme functions, paying close attention to its psychological effects as well as analyzing how the media helps promote enthymemic discourse. Finally, I will propose a way that composition instructors can harness the idea of the enthymeme to facilitate critical thinking in the classroom.

The purpose of the paper is to provide evidence that a rebirth of this classical term is in order. Enthymemes are tricky, and they are often there without us ever knowing or suspecting them. By analyzing what an enthymeme does, what it looks like and how to respond to it, we can be better prepared to make the important ethical decisions we are faced with every day.

## Introduction

On the surface of the moon that late July evening in 1969, Neil Armstrong chatted with mission control in Houston as he descended a ladder on the exterior of the Lunar Module. As he stepped down, he told them how the footpads of the module were only depressed a few inches into the surface. The surface, he said, “was almost like a powder” (One Small Step). In fact, Armstrong discussed a myriad of moon-related things — mostly technical jargon — before settling on the surface and uttering, perhaps, the most famous words of the 20th century:

*That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.<sup>1</sup>*

The next morning, newspapers across the world splashed on their front pages grainy, grayscale images of Armstrong with his feet firmly planted on the surface of the moon. The headlines reflected the excitement that surrounded the accomplishment (“Moon, We're Onto You,” read the front page of the *St. Petersburg Times* that day). *The New York Times* dedicated an entire 18 pages to the lunar landing.

Amid all the excitement, however, something slipped under the radar. Neil Armstrong's famous quote was actually a blunder that made no logical sense. What Armstrong meant to say was: “That's one small step for *a* man, one giant leap for mankind.” The exclusion of the word “a” makes a world of difference in regards to his statement, because without the article, “man” and “mankind” mean the same thing. Armstrong had essentially contradicted himself, saying that his first step on the lunar surface was both a small and large step for humanity.

---

<sup>1</sup> To hear raw audio of Armstrong's comments, visit this web site:  
<http://www.hq.nasa.gov/office/pao/History/alsj/a11/a11a1091545.ram>

Despite *The New York Times* extensive coverage, which included a word-for-word transcript of the landing crew's communication with Houston and a full two pages where famous people offered up their opinions surrounding the landing<sup>2</sup>, not once did the *its* reporters call into question Armstrong's confounding quote.

Of course, the correctness of the astronaut's statement is a moot point. As his words traversed the radio waves from the moon and into the living rooms of millions of people around the world, the meaning, however mangled by his phrasing, was clear: His first step on the moon was a trivial act for a single man, but a monumental one for the whole of humanity.

This example illustrates just how easily the structure and context of an utterance can override its meaning. Armstrong's words — at least the way he said them — were familiar. He used simple juxtaposition, a rhetorical device used extensively by the likes of then-recent icons John F. Kennedy (...”ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country”) and Martin Luther King Jr. (“We may have all come on different ships, but we're in the same boat now”). Consider, too, the context: In a decade largely defined by tragedy — the assassinations of Kennedy, King, Malcolm X and Robert Kennedy and the onset of the Vietnam War, for instance — Armstrong had an audience willing to accept his words as the slogan for a generation.

In this tale lies the basis for this paper. The truth of the matter is what Neil Armstrong said (or meant to say) on the moon in 1969 was largely inconsequential. At most, Armstrong produced a statement that would forever remind us of the space race of the late 1950s and 1960s; at least, he concocted a juicy sound byte. Either way, the

---

<sup>2</sup> Here Pablo Picasso famously quipped: “It means nothing to me. I have no opinion about it, and I don't care.”

confusing logic of his actual words had little impact on the world. The same, however, cannot be said for all faulty lines of logic, especially those that try to persuade us, try to shape and reshape our opinions and try to paint us red or blue when we go to the polls every fourth November.

This is why I believe we, as teachers of writing and argument, should consider resurrecting the classical concept of enthymeme and teach students how to recognize and respond to all of its modern manifestations. The purpose of reintroducing the concept in the composition classroom is not to create a new generation of sophists for whom the notion of “truth” is pure folly. As teachers of argument, we are charged with teaching students to “think critically,” though determining exactly what critical thinking is and then teaching kids how to do it can be challenging. Understanding the enthymeme, its role in classical rhetoric, the way it functions in modern politics and its inherent power to replicate will serve our students well in a changing rhetorical world that each day favors more and more public discourse.

## Defining Enthymeme

Before discussing how the enthymeme pervades modern discourse, it is first important to attempt to define the term. For Aristotle, the enthymeme was “a sort of syllogism” (Bizzell 180). A syllogism simply states: If A is greater than B, and B is greater than C, then A is greater than C. Aristotle’s famous example goes like this:

1. All men are mortal.
2. Socrates is a man.
3. Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

Notice that the argument here is valid because the major premise (All men are mortal) is indisputable. As a result, the minor premises that follow are validated. The enthymeme, however, is slightly different. The enthymeme is a lot like a syllogism, except its major premise is not absolute, and its ability to persuade hinges on probability and commonly held assumptions of the audience.

1. All men are lustful. (Major Premise)
2. Socrates is a man. (Minor Premise)
3. Therefore, Socrates is lustful. (Conclusion)

Problematic to this argument is that the major premise is not true all of the time. The acceptance of such a premise depends wholly on the audience and what they perceive as true and as a result, Aristotle argues that speakers who employ enthymemic discourse often stick to simple messages that have universal appeal. Simplicity “makes the uneducated more effective than the educated when addressing popular audiences — makes them, as the poets tell us, ‘charm the crowd's ears more finely,’” he says (Bizzell



225). In fact, it is more likely that the first premise (All men are lustful) would be left unstated, the author having assumed the perpetually unquenched lust of men to be a given among his or her audience members. This focus on audience will be important later.

Aristotle was not alone in discussing the enthymeme. Isocrates, too, considered how this line of reasoning functioned in discourse, as did his contemporary Anaximenes of Lampascus. Where the enthymeme for Aristotle was simply a syllogism that contained a premise that was only probable (a logical fallacy), Isocrates saw the enthymeme for its kairotic affordances. Having employed various stylistic and rhetorical devices suitable to the particular audience, Isocrates believed a speaker could then effectively dispatch a series of enthymemes to win over a crowd. The use of rhetorical devices served to “intensify (the enthymeme’s) impact and enhance its presence and memorability in the audience's psyche” (Walker 53). Thus, the enthymeme only functions in an effective manner when closely accompanied by an acute awareness of kairos<sup>3</sup>.

Anaximenes defined enthymemes as “oppositions,” which can be created by carefully picking apart an opposing rhetor's argument for any of its inherent contradictions. Having exposed the weakness in his opponent's argument, the orator can then claim that his own words uphold the common good. The audience, Walker notes, should be left with not just with the feeling “that the speaker's claims are true or probable, but that both speaker and claims are good and admirable, and the very opposite of what is false, bad and detestable” (50).

---

<sup>3</sup> Philip Sipiora traces the word kairos to The Iliad “where it denotes a vital or lethal place in the body, one that is particularly susceptible to injury and therefore necessitates special protection; kairos thus, initially, carries a spatial meaning” (2). As the term evolves, its definition expands. A kairotic speaker should be able “(to) know the various forms of discourse, in order to avoid violating the rules of appropriateness; to alter the discourse for convenience; and to choose forms that are harmonious with each other.” (4)

The enthymeme has also been reimagined by more recent theorists like John T. Gage, who reveals how the classical understanding of this line of reasoning lends itself to new ways of thinking about invention in the composition classroom. An understanding of enthymeme will force students to eschew “knee-jerk” responses and instead encourage more critical treatment of logic in argument-building. Students can use enthymemic principle to predict how certain audiences will react and sculpt their arguments accordingly (Gage 40). I discuss the application of enthymeme in Freshman Composition in the final part of this paper.

The enthymeme is particularly powerful because as a rhetorical device it often lurks in the shadows. Where other forms of argument may lay their cards out on the table, taking careful, logical steps, the enthymeme relies on what is unstated or what is perceived to be already understood. Like the wolf in grandmother's pajamas in the tale of *Little Red Riding Hood*, the enthymeme often disguises itself, covering its true nature with metaphor, juxtaposition and the veil of logic. In the same way, millions were fooled into thinking Neil Amstrong's first words on the moon made sense, the enthymeme has the capacity to make faulty argument seem probable.

## The Enthymeme Exemplified

Neil Armstrong's botched quote demonstrates how familiar structure can fool even a worldwide audience. The enthymeme works in a similar way, as a writer or speaker employing this type of argument assumes that the structure will make the argument seem inherently appealing to the audience. Case in point: a short-lived national debate flared up in late September 2005 when Ronald Reagan's former Secretary of Education, William Bennett, made what seemed like an unconscionable claim. On his nationally broadcast morning radio show, which reaches over a million listeners a day, a caller asked Bennett if he believed a theory that posited that potential revenue from aborted fetuses could have adequately funded our current Social Security program. Bennett hesitated to answer, but was reminded of similar findings in Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner's recent publication, Freakonomics. In the book, the authors claim that crime rates have decreased since the legalization of abortion in the 1970s, a result of fewer unwanted children growing up in predominantly impoverished households. Bennett then said this:

...I do know that it's true that if you wanted to reduce crime, you could — if that were your sole purpose, you could abort every black baby in this country, and your crime rate would go down. That would be an impossible, ridiculous, and morally reprehensible thing to do, but your crime rate would go down. So these far-out, these far-reaching, extensive extrapolations are, I think, tricky. (Media Matters)

In the days following the remark, several political commentators, conservative and liberal, painstakingly affirmed Bennett's argument on the basis of its apparent logical

infallibility. It was an uncomfortable example, especially in light of the racially charged milieu that followed the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina, but the claim was, they maintained, logically sound:

...the empirical claim here is unambiguously true. (Yglesias)

Bill Bennett made a statement that is inarguably true, and look at the quick calls for censorship. It is a fact that blacks are disproportionately involved in criminal activity. (The Editors)

The rate (of crime among blacks) being high, it is an unavoidable mathematical reality that if the number of blacks, or of any group whose rate outstripped the national rate, were reduced or eliminated from the national computation, the national rate would go down. (McCarthy)

With this example, we see enthymemes in action in several different ways. First, let's look at Bennett's supposition in syllogistic terms:

1. The crime rate among black Americans is disproportionately high in comparison to other races.
2. Therefore, if we abort a generation of black babies, the crime rate will decrease.

Upon first look, it appears that there is little to dispute. The first statement is backed up by more than fifty years of U.S. criminal statistics<sup>4</sup>, so the second statement, however morally reprehensible, would seem to make good, logical sense. However, in

---

<sup>4</sup> For more information, visit the Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics: <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/correct.htm#Programs>

this case — which is the case for many enthymemes — the major premise has been left unstated, and as a result, we are left only with the minor premise and the conclusion. Here, Bennett assumes that his audience — which likely consists of conservative-minded, upper-middle class whites — has already accepted the major premise as fact. That premise, of course, is that blacks are inherently more likely to commit crime. As Lawrence D. Green suggests, speakers who utilize enthymemic reasoning often omit the major premise because they assume “it is so much a part of the shared communal perception that to mention it would insult the reader’s intelligence, advertise the writer’s ineptitude, and slow down the discourse” (624).

It may seem that this major premise (blacks are inherently criminal) is the same as the minor premise (blacks commit a disproportionate amount of crime), but it is not, and the distinction is crucial. The major premise can only be viewed as probable, as scientists have yet to prove any genetic predisposition to crime among blacks (or any other race for that matter). A more logical main premise would have considered the social factors that lead to crime, and instead of suggesting the elimination of a generation of black babies, Bennett could have suggested a way to raise the household income of black mothers and fathers. The minor premise, on the other hand, is indisputable. Having a keen awareness of his audience, Bennett crafted an argument that seemed perfectly logical to those that accepted his unstated major premise.

By examining this enthymeme, we can also see how easily it can fool. In positing his argument in logical terms, Bennett gave it credibility that resonated with many of his defenders, as well as individuals who normally wouldn’t cross party lines to defend the lifelong conservative. The idea was horrid, but the logic was indisputable, many

conceded. But how many of Bennett's defenders would still defend his remarks if the major premise — that blacks are inherently, at the genetic level, predisposed to deviant behavior — was explicitly stated? While statistics show that show blacks commit a disproportionate amount of crime, the same statistics also reveal other factors that contribute to crime, such as poverty, availability of healthcare and population density. How many of Bennett's defenders would champion a race-based view of crime over a sociological one?

Just how to treat enthymeme is tricky, because as this example shows, sometimes it can be hard to tell whether a premise is really missing. As Green notes, enthymemic reasoning is so ubiquitous to modern discourse “that we are apt to see right through it and follow the way it patterns our thought without being conscious of the patterning itself. (623)” Unfortunately for us, the enthymeme is not only a powerful cultural force in terms of its structure, but it also exploits us in other ways which I will discuss in-depth in the next two sections.

## Putting The ‘Meme’ In Enthymeme

In *The Body of Persuasion: A Theory of the Enthymeme*, Jeffrey Walker dissects the etymology of the word “enthymeme,” tracing the word back to its Greek root, “thymos,” meaning “heart.” Thymos, Walker notes, is “often linked to both the production and reception of passionate thought and eloquent, persuasive discourse (49).” While this analysis gives us insight into the origins of the word, it only tells half the story. If we are to understand the power of enthymeme in today's world, we need look no further than the second half of the word; for there lies a relatively new term that allows us to reimagine how the enthymeme functions.

Ethologist Richard Dawkins coined the word “meme” in early 1970s. Dawkins introduced the term in his book *The Selfish Gene* to describe the phenomena of “cultural transmission” (192). The word meme, Dawkins explains, refers to the capacity of units of culture to replicate and spread. Memes function on a brute, utilitarian foundation, wherein natural selection weeds out weak memes and powerful ones get transmitted horizontally (from person to person) and vertically (from generation to generation). Dawkins encapsulated his vision of the meme succinctly in Chapter 11 of his book:

Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. (192)

Memes are enduring and persistent. Think of jokes like “Why did the chicken cross the road?” Think of catch phrases like “the more the merrier” or “kill two birds with one stone.” Think of belief systems like Islam or Judaism or Christianity. So what have memes to do with political argument and orators’ reliance on enthymemic reasoning? Well, everything. Dawkins theorizes that successful memes must have “longevity, fecundity, and copying-fidelity,” and enthymemes provide political argument with just these ingredients. Politicians cannot sell long, complex arguments so instead they condense those arguments into tightly packed enthymemes that are media-ready. For Bennett, reducing the crime rate was as simple as eliminating a race of people. For Al Gore in his 2000 bid for the presidency, we were a lockbox away from fixing social security. His opponent, then Gov. George W. Bush, scored a major meme with “fuzzy math.” In the context of traditional political discourse the enthymeme often resembles what we’ve come to know as “talking points.”

Bush’s characterization of Democratic candidate John Kerry as a “flip-flopper” during the 2004 Election is a prime example. This phrase, and variations of it, gave Bush the power to call into question Kerry's voting record during the past thirty years, without having to articulate the specifics of his argument. The unstated premise was that if Kerry couldn’t make up his mind about the necessity of war, whether it was Vietnam or Iraq, he would be an unreliable president. Flip-flopper works in part because of the quirky vocal cadence it creates, which lends itself to repetition. During that campaign both parties unleashed a series of memes designed to defame the opponent, and the media become the carrier for these attacks. Cultural hero of the left, Jon Stewart, captured just how incessant talking point memes can become once released into the mainstream media



machine. In his segment *from The Daily Show* in the summer of 2004, Stewart compiled clips of conservative talking points from cable news shows that labeled Kerry's running mate, John Edwards, as out of the mainstream, and as one of the most liberal members of the senate.

***Fox News:*** "He stands way out of the mainstream."

***CNN – Terry Holt, Spokesman for Bush Camp:*** "...way out of the mainstream."

***CNN – Communication Director, Bush-Cheney:*** "He stands so far out of the mainstream."

***CNN – Lynn Cheney:*** "He's so out of the mainstream."

***CNN - Terry Holt:*** "They're out of the mainstream."

***CNN – Frank Donatelli, GOP Strategist:*** "...well out of the mainstream. (Jaffa)<sup>5</sup>

There you see the meme in all its glory, jumping from mouth to mouth effortlessly and repetitively as national news cameras roll. Stewart's example should be all too familiar to anyone who tunes in to mainstream news outlets during campaign season, but memes and enthymemes don't always rely on cable news for transportation. Take rapper Kanye West, for instance, who caused shockwaves in the Fall of 2005 when he went off script during a celebrity television charity drive on NBC for the victims of Hurricane Katrina. After pointing out the double standards in regards to the treatment of white victims versus blacks (whites were looking for food, blacks were looting, he said), West ended his outburst with this now infamous meme:

---

<sup>5</sup> For complete audio of the segment, download the MP3 (3.8mb) here: <http://collegewriting.us/Ryan/Pedagogy/DailyShow.mp3>

*George Bush doesn't care about black people.*

That quote — an enthymeme with several unstated premises and a juicy meme to boot — resonated in media, where West was criticized for including emotional politics in a charity event and likewise praised for what many thought was an accurate description of the state of affairs. According to a search on Lexis Nexis, in the two weeks that followed, West's quote was carried in 66 major U.S. newspapers, including the *New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. When asked by *Playboy* how he felt about NBC's decision to edit the broadcast for its West Coast airing, West was indifferent. He said NBC shouldn't have been surprised: his music had always been socially conscious and politically active.<sup>6</sup> But when taken as a whole, West admitted he could see why some might have expected his controversial rant. His rhetorical flare had disguised his purpose.

They didn't listen to ... "Crack Music." They just heard the hooks. They didn't hear what I was saying about social issues. With my polo collars popped, they never saw me coming. (*Playboy* 50)

West, having built up a reputation of creating incredibly catchy music, and having dressed in a way few people would find offensive, was able to launch perhaps the most memorable enthymeme from the Katrina disaster. Like Armstrong, West had an audience willing to fill in certain premises he left out in his blanket statement, and an audience

---

<sup>6</sup> On his critically acclaimed second album, 2005's *Late Registration*, West takes on the perils of the diamond industry in "Diamonds From Sierra Leone." In "Crack Music" he suggests the government had a hand in ensuring blacks remained repressed following the civil rights movement by keeping the cost of crack low: "How we stop the Black Panthers?/Ronald Reagan cooked up an answer."

desperate for answers five days after the hurricane had struck and little had been done to help survivors.

And while Bush has certainly been the target of plenty enthymemic attacks, he and his administration have relied on the same type of reasoning and memetic efficiency to popularize its oft-criticized foreign and domestic policies. Consider the slogans and one-liners that have proven to be strong memes in the four years since the September 11th Attacks: *War on Terror*; *Defending freedom abroad*; *You're either with us or against us*. What do all these have in common? They are turns of phrases that are, essentially, enthymemes not at all shaped like syllogisms. Instead, the arguments are stripped down to their lowest common denominator and are given a sexy name, making the propagation of the ideas easier to spread. All the aforementioned phrases boast the “longevity, fecundity and copy-fidelity” Dawkins claims are necessary for successful transmission. If they didn't, we wouldn't be as intimately familiar with them as we are today. The one thing that all the enthymemes referenced above have in common is that all are mere remnants of complex political philosophies. Additionally, they demonstrate how the replication of an idea, given the right ingredients, can be powerful, deceitful and costly. While the audience constitutes the main “ingredients” to a persistent meme and persuasive enthymeme, a clean channel through which enthymemes can travel is also requisite for successful transmissions. As far ingredients go, then, without the media, the enthymeme's impact of discourse would not be ubiquitous.

## The Media

Having established that enthymemes do in fact play a significant role in modern discourse, it would now seem appropriate ask how this form of argument has become so popular. While answering this question definitively is impossible, I would like to suggest here that the media plays a major role in promoting enthymemic thought. By exploring how the media functions, we can better understand how enthymemes function, and by analyzing the press in this critical light, we may find ourselves more equipped to make intelligent decisions.

The example I used earlier in this paper — Former Education Secretary William Bennett's assertion regarding abortion and crime rate — demonstrated how common the enthymemic line of reasoning is and how convincing it may appear to be at first glance. But the enthymeme's power is not only derived from the way it can disguise itself as logical argument, but also from the way it can replicate itself as an infectious meme. As enthymemes generally take complex arguments and make them simple, an idea that is easily replicable is easier to pass along.

I have already analyzed how Bennett's argument is represented syllogistically, and ultimately why it fails. I have also discussed how the familiarity of that type of reasoning makes it inherently persuasive. But memes and enthymemes don't exist within a vacuum. They need a channel through which they can travel, and the media provides just the right venue. But why?

The memes deployed by politicians are granted free and effective transport. Much in the way Neil Armstrong's famous words were splattered across hundreds of newspaper front pages despite their being nonsensical, enthymemes often enjoy the same treatment

in the mainstream media, which bolster their memetic qualities. As noted by Jamieson and Waldman, and as I have described in the introduction, a recitation of facts can easily be overtaken by overly simplistic presentation. In the business of news the “critical variable is usually not the facts themselves but the manner in which they are arranged and interpreted in order to construct narratives describing the political world” (Jamieson and Waldman xiv). Additionally, because the media wields so much power, the replication of enthymemic reasoning is all the more frightening if we are left unaware of how to defend against it. In politics, the efficient spread of ideas from a politician to his or her base is a crucial part of ensuring consecutive terms in office. In creating political arguments, it behooves politicians to create the most effective memes possible because “those who control the language control the argument, and those who control the argument are more likely to successfully translate belief into policy” (Jamieson and Waldman xiv).

Criticizing the press in these terms to some may seem like a condemnation of journalism. “Media” is indeed a sweeping term, and in no way do I mean to imply that individual reporters or editors are acting maliciously, purposefully injecting enthymemes into every facet of public discourse in a concerted effort to mislead their readership. This is not the case at all. The rules of journalism, and pressure from more new, dynamic, democratic and malleable forms of media create an atmosphere of unfettered competition. In a media world teeming with e-mail alerts and RSS feeds tailored to our needs, numerous web sites and blogs offering unusual independence from corporate money, round-the-clock cable news and traditional print outlets, it is becoming increasingly harder to rope in readership, especially for the broadcast and print enterprises. The way the mainstream media has reacted to this competition, I will argue, is by pursuing

sensationalist narrative angles in stories, and in turn, ignoring important contextual information relevant to the reader's understanding of the story. This approach has left the media susceptible to enthymemic arguments like Bennett's, which fail to critically examine complex issues and instead focus on more palatable themes, like quick and easy solutions to crime.

Bird and Dardenne shed some light on this perspective in their discussion of the narratives that seem to dominate the airwaves. By highlighting the mythical qualities of news, it becomes apparent that the media not only tell us stories about the world around us but tell us stories that influence our understanding of reality. And really, this is what storytelling is for. Much in the same way a mother uses stories (The Boy Who Cried Wolf or parables from the Bible, for example) to teach her children how to behave, the media tells stories that force us to consider how we would behave were we part of that scene. Each time the 11 o'clock news leads with a story of a heroic convenience store cashier who warded off a would-be thief, we are able to consider how we would respond in that situation. Powerful stuff, especially since 24-hour-a-day news oftentimes puts us right at the scene of the story, allowing us to vicariously live through the days' newsmakers and work our way through difficult moral dilemmas. On television news, viewers of the popular convenience store robbery narrative often get to see the action from surveillance cameras within the store.

While this sort of interaction between the news and its consumers can be viewed positively — on a primal level the news forces us to consider how we would react in various situations, which may leave us better prepared should one actually arise — Bird and Dardenne and others have shown that the dissemination of those familiar narratives

come at a cost. Indeed, “Through myth and folklore, members of a culture learn values, definitions of right and wrong, and sometimes can experience vicarious thrills” (70), but while these stories may make us reconsider our own value systems, they may also distort our view of reality.

Because mythical narratives are so powerful, news organizations — as I said above — tend to promote the most familiar aspects of the story, and in doing so, succeed in ignoring more relevant information. The old saying “If it bleeds, it leads” characterizes the rise of sensationalism in journalism, but sensationalism and the favoring of familiar narratives aren’t quite the same thing, though some may argue they often mix together.

Claire Wardle's analysis of two similar criminal cases in Britain and the United States, perhaps, makes the best case for this phenomenon. Wardle analyzed 133 articles from newspapers in the U.S. and Britain that covered the stories of Ted Kaczynski (“The Unabomber”) and David Copeland (“The Nail Bomber”), respectively. Her research demonstrates how media organizations generally frame stories in a way that makes them identifiable to a particular culture. Through qualitative analysis, Wardle shows how the narratives of the American papers differ from the British papers, and while the conclusions she reaches have some interesting things to say about the differences in the two societies, the results indicate that a familiar narrative path can dominate a story and neglect more important contextual information that might help readers or viewers better understand the nature of the crimes committed.

Wardle's analysis highlighted cultural difference (American papers, for instance, concentrated on the trial of Kaczynski, while British papers focused on Copeland's crimes) but also revealed a pattern of similarity in the coverage of the two cases. Both the

American and British media, in general, ignored or downplayed the perpetrators' severe mental illness. Both men having been diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, reporters could have used the cases to educate the public about the disease but instead focused on the more palatable narrative: the battle of good versus evil. Kaczynski was pitted as a mountain hermit, Copeland a Nazi sympathizer. Having fundamentally ignored the topic of mental illness, reporters failed to provide a context to readers that could have helped answer the “why?” surrounding the cases and the unspeakable crimes committed by the two men. Wardle calls upon James Carey, author of “The Dark Continent of American Journalism,” to further elucidate this point.

Carey explains the absence of “why” in the idea that the “who, what, where and when” are relatively transparent whereas the “why is invisible”. He continues by stating, “Explanations do not lie within events or actions. Rather they lie behind them or are inferences or extrapolations that go well beyond the common sense evidence at hand. Explanation then cuts against the naive realism of journalism with its insistence on objective fact.” (249)

Having established the media's role in perpetuating myth reveals why memes and enthymemes flourish in media rich environments. The Bennett example illustrates, too, how enthymemes create a sort of snowball effect, wherein enthymemes with strong memetic resonance gain strength from previous enthymemes, resulting in a myth that grows larger and more believable. In the same way the media failed in adequately providing context in the Unabomber and Nailbomber cases, so too did Bennett and his supporters in advocating the position that the abortion of black babies would result in less



crime. A more comprehensive analysis would have considered, as I have already discussed, key social factors that contribute to crime. An informal content analysis illustrates how Wardle's findings regarding the neglect of important contextual information and Bird and Dardenne's research concerning familiar narrative paths chosen by journalists are omnipresent in today's media. A primer for WFLA-Tampa Newschannel 8's 11 o'clock news on March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2006 went like this:

Who would hurt an innocent puppy? Police say this man did, and his crime didn't end there.

The preview, which aired to during a commercial break of NBC's *The Office* (a primetime spot), constructs a frame that, as with the mail and nail bombings, forces the audience to ask “why?” This story serves as another clear example of how “The audience demands that the world makes sense, but rather than provide deeper, more thoughtful analysis, reporters too often rely on simplistic, personifying situations by focusing on the individual incident rather than the wider causes.” (Wardle 249)

The following day, both major Tampa newspapers ran stories on the incident, and neither explored any of the “wider causes.” Both stories follow the pattern which clearly delineates the narrative path. “When Aihab Gerges saw a man drag a puppy across a gas station parking lot Wednesday, he couldn't stand by and watch the dog suffer,” reads the lead of *The Tampa Tribune* story, which immediately reinforces the hero/villain dichotomy. It's Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader, Harry Potter and Lord Voldemort, David and Goliath.

By viewing the story within this frame, I am not insinuating that the offender's crimes were not serious, nor am I trying to devalue the actions taken by the passerby who confronted the man and helped to save the dog. Indeed, the “hero” of this story was repeatedly stabbed following his confrontation with the man. What's telling regarding the way all three news organizations covered this story is the same neglect for the perpetrator's mental illness that Wardle illustrates in her analysis in the Kaczynski and Copleand cases. In the case of Juan Martinez-Castro, the man who dragged the dog across the parking lot and then stabbed the man who tried to save it, the issue of mental illness is only apparent, as no official agency claims that he suffers from any kind of psychological disorder. It is also unclear to what extent the reporters who wrote the stories for the various outlets pursued this angle. It is only clear that no possible motive or explanation is explored. There has long been a correlation between mental illness and animal abuse, researchers having identified animal abuse an indicator of various social disorders. Additionally, according the police report Martinez-Castro was homeless, though none of the stories mentions it.

Ultimately, the villain was vanquished, the hero was injured but not fatally, and the dog was turned over to animal services where it will no longer be abused. “Why” anyone would abuse an innocent puppy and stab another human being with a steak knife, however, was never answered.

What accounts for this type of story? What are the factors and the forces that push journalists to explore narrow narrative paths? As I stated before, I believe the media has seen a fundamental change over the past few decades. Today, newspapers, for instance, are forced to cope with declining circulation and competition from a vast number of

alternative sources, mostly online. This competition means that mainstream media (especially newspapers), must create messages that quickly grab our attention in order to remain relevant. In a media environment that each day sees thousands of outlets around the world writing the same story, it is beneficial for the narratives to tend toward the meme, or the simplest ideas that have the best capacity for replication. And these simple messages are not exclusive to the dissemination of news, either, as the advertising that pays for the news content deals almost exclusively with memes and enthymemes. In his latest book, Mediated: How the Media Shapes Your World and the Way You Live in It, Thomas de Zengotita attempts to explain just how saturated we are with images designed to quickly grab our attention. While he admits his book is no academic treatise, his observations, I believe, help elucidate why the enthymeme is a relevant topic of discussion, and how an environment filled with unlimited “options” creates a relationship between product/story and consumer/reader that hinges on quick ploys for attention.

Take the new Times Square, everybody’s favorite icon for the virtualization process, because that’s where what is happening in the culture as a whole is so effectively distilled and intensified. All the usual observations apply — and each observation contributes its iota to muffling what it was intended to expose, including this one, my little contribution, which consists of noticing how everything in that place is *aimed*. Everything is firing message modules, straight for your gonads, your taste buds, your vanities, your fears. But it’s okay; these modules seek to penetrate, but in a passing way; it’s all fun. A second of your attention is all they ask. Nothing real is firing, nothing that rends or cuts... (21)

Having envisioned de Zengotita's Times Square, replete with carefully directed light shining on carefully constructed words and images — all of which are drenched in rhetoric designed to make you look — now envision this: It's the same Times Square, except this time the ads are replaced by bits of news competing for your attention. Over here it's *Pope slams gay marriage ahead of Italian vote*, over there it's *Supermodel Naomi Campbell charged with assault*. In place of the famous Cup Noodles billboard, there's Bill O'Reilly, pointing directly at you and saying *It's not Okay to be overweight*. Directly below is Anderson Cooper, quietly composed, maybe of the verge of tears, saying *You worry when you eat out, but your own kitchen could be crawling with germs and bugs that can make you sick.*<sup>7</sup> And as you stand there in the middle of Times Square, your eyes shifting back and forth, up and down, you are given a choice: You can either pursue one of the hundreds of fleeting stories, or you can submit, and, overwhelmed by the weight of it all, choose to do nothing. This second option is what de Zengotita calls “the moment of shrug” (17), the notion that when so many media representations inundate the mind, the mind will often shut them all out.

Moments of shrug are not beneficial to news outlets. Too many stories get shrugged off, and suddenly ad revenue falls and circulation continues its downward slide. Memes are perfect contenders for side-stepping news consumer apathy, as successful ones are always constructed with careful attention paid to ethos, logos and pathos. If we can agree that today's youth is inundated with more media than any previous generation, then the next step I am going to suggest should seem logical: Take the meme and enthymeme to the classroom.

---

<sup>7</sup> All headlines retrieved from mainstream news web sites on March 30, 2006.

## Enthymeme In The Classroom

As Gage has demonstrated, the enthymeme can be used as a powerful tool for education with regards to critical thinking. While it would be wrong to suggest that teaching the enthymeme would be the end-all-be-all for critical thinking education, it seems clear that the inclusion of it in the Freshman curriculum could only net positive results. The Delphi Report, a comprehensive study on teaching and assessing critical thinking in the classroom, concludes with a list of six cognitive skills (interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation and self-regulation) that deserve special attention when teaching critical thinking. The second skill on the list, analysis, is where the enthymeme could best be situated. The language of the recommendation regarding analysis reveals precisely why the enthymeme should be re-introduced into the freshman composition classroom and given just as much time and energy as formal essay writing, MLA style, peer review and other composition staples. Students should be able to

...support or contest some claim, opinion or point of view, to identify and differentiate: (a) the intended main conclusion, (b) the premises and reasons advanced in support of the main conclusion, (c) further premises and reasons advanced as backup or support for those premises and reasons intended as supporting the main conclusion, (d) additional unexpressed elements of that reasoning, such as intermediary conclusions, unstated assumptions or presuppositions, (e) the overall structure of the argument or intended chain of reasoning, and (f) any items contained in the body of expressions being examined which are not

intended to be taken as part of the reasoning being expressed or its intended background. (8)

Aside from satisfying many of the suggested points above made in The Delphi Report, the enthymeme gives students not only a chance to learn what makes a argument flawed or illogical, but it also teaches them to consider what role an audience plays in the transmission of an idea. This awareness of the many rhetorical tricks they must learn to detect when consuming arguments in turn leads to consideration of those very tricks when writing or articulating arguments of their own.

As composition programs across the country begin to adopt curricula that focus more heavily on critical understanding of rhetoric, the inclusion of the classical notion of enthymeme would seem appropriate. But can the enthymeme be incorporated into a freshman-level class? I think it can be, and below I will demonstrate how.

*Get to it*

Introducing the enthymeme doesn't mean elaborating on the word's rich history and evolution, as I have attempted to do here. Introduce the concept of the enthymeme by providing students with two example arguments and asking them to parse them for their rhetorical strengths and weaknesses. Both arguments should be represented in standard prose; one should be a strong syllogism and the other an enthymeme, preferably one they may be familiar with already. For instance:

All people must breathe oxygen. You are a person, so you must breathe oxygen.

*and*

It's cold outside. If you don't wear a coat, you will get sick.

While simple, these examples clearly delineate the syllogistic and enthymemic structure. Many students are likely to notice the important differences immediately, pointing out, perhaps, the undeniable aspects of the first argument and, hopefully, questioning the truth of the second. However, should students not identify the weaknesses in the enthymeme, it's understandable, and will in fact create a "teachable" moment. The enthymeme presented in the second argument is also a powerful meme, one that many students will have undoubtedly heard at some point in their lives. (It may be appropriate to introduce students, around this time, to the concept of the meme so that it may inform their understanding later of how enthymemes function in the world.) Students can be led to discuss who the intended audience of this argument might be, given that the articulator of the argument is likely Mom or Dad or some other authority figure. Ask students to consider what assumptions the speaker has made about his or her audience, and then ask them — given what basic knowledge they have of biology — if they find the argument compelling still. Once it has been noted that germs, not coldness, generally cause illness, the class can then focus on why the argument is so popular. If the argument is

fundamentally flawed, why is it so widespread even today? What makes Mom believable? Why do mothers still insist that their children wear a coat in cold weather?

By engaging students in a simple discussion like this, you aid students in identifying themes central to enthymemic reasoning, namely exclusion of certain premises, the presence of assumed truths and the importance of an authoritative voice. With the foundation laid, call upon the class to identify enthymemes in their own lives. I have found that students often resort to pointing out the enthymemic tendencies of their parents' parenting. This type of exercise can also coincide with the more traditional concepts associated with argument, like appeals to logic, emotion and need. Additionally, give students some guidance. If they treat enthymemes like Easter eggs, they may become frustrated. Ask them to remember the last argument they had with a friend and to recall the way enthymeme functioned within it, or challenge them to remember a time when they capitalized upon an individual's assumptions to persuade them.

#### *Media analysis*

Having introduced the topic of the enthymeme, and perhaps the meme as well, turn to the thing that your students know best: the media. I have discussed at length in this paper how enthymemes thrive in modern discourse through the media, and I have also discussed briefly how changes in the media have the potential to fundamentally change one's perception of reality. By asking your students to identify enthymemes in the media, you make them aware of how the pressures of a highly mediated lifestyle can leave indelible marks on how they see the world. While searching for enthymemes in newspapers, magazines and on the Internet is certainly a good place to start, I have found



that students feel more comfortable at first playing around with the idea of enthymemic reasoning when they are looking at advertisements.

In the fall of 2004, I authored a project for my freshman composition 1101 class called “Advertising and Rhetoric.” The project required a field trip to the periodicals section of the library, where I asked students to find advertisements for a single type of product (car, beer, jeans, clothes) that spanned five successive decades. After scanning or copying the ads, they were given a set of criteria for critical analysis, with their overarching goal being to describe how the nature of advertising has changed over the time period studied. Specific questions dealt with common rhetorical fare, like target audience, language style and usage of ethos, logos and pathos, but it also included a question that asked students to identify logical errors and uses of enthymeme. The benefit of starting with this project is that my experience sees my students having some major successes in both identifying enthymemes in the ads and understanding the overall role the enthymemic line of reasoning plays in society. Having done that, move on to more nuanced arguments, such as those found on op-ed pages of newspapers or political campaign trails. Have students conduct informal content analyses of national broadcast news for a week and create a report on that week’s popular memes. Having identified the memes, then ask them to analyze whether any of the memes were also effective enthymemes.

### **Conclusion: Consider The Enthymeme**

This paper is not meant to be an indictment of the media, nor have I set out to malign politicians for their often-faulty lines of reasoning. In examining the role of the enthymeme in society, I have found myself rethinking my own arguments more carefully and critically. By resurrecting this old term in Freshman composition classes and asking our students to rethink what it means in the context of their own lives — how they formulate their own and judge other's opinions — I believe we do them a great service. As Green suggests, the effect of immersing students in a curriculum that seriously considers the role of the enthymeme is obvious:

The pedagogical implications of such verbal invitation and restriction are straightforward: students can be taught how the enthymemic patterns which they already use generate particular structures of ideas, and students can use this understanding to control their own processes of composition. (624)

While the focus of this paper is more concerned with the identification and dissection of the enthymeme, Green's point should not be overlooked. As students become more familiar with the concept, they will become more conscious of ways to utilize the enthymeme in their own writing, and more importantly they will become aware of times when they are relying too heavily upon it.

Teaching students how to recognize the flaws that emerge as a result of enthymemic reasoning does not instruct them on what a good argument looks like. Indeed, few arguments are as simple as “All men are mortal...” What this type of instruction does do, however, is teach students to consider arguments in terms of

audience. Coupling historical perspectives of the enthymeme along with practical applications in the classroom, like Gage's writing invention strategies<sup>8</sup>, gives us a firm foundation on which to build. More importantly, it arms students with the rhetorical know-how needed to avoid the enthymeme's sneaky ways.

Neil Armstrong strongly considered his audience in the days leading up to his historic moon landing when he penned his famous quote. He knew the power of juxtaposition and he knew the power of succinct, but epic, phrasing. He knew that whatever he said would be forever replayed over the course of American and world history, that his words would fall off the lips of every 2<sup>nd</sup> grader learning about our conquests in space for the first time.

It's fortunate that Armstrong's first words on the moon were insulated with several layers of rhetorical protection. His meaning, as a result, was only successfully transmitted because so many other lines of reasoning like his had flourished during the eons of human discourse that came before his utterance. Had his statement been couched in any other way, the words that were meant to establish the United States' technological and scientific dominance, could have conveyed a different meaning entirely.

Let's open our eyes to the enthymeme and use it as a springboard to teaching other important forms of rhetoric. Let's tell our students about Neil Armstrong and the 11 O'clock news and Victoria's Secret ads so that they may be better prepared to identify

---

<sup>8</sup> Gage suggests that students can use enthymemic reasoning to predict how a given audience might react and adjust their arguments accordingly. His four-step process asks students to consider the following when structuring an argument:

1. questions at issue,
2. probable answers to those questions, or stances taken,
3. potential strategies for leading to those answers, and
4. assumptions which make the strategies work.

more subversive enthymemes that could potentially distract them from making important political and ethical decisions. Let's do this soon, because the average 18-year-old's world is becoming more and more mediated every day and within the media this powerful form of reasoning abounds. Consider the enthymeme<sup>9</sup>.

---

<sup>9</sup> 1. Enthymemes are everywhere.  
2. They are designed to play off audience assumptions and can often be misleading.  
3. Therefore, we should teach students how to identify and dissect them.

## Works Cited

- Bird, S E., and Ryan W. Dardenne. "Myth, Chronicle and Story: Exploring the Narrative Qualities of News." Social Meanings of News: a Text Reader. Ed. Dan Berkowitz. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1997. 333-350.
- Bizzell, Patricia, and Bruce Herzberg. The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present. 2nd ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001.
- Dawkins, Richard. The Selfish Gene. New York: Oxford UP, 1976.
- De Zengotita, Thomas. Mediated : How the Media Shapes Your World and the Way You Live in It. 1st ed. New York: Bloombury, 2005.
- Green, Lawrence D. "Enthymemic Invention and Structural Prediction." College English 41 (1980): 623-634. JSTOR. 11 Nov. 2005.
- Jaffa, Eric. "The Daily Show Does a Great Bit About Republican Talking Points." MoveLeft Media. 18 July 2004. MoveLeft Media. 03 Mar. 2006  
<[http://www.moveleft.com/moveleft\\_essay\\_2004\\_07\\_18\\_the\\_daily\\_show\\_does\\_a\\_great\\_bit\\_re\\_talking\\_points.asp](http://www.moveleft.com/moveleft_essay_2004_07_18_the_daily_show_does_a_great_bit_re_talking_points.asp)>.
- Jamieson, Kathleen Hall, and Paul Waldman. The Press Effect: Politicians, Journalists, and the Stories That Shape the Political World. New York: Oxford UP, 2003.
- McCarthy, Andrew C. "Shameful Attacks." National Review Online. 30 Sept. 2005. National Review. 12 Nov. 2005  
<<http://www.nationalreview.com/mccarthy/mccarthy200509301104.asp>>.

"Media Matters exposes Bennett: '[Y]ou could abort every black baby in this country, and your crime rate would go down'" Media Matters For America. 28 Sept. 2005. 8 Nov. 2005 <<http://mediamatters.org/items/200509280006>>.

New York Times 21 July 1969, Late City ed., sec. A.

"One Small Step." Apollo 11 Lunar Surface Journal. 17 July 2005. NASA. 15 Nov. 2005 <<http://www.hq.nasa.gov/office/pao/History/alsj/a11/a11.step.html>>.

The Editors. "Bill Bennett tells truth, Liberals call for censorship." The Unalienable Right. 30 Sept. 2005. American Federalist Journal. 12 Nov. 2005 <<http://www.federalistjournal.com/fedblog/?p=288>>.

Wardle, Claire. "The "Unabomber" Vs. the "Nail Bomber": A." Journalism Studies 4 (2003): 239-251.

Wells, Mike. "Man Stabbed Helping Puppy, Deputies Say." The Tampa Tribune 17 Mar. 2006. 24 Mar. 2006 <<http://www.tbo.com/news/metro/MGBJVUP1WKE.html>>.

Yglesias, Matthew. "In Defense of Bill Bennett." TPM Cafe. 29 Sept. 2005. 12 Nov. 2005 <<http://yglesias.tpmcafe.com/story/2005/9/29/16450/9195>>.