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Rhetorical Analysis: Nora Ephron Wellesley Commencement Speech
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Set the stage: it is 1996 and it is about to be the turn of the century. Women's rights and societal equality have come a long way from the 1960s to be sure, but the social and political landscape is in no way treating them as equals to men. They are still being undermined in many industries and certainly treated as the lesser sex. But there are more opportunities at the same time, more rights and privileges, and it is not unfair to say that many women have a greater ability to take charge of their futures.

Rewind to 1962, 37 years prior - a young woman named Nora Ephron graduates from Wellesley College. She is en route to becoming a successful author, journalist, screenwriter, and director. She might not become a household name in the typical sense, but any family that has ever watched a romantic comedy film would recognize her name. In the 90s, she was arguably at the peak of her career and to a class of aspiring intellectuals and soon-to-be graduates, she would have been a compelling role model. So when her alma mater calls on her to deliver the 1996 commencement speech, she rises to the occasion. Rather than writing for the general public by way of book or screen as she is accustomed to, she speaks candidly to the keen and anxious graduates in front of her. Her general aim seems to be to convey that while society has come a long way for the better, this rising generation still has much work ahead of them to create true equity. Ephron utilizes a wide variety of emotional appeals, heavy repetition and parallelism, and evocative imagery that supports a conversational tone to convey her overarching plea for the audience to view themselves as empowered leaders in their own lives.

Foremostly, Ephron relies heavily on appeals to her audience's emotions, which when considering the setting of the speech, makes sense. She understands that her audience is on

the precipice of something huge and is experiencing the feelings of excitement and anxiety that come with that. She knows her audience wants to feel heard and emotionally understood at this moment.

On that note, one of the emotional appeals she uses most frequently is anecdotal evidence - she reminisces about her own time spent at Wellesley, the sociopolitical climate of the time, and how it affected her worldview. She recalls several instances she had at the women's college - the commencement speech she heard, jarring advice received from her dean, as well as how the last 30 years of her life as a post-grad have played out. What these recollections do is tell the audience that Ephron has been exactly where they have - she innately understands the confusion and thrill that they are feeling right now. She says "Something was over. Something safe and protected. And something else was about to begin" (Ephron). And things worked out for her - as she says, "[they] can have it all" if only they have the courage to not ascribe to the pathways laid out for them and instead pave their own. This is a powerful message to send her audience because an age old question posed to women is "can you *really* have everything you want? Is it realistic to expect you can be both a mother and a career woman, be both a wife and have money to your own name, be both single and well-respected? Can you really have all your materialistic desires and happiness at the same time?" The young ladies in front of Ephron have likely asked themselves this question hundreds of times, and so surely it is reassuring to have someone who had at some point shared in this uncertainty, stand up and tell them that the answer is yes, absolutely.

She then tells them a story, not yet of her time post graduation, but of an encounter with a counselor at Wellesley when she was experiencing inner conflict. She explains how her perspective of the situation matured over time and how her final takeaway was that the Wellesley College of the 1960s wanted its alumni to be the ideal lady, "to spend [their] lives making nice" (Ephron). It is clear from Ephron's tone, specifically the dry quality of it when she describes this hypothetical dinner parties in which Wellesley graduates have the inherent role of

peacemaker, that she sees this as a terrible fate for women. The role of this anecdote is not to just explain her experience as a student, but to also lay the foundation for a major crux of her speech - the idea that the women of her generation were faced with a much more oppressive society, a world that initially told them to be content with being First Ladies, and then suddenly pivoted to judging them for not aspiring to be President. In the second half of this speech, she juxtaposes this idea with the sentiment that the graduates she is speaking to don't face those challenges, and although they certainly have ones of their own, they have a greater ability to take charge of their own lives and they should not let that go to waste.

Towards the end of the speech, she gives the audience a glimpse into how her life has evolved since leaving Wellesley - she recounts a quick story that really exemplifies the message she is trying to send. She mentions how she has frequently switched careers, and almost as often been divorced. She says that the ability to pivot quickly, "take another path," is "one of the most delicious things available to women" (Ephron). Her word choice and diction are specific and evoke this idea that the world is something to savor and indulge in, rather than intimidating. Here she appeals to the minds of her very specific audience demographic - young, intelligent women who are about to have their whole lives open to them and will soon encounter so many different difficult decisions. Through this emotional play, she sets herself, not apart nor above her audience, but as one of them - as someone who went through the same gamut they will experience and made it out the other side, happy and fulfilled. This is a hopeful way to start the conclusion of her speech - after outlining all the ways in which these women will face resistance from society, she nudges them forward with the courage that it has been done before and can be done again.

Another tool she uses to create pathos appeal is a humorous and conversational tone. The occasional biting remark or rhetorical question serves to make the audience feel as though they are just a close friend of Ephron, sharing an inside joke while scoffing at the state of the world. For example, she passes the comment, "The Wonderbra is not a step forward for women.

Nothing that hurts that much is a step forward for women," and "I always wondered what I was supposed to do in that year. Iron?" (Ephron) These lines bring some levity to a speech that is otherwise dense in serious values. Not only does creating this atmosphere while speaking put the audience at ease, it also makes them feel as though they are being personally cheered onwards when Ephron makes her invigorating call to action at the end.

On the topic of her tone, it is not just shaped by pathos appeals, but also by Ephron's frequent use of imagery and allusions. It is valuable to note here that those who are familiar with Nora Ephron likely know her as a renowned screenwriter and author - her entire credibility and standing come from her reputation as a skilled woman of her craft and so her audience will naturally be expecting much more than the typical, overused adages one might typically hear at a commencement speech. They are anticipating a display of captivating storytelling.

She delivers on this front, most specifically by creating vivid pictures of the ever-shifting social landscape and throwing in allusions to the modern society of the 1990s i.e. the Wonderbra, Advil, and lattes. It's worthy of note that these are specific examples that the female audience will understand as a regular part of their lives, and they also demonstrate the shift during this time period from inventing for necessity to inventing for convenience. Instead of just saying, "things are very different today compared to how they once were," which has been said countless times by countless people, she explains exactly how this is the case.

She additionally draws a picture of herself writing this commencement speech "on a computer next to a touch tone phone…a bottle of Snapple on [her] desk," mere seconds after depicting a world, 30 years prior, where politics looked vastly different, which is to say not inclusive, and Wellesley students had strange nicknames, faced cruel stereotyping, and took courses that were evidently phased out by the time of this speech. Those are all allusions that the deans and professors sitting behind Ephron might understand, but the students in front of her likely do not. What this does is actually age Ephron and buttress her idea in the first half of

the speech that women once faced a very different set of oppressive circumstances, circumstances that they could later reasonably blame their discontent with life on.

Continuing with the idea that Ephron's speech can be split into two halves, the first focusing on society as it was and the second focusing on society as it is in the 1990s, one might question how to discern what the true takeaway is meant to be amongst all the imagery and humor.

Fortunately, Ephron relies heavily on repetition to drill her most important points into the listener's psyche. Most notably, she says "a long time ago" or asks "How long ago was it?" a total of nine times, to fully impress upon listeners that things are so unfathomably different today from what they once were. She later says some variation of "don't delude yourself" four times, paired with the similarly repeated phrase "attack on you," to show that while things may seem to be so much better in 1996 then they once were, society has not yet stopped searching for ways to tear women down and these young graduates would be naive to think otherwise (Ephron).

Even more powerful than her repetition is her parallelism. She says "They had never intended to be the heroines of their own lives…they ended up feeling like victims," while referencing her class of 1962, and she calls back to it when she later rouses her audience. In what could easily be considered the main idea of the whole commencement speech, she says, "be the heroine of your life, not the victim" (Ephron). This particular phrasing and parallel works to instill the audience with a sense of gratitude that they today have the right to be their own heroine, and it should motivate them to take up that title.

The most poignant example might be the artistic parallelism of the very last sentence. "Welcome to the best years of your lives" (Ephron). This calls back to the graduates that were sitting in the same seats 30 years prior, when Ephron says "they ended up, and this is the really sad part, thinking that their years in college were the best years of their lives" (Ephron). If one thing is certain, it is that the speaker does not want to see her audience follow in the steps of

her own peers, as she urges them to view their education as “a dress rehearsal for a life that is yours to lead,” which is in fact, another parallel to an anecdote she had recalled of hearing her classmate say the inverse of this statement (Ephron). She wants them to know that every possibility is within their reach, if only they have the nerve to face all the certain messiness and complications and difficulties they will surely come across, and the willingness to “make a little trouble out there” (Ephron).

Through the artful combination of pathos appeals, descriptive word choice and storytelling, and compelling parallelism and repetition, Nora Ephron impels her audience of freshly graduating women in their early twenties to take charge of their lives, accomplish all the things their predecessors were denied the right to achieve, and be loud and unapologetic trailblazers.

Works Cited

Ephron, Nora. “Nora Ephron ’62 Addressed the Graduates in 1996.” *Wellesley College*, www1.wellesley.edu/events/commencement/archives/1996commencement. Accessed 23 Sept. 2024.