

Emily Sim
RHE 321
November 10, 2015

An Analysis on “A Whisper of AIDS”
<https://magic.piktochart.com/output/9012257-a-whisper-of-aids>

On August 19th, 1992, Mary Fisher, an AIDS activist, delivered a speech entitled, “A Whisper of AIDS,” at the Republican National Convention in Houston, Texas. In her speech, Fisher speaks of the reality of the threat that AIDS presents to American society. She gives her own story as a testimony to how risk is present to all segments of American society. Fisher’s speech awakens the audience to the threat of the disease in the America and ultimately requests the formulation of compassionate policies for those living with AIDS.

Isocolons are ubiquitous in this piece, functioning to powerfully emphasize Fisher’s points. When she says, “Though I am white and a mother, I am one with a black infant struggling with tubes in a Philadelphia hospital. Though I am female and contracted this disease in marriage and enjoy the warm support of my family, I am one with the lonely gay man sheltering a flickering candle from the cold wind of his family’s rejection,” a beautiful rhythm is present, grabbing the audiences attention, as she paints a contrast between her situation and the situation of those less fortunate than her. She is of a majority group; the people she mentions are a minority. Yet, the distinctions that society has normally applied here are null- they are “one.” Both groups are subject to the ravages of AIDS. If both the majority and minority were at risk, the logically following conclusion is that everyone was as risk. Next, Fisher repudiates the assumptions that those with AIDS contracted the disease because of stereotypical qualities or risky behaviors. Given her audience, the Republican Party in a formal setting, this is particularly effective. It is likely that most people present were not (or would not openly admit that they were) hemophiliacs, gay, or

Emily Sim

RHE 321

November 10, 2015

injection drug users. They would have easily dismissed idea that they were at risk for AIDS.

But Fisher invalidates these assumptions, saying, "Because I was not a hemophiliac, I was not at risk. Because I was not gay, I was not at risk. Because I did not inject drugs, I was not at risk." The repetitive nature of the sentence structure presents facts in a very sobering way. The isocolon emphasizes her old belief that she too was not at risk, because she didn't have these risk factors. Yet, her existence is proof that the risk is still present to all. Another powerful use of isocolon occurs when Fisher renumerates the story of Pastor Nemoeller, saying, "They came after the Jews, and I was not a Jew, so, I did not protest. They came after the trade unionists, and I was not a trade unionist, so, I did not protest... Then they came after me, and there was no one left to protest." The repeated sentence structure here is especially rhythmic and pleasing to the ear here, despite the disturbing content of the words. The reader listens and is easily able to be a step ahead of the speaker, filling in the next part of the clause. However, the turn of events ("and there was no one left to protest,") at the end provides a little twist that effectively grabs the listener's attention and immediately returns them to the grave consequences of the Pastor's inaction. It is a compelling warning should the audience continue treating the AIDS epidemic as they previously had. Fisher uses isocolon again when describing the suffering of those with AIDS. She says, "You weep silently. You grieve alone." The repetition of short, simple sentences here produces a dramatic effect. The sentences are unembellished and grim, just as the life of an AIDS-infected person was bleak, barren of compassion. The images of isolation and fear are strong. This evokes feelings of sadness in the audience, as the "you," puts the audience in the place of the AIDS-infected person for a moment. Here, the audience is driven to compassion and decreases the chance of the audience's opposition to the next

Emily Sim
RHE 321
November 10, 2015

portion of the speech where Fisher claims that it is those without HIV who “tolerate ignorance and practice prejudice,” and promotes effective action.

Two effective formal topics utilized in this speech are contradictories and analogy. Fisher makes an argument that “we must be consistent if we are to be believed.” She says that, “...as a parent of policy maker, we must act as eloquently as we speak—else we have no integrity.” Fisher’s use of contradictory strategy here challenges moral principles of the audience. Inaction and integrity are mutually exclusive in this situation. If the audience is to have its integrity intact, they must act. Another effective strategy was the use of analogy. Fisher relates the AIDS situation to “another holocaust.” She tells the story of a pastor who thought that because he wasn’t Jew, trade unionist, or Roman Catholic, he didn’t need to protest. The Nazis took each of these groups. After each of these groups was taken, he realized the Nazis were coming after him too, but “there was no one left to protest.” This resembles the AIDS issue because of the failure to recognize risk and implement effective action. It is a harrowing warning that no one was safe during the Holocaust, and now AIDS. If nothing were to be done to address the issue, America would be at great risk. Equating the Holocaust and the AIDS epidemic emphasizes the severity of the issue, compelling the audience to act.

The main argument of this piece can be stated enthymatically as follows: “AIDS is a devastating disease that attacks all humans,” (major premise), “you are a human,” (minor premise, unstated), and “you are at risk for contracting AIDS,” (conclusion). Fisher builds up the major premise for much of the beginning of her speech, telling the audience that AIDS does not ask whether a person is “black or white, male or female, gay or straight” and so on. She covers a wide spectrum in each of her statements, essentially including “all

Emily Sim
RHE 321
November 10, 2015

humans” for all intents and purposes. By allowing audience to “fill-in-the-blank” in the next part (you are a human), the audience gains a clearer understanding of Fisher’s point, which strengthens her argument.

An ideograph operating in this text is the idea of “justice.” The idea of justice is a positive concept. When justice is present, it is believed that one received what one deserved. The ideograph in this text operates on the presumption that those with AIDS did not do something despicable to contract it such that they deserve the kind of suffering that AIDS brings. Suffering should not be punished with more suffering. In this case, “justice,” means that those suffering with AIDS should not “[earn] cruelty,” or “deserve meanness.” They should not be “isolated for treated as outcasts.” “Justice,” operates here to mean compassion for those who were suffering. However, others may refuse to give up the assumption that those who were suffering from AIDS deserved it because they were homosexual, drug users, or had sinned in some kind of way that brought the wrath of God upon them. Under this assumption, the suffering of AIDS infected persons is justified, and the need for compassionate policies would therefore be unnecessary.

Fisher’s call for compassionate policies regarding AIDS was very effective. The most compelling aspect of her argument was the use of isocolon when she tells the story of the pastor. The story itself was powerful, but its double use as an analogy of the Holocaust to the AIDS epidemic gives the reader a sense of urgency and gravity that the issue must be dealt with. The Holocaust was in the past, but Fisher’s uses this historical event to prompt action in the present. She ultimately says that we have an imminent holocaust upon us (America), but the decision we make can impact the course of this epidemic.

A Whisper of AIDS

19 August 1992
Mary Fisher
Republican National Convention



Emily Sim
RHE 321



purpose

To promote the creation of
compassionate policy regarding AIDS

RHETORICAL STRATEGIES



INOCULATION

Emphasis of the threat of AIDS to all people of all demographics and to induce compassion in the audience



CONTRADICTION

Audience cannot both succumb to inaction and maintain their integrity



ANALOGY

The Holocaust in Germany is equated to the AIDS epidemic in America



IDEOGRAPH

"Justice"- some may say that those who are suffering deserve compassion; others may say that those with AIDS are receiving their punishment

MAIN ARGUMENT AS AN ENTHYME



Major Premise:
AIDS is a devastating
disease that attacks all
humans.



Minor Premise:
You are human.



Conclusion:
You are at risk for
contracting AIDS

Emily Sim
RHE 321
November 10, 2015

Works Cited:

"American Rhetoric: Mary Fisher -- 1992 Republican National Convention Address ("A Whisper of Aids")." *American Rhetoric*. American Rhetoric, n.d. Web. 30 Oct. 2015.
<<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/maryfisher1992rnc.html>>.