

Criticism on Mary Fisher's "The Whisper of Aids"

In 1992, Mary Fisher gave a speech at the Republican National Convention (RNC). Fisher had been diagnosed as HIV-positive and was an advocate for more research to solve the AIDS crisis that was sweeping the country and the world at the time. In her speech, entitled *The Whisper of Aids*, Fisher uses pathos to develop an emotional appeal to her audience and make them aware of the dangers of AIDS—both for America, and for them. She does this by instilling a sense of fear that AIDS could strike them and their family. She uses three techniques of pathos to manipulate the audience into accepting her arguments: storytelling, analogy, and emotionally charged words.

The first technique of pathos that Fisher uses is that of storytelling, which she uses to connect with her audience and help them develop empathy. As Kenneth Burke, a rhetorical theorist from the first half of the 21st century asserted, before we can persuade someone, we have to identify with them. Fisher does this by sharing her personal story, which resonates with the audience as they are a similar demographic as her. She explains that though she is "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." In this introduction to her speech, Fisher uses her personal story to evoke feelings of empathy from the audience, as they can imagine that they too might be affected because most of

them are from the same background. Kelly (1992) explains that “Mary Fisher is rich, White, heterosexual, and a high cast Republican. Hers is not the common face of AIDS.” At the same time, she draws them to extend the empathy they have for her, to all those suffering from AIDS. With this story, she sets the foundation for the rest of the pathos-based techniques of her speech.

The second technique that Fisher employs is that of analogy. She connects the audience’s experiences of thinking that they are not at risk for AIDS to the experience of the Jewish people in the Holocaust. Fisher next shares in her speech a saying by Pastor Niemoeller, a pastor who survived the Nazi death camps. The pastor said, “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. They came after the Roman Catholics, and I was not a Roman Catholic, so I did not protest. Then they came after me, and there was no one left to protest.” Fisher then uses this to explain that if the audience feels that they are not at risk, this “lesson” from “history” proves otherwise. This analogy helps to evoke both the compassion that she believes her audience should feel toward those with AIDS who are different from them, as well as instills feelings of fear—that the audience is by no means safe from the disease, just as groups other than Jews were killed in the Holocaust. This is a powerful analogy in evoking pathos, for both of these reasons.

Finally, Fisher uses a number of emotionally charged words as a pathos technique. Some examples include AIDS “littering its pathway with the bodies of the young” and “we praise the American family but ignore a virus that destroys it.” Perhaps the most powerful use of emotional words comes toward the end of the speech,

however, when Fisher directs her speech toward her young children. She promises them she “will not give in” and that she “will not hurry to leave you, my children. But when I go, I pray that you will not suffer shame on my account.” In this part of the speech, Fisher’s emotional words to her children—like “courage,” “hope,” “strength,” “safe,” “suffering,” “when I go,” and “suffer shame”—cannot help but evoke empathy in the audience. One can imagine many in the audience being brought to tears by Fisher’s words, as they think of her pain as a mother knowing that she will die, as well as her wishes for them to not suffer on her behalf. In fact, Selby (1994) reported that “this former Boca Raton Mother Of two moved the Republican Party elite to tears...” For every parent in the audience, Fisher evokes a parent’s worst fear—that he or she will die before his or her children have grown. This connects to her argument that the country should be compassionate toward those with AIDS. However, Fisher takes it even further, suggesting that her children actually might suffer shame, in addition to the loss of their mother, because of Americans attitudes about AIDS. In this way, Fisher evokes a potential fate worse than even her death as a parent. She culminates this with an appeal to action: “I appeal: Learn with me the lessons of history and of grace, so my children will not be afraid to say the word AIDS when I am gone. Then their children, and yours, may not need to whisper it at all.”

Plato, the famous Greek philosopher of the 5th century BCE, believed that rhetoric was inherently manipulative. Rhetoric, in his eyes, was used as a means to achieve some end. Fisher’s speech would fall directly within his critiques. In Fisher’s

speech, she compellingly uses pathos to elicit empathy and call the audience to action by instilling fear in them. Through storytelling she connects to the audience and helps them to see that AIDS can affect them as well—not just a small subset of the population who are unlike them. Through the analogy of the Holocaust, she both spurs them to take action as well as instills fear that the AIDS crisis is on par with the devastation of the Holocaust. And finally, through emotionally charged words when speaking directly to her children—who will be left motherless, and possibly suffer additional shame because of attitudes toward AIDS—she makes an actual “appeal” for the audience to become more compassionate toward AIDS sufferers and to support research efforts to stop the AIDS crisis.

References

Kelly, M. (1992, Aug 20). A delicate balance: Issues–AIDS; AIDS speech brings hush to crowd. *New York Times*, p. A21.

Selby, H. (1994, Nov 29). Mary Fisher's message. *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*. Retrieved from <https://www.sun-sentinel.com/news/fl-xpm-1994-11-29-9411250335-story.html>