Rowling’s Commencement Speech at Harvard University: Rhetorical Criticism Essay

Throughout our journey on this planet, it can be hard to to recognize the wonderful lessons the dark parts of our life offers us. As humans, we strive to succeed, and do not take failure very well. Since we do not accept failure we try to cover up the obstacles facing us to pretend like everything in our lives is perfect and easy. During J.K. Rowling’s commencement speech at Harvard University, she discusses the perks of failure and why being imaginative is a strength. While having the pleasure of listening and reading her speech, I found ways that showcases how Rowling utilizes ethos, logos, and pathos which helped capture the purpose of her speech.

Rowling was born in Chipping, Sodbury, July 31st, 1965. She had an imaginative mind from a young age which lead her to writing books. At the age of six, she wrote her first book about a rabbit with measles. After graduating from high school, her parents encouraged her to go to the University of Exeter to study French because English was a “useless” major. In 1990, J.K. Rowling first started thinking of the idea for the novel series Harry Potter. She was on a delayed train ride from Manchester to London, and she began forming the characters for the series in her mind; however, it took several years, and quite the hunt for a publisher, before a small publishing company finally took the book on. After the first Harry Potter book was published, the book sales took off. In 1998 Warner Bros. secured film rights for the book, and offered seven figures to Rowling, and now the series is one of the most well-known movie series in history (Pettinger, Tejvan).

Harvard University chose J.K. Rowling to deliver the commencement speech to the 2008 graduating class because she has faced many challenges throughout her life. Many people told her she could not be a successful author, but she did not listen to them and continued to write books. Rowling was brought in to speak to help motivate the class of 2008 to never give up on their dreams. By talking about her failures and her imagination, the students can see that with a little imagination and determination you can do anything.

In Rowling’s speech, she provides a background of her life, and the failure she endured over the years. The details from her life provide her the credentials needed to speak about failure and imagination, which demonstrates ethos. Since Rowling’s parents were impoverished, they wanted her to be more than a writer; therefore, they pushed her to major in a career she did not like. Her parents did not want her to experience poverty like they had to, so they wanted her to have a degree so she could find a stable career. She says:

“I cannot criticise my parents for hoping that I would never experience poverty. They had been poor themselves, and I have since been poor, and I quite agree with them that it is not an ennobling experience. Climbing out of poverty by your own efforts, that is indeed something on which to pride yourself, but poverty itself is romanticised only by fools” (Rowling, J.K.).

While she may have been in poverty, she survived the brutal circumstances that poverty brought her way. Not only has she faced many hardships, she has also felt the satisfying feeling of success. Even though her parents discouraged her dreams, Rowling was only successful because she never gave up on her lifelong dream: becoming an author.

Ethos is also incorporated because the students and public know about Rowling's successful career and the affect the Harry Potter series has played in the student's lives. She goes out of her way to reference the series by saying, "I will convince myself that I am at the world's largest Gryffindor reunion" (Rowling, J.K.). Rowling knows that a majority of the audience will make the connection to the successful novel series. The ethos is even more convincing because not only has the graduating class grown up reading her books, but they also witnessed the development of the movie series. The students have been there while Rowling's career developed, so they have seen the successes and failures she has endured which helps illustrate her credibility.

Throughout the speech Rowling incorporates a comfortable dialogue in a formal setting, but does have serious topics and moments where she shares words of wisdom. By doing this, she incorporated multiple aspects of pathos into the speech to help engage the audience. The dialogue resembles how the students feel on the day of graduation: they are comfortable sitting with the classmates that have become friends throughout the years, but at the same time it is their formal graduation ceremony. The speech also resembles the Harry Potter series. The novels are pieces of her child-like imagination, but also include serious moments. The outline provides a humorous and thoughtful action so the audience can enjoy the entire speech instead of falling asleep halfway through. She lightens the mood at the start of the speech, "Not only has Harvard given me an extraordinary honour, but the weeks of fear and nausea I have endured at the thought of giving this commencement address have made me lose weight. A win-win situation!" (Rowling, J.K.). By including this in her speech, it shows that she may be slightly nervous, but is embracing her nerves. She is indirectly tapping into the graduate's emotional state because the graduate's have more than likely suffered through "weeks of fear and nausea", since they are about to officially enter the terrifying world of true adulthood. She continues to connect with the graduates by letting them know about her graduation ceremony, "The commencement speaker that day was the distinguished philosopher Baroness Mary Warnock. Reflecting on her speech has helped me enormously in writing this one, because it turns out that I can't remember a single word she said" (Rowling, J.K.). This shows that she remembers being in their position, and how she wanted to make her commencement speech more memorable than Warnock's was. From the start, Rowling tells the audience what the speech is going to address, failure and imagination. Which are somewhat contradicting topics which allows the audience to feel a variety of emotions leading to a fully engaged audience. She states the benefits of failure which may confuse many people since failure has a negative connotation. Rowling suggests that many of the students graduating have not experienced true failure, "The fact that you are graduating from Harvard suggests that you are not very well-acquainted with failure. You might be driven by a fear of failure quite as much as a desire for success" (Rowling, J.K.). She also mentions the lack of imagination most of the students have since they are driven by achieving standards others present them.

Aside from Rowling emotionally engaging the audience, she provides facts and evidence to reason through her arguments. She uses logos in her speech by providing examples of what the graduates can possibly expect in life. "...Some failure in life is inevitable. It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all" (Rowling, J.K.). She states factual evidence that everyone will fail sometime in their life, no matter how big or small the failure is, unless you never take any risks and play it safe your whole life. When describing imagination she explains the actual definition and compares it with her definition "Imagination is not only the uniquely human capacity to envision that which is not, and therefore the fount of all invention and innovation… it is the power that enables us to

empathise with humans whose experiences we have never shared” (Rowling, J.K.). She connects to the audience by explaining how imagination can help someone feel empathetic towards others. Rowling proceeds to talk about her early career at Amnesty International, an African research department, where she dealt with cases of cruelty and had to read through many victims testimonies to abuse, rape, and other crimes. These facts are real examples of how important it is to have a good imagination. “Every day, I saw more evidence about the evils humankind will inflict on their fellow humans, to gain or maintain power… And yet I also learned more about human goodness at Amnesty International than I had ever known before” (Rowling, J.K.). Connecting to the fact that the college students have lived a cushioned, safe life and are now about to experience the evil and good the world can offer, helps provide factual evidence that helps the audience relate to the speech.

J.K. Rowling created a well-rounded speech through the appeals supporting her claims. She adequately provides ethos, pathos, and logos which helps connect the audience to what she is saying. From the knowledge and experiences she has gained, she provides wisdom to those who may be affected in the same ways she was. From her success, she is able to pass on advice that cannot be obtained through schooling. The purpose of a commemorative speech is to help motivate, and provide words of wisdom to the graduates to help them learn and thrive when entering into the real world. Rowling accomplished the purpose mainly through ethos; however, she further expanded into pathos and logos which helped create a strong and enjoyable speech.