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### Kairos, Stasis, and Commonplaces Through Three Works

When creating effective rhetoric, whether it be for a speech, a campaign, an essay, or some other form of impactful literature, there are factors that play into its successfulness. In their book, *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*, Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee outline some of the most necessary aspects of effective rhetoric. The evolution of how rhetoric has developed throughout history and its relevancy for those who engage in rhetoric today is displayed throughout the text. For the purpose of this paper, a focus will be placed on the importance of kairos, stasis, and commonplaces within rhetoric. Additionally, three major works will be analyzed in terms of their usage of kairos, stasis, and commonplaces. These texts have been chosen to trace how these three factors (kairos, stasi, and commonplaces) within rhetoric have been applicable to works throughout a broad span of time. First, a portion of St. Augustine of Hippo's *On Christian Doctrine* will be analyzed, followed by an excerpt of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, and finally, Rowland McMaster's more contemporary work, *Why Read?* will be addressed. These works span from the year 397 all the way to 2013 and their topics vary greatly. However, each of the three articles were meant to be relevant to an audience in the time that they were written and an argument can be made that they are still relevant today. Therefore, it is important to note that kiros, stasis, and commonplaces are evident within the rhetoric of St. Augustine, Virginia Woolf, and Rowland McMaster.

In order to fully understand how these three works of rhetoric can be analyzed for their effectiveness, it is important to first note what *kairos*, *stasis*, and *commonplaces* mean within the context of rhetoric. Crowley and Hawhee state that, “*Kairos* requires that rhetors view writing and speaking as opportunities for exploring issues and making knowledge” (41). In short, the *kairotic* moment that the speaker/writer is searching for must allow for the rhetorician to inform the listener/reader on an issue and many times persuade them to believe the point that is being made. When a time manifests in which the audience will be willing to hear what is being argued and the rhetors ideas are relevant to the time, this may be a *kairotic* moment for the rhetor. This lends itself to the *stasis*, which is understood best when Crowley and Hawhee write that, “The most satisfactory modern equivalent for *stasis* seems to be the term *issue*, which we define as the point about which all parties to an argument can agree that they disagree: this is what is at issue” (56). The *stasis* is essentially what helps the rhetor determine what their argument is truly about. If the rhetor can discern that there is a particular issue that has relevance for an audience they may choose to develop an argument based on that. Finally, there are the *commonplaces*, which are described as “refer[ing] to statements that regularly circulate within members of a community (Crowley & Hawhee). These *commonplaces* are the universals known throughout the community that lead to propositions that are rooted in the daily discussions and debates of community members. Due to their ‘common’ nature they are difficult to ignore when dealing with political, ethical, social, economic, and philosophical issues. Many times, it is necessary for a rhetor to include *commonplaces* within their argument to connect with the audience.

Now that there is somewhat of a basis for understanding the *kairos*, *stasis*, and *commonplaces* within rhetoric, it becomes easier to decipher and analyze the works stated above.

First, St. Augustine of Hippo writes about the importance of developing an understanding of the parts within language in *On Christian Doctrine*. St. Augustine was writing at a time when there was no universal language, no easy guide for translation. Due to the inaccessible nature of religious texts, he felt that it was important to guide people through the Scripture so that they could understand God's word. The need for some kind of guide for Scripture leads to St. Augustine's assertion that the study of linguistics is a necessary part of relation among people.

St. Augustine saw that there was need for the development of an aid for these texts, for a push to study the linguistics in language, rather than just signs. In other words, he was aware of a kairotic moment in which he could argue for the need to study these aspects of language and it would feel relevant for the audience. St. Augustine writes that, "signs ('a thing which, over and above the impression it makes on the sense, causes something else to come into the mind as a consequence of itself') are very few in number compared with words" and he later argues that that it is impossible for these signs to be common among all nations (3). Therefore, by noticing that there is an impossibility present, his contention that there is a need for the study of linguistics in order to understand other languages can justifiably be categorized as an awareness of kairos. St. Augustine was able to see an opportunity due to the relevance that his argument would have on the people of that time.

It is also important to note that the kairotic moment that St. Augustine was able to take notice of lends itself to the stasis, or the issue that he was trying to remedy. St. Augustine wrote that, "ignorance of things renders figurative expressions obscure," which results in misunderstandings of "things" mentioned throughout the Bible (24). With a lack of universal language comes the inability of many to understand the Bible. Thus, the stasis, the issue, of how

to rectify this problem becomes the basis of St. Augustine's writing. The solution to the issue becomes the study of linguistics in order to not only interpret the language present within Scripture, but find truth within God's word. St. Augustine was very aware of the stasis, which allowed him to develop his writing in order to convince the audience to fix their problem through the study of language.

Finally, St. Augustine was able to effectively engage the audience through the use of commonplace topics. In order to have a better understanding of what a commonplace topic means both to the rhetor and the audience it is important to take note of Aristotle's three common topics: "1) whether a thing has (or has not) occurred or will (or will not) occur, 2) whether a thing is greater or smaller than another thing, and 3) what is (and is not) possible" (Crowley & Hawhee 90). St. Augustine was very aware that there was a need for a guide to the Scripture, but he also knew that it was possible to create a movement of linguistic study, because of the values within the Scripture. These commonplace topics, "goodness, justice, honore, wisdom," are what make it possible for St. Augustine to be effective in his argument. He writes that, "knowledge leads to understanding," and by studying linguistics and reaching this understanding, this truth, he knew that there would be an influx in the values that the common people desired (10).

By taking note of the stasis of the need for a guide to scripture, St. Augustine was able to create a kairotic moment that allowed him to not only create this guide, but argue for an increase in linguistic study. Augustine had an understanding of the common values that were present among society and those that were in the Scripture and used those that were common among the two to bolster his argument. However, this urge for linguistic awareness is not just a stasis of

397, but something that is still relevant to this day. An increase in communication among nations creates a kairotic moment for a push towards greater understanding of languages. It is therefore important to note that St. Augustine's text is still studied today in many ways, but his argument for the need to develop a more universal understanding of language can help get rid of the "ignorance of things [that] renders figurative expressions obscure" (Augustine, 24).

Virginia Woolf was also able to write a piece that held great relevance within the time she was writing, but continues to hold as an important argument to this day. In *A Room of One's Own* Woolf urges for an increase in appreciation for female writing by looking at the conditions that women were living in that made it nearly impossible for them to ever become successful thinkers or writers. Woolf saw the kairotic moment: a lack of appreciation and rights within the female community that was being challenged as the woman's suffrage movement took place. This is evident when she uses the example of what it would have been like if Shakespeare were to have had a sister,

She was as adventurous, as imaginative, as eager to see the world as he was. But she was not sent to school. She had no chance of learning grammar and logic, let alone of reading Horace and Virgil. She picked up a book now and then, one of her brother's perhaps, and read a few pages. But then her parents came in and told her to mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers. (Woolf 373)

Woolf was aware of the almost nonexistence of female education throughout history and saw this as an opportunity to (almost ironically) write about the need for an increase in appreciation and accolades for female writers.

In addition, it once again becomes apparent that the kairotic moment present at the time that Woolf was writing in, which for this particular piece was 1929, easily lends itself into the decipherment of what the stasis might have been. Woolf clearly articulates what exactly the issues that she was addressing looked like when she wrote,

But women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing the piano and embroidering bags. (Woolf 377)

It is clear that Woolf recognized an issue within society and her intention was to address this issue throughout her works. She pushed for more recognition for woman, clearly addressing the issue at hand.

It is also important to take note that Woolf was able to incorporate commonplace values within her work. She understood that many previous woman writers were unable to freely dedicate their time to developing their writing capabilities and were therefore forced to write whilst still upholding their “female duties.” Woolf writes, “If a woman wrote, she would have to write in the common sitting-room...she was always interrupted” (376). This inability to freely write is something that Woolf highly praises and believes should be looked at as an incredible overcoming, yet they still showed an adherence to family values. Additionally, due to the suffrage movement that had just taken place, Woolf was able to capture the values of the time, which included such things as courage, respect, wisdom, and liberty. All of these values were a

necessary part of garnering a greater appreciation for women and the work that they do and have done.

Therefore, it is important to see the connection between the movement that was taking place in the 1920s and the current push for women's rights that is taking place today. Woolf's writings can still be read and used as an argument to address issues within the current *kairos*. As women continue to fight for equal pay and fight against the objectification of women in society, it becomes evident that the commonplace values that Woolf was catering her writing towards, are still very much present within society today. Because the stasis, the issue, of women's rights continued to develop after Woolf's time and to this day there is still great relevance in her works.

The idea that works written years ago, decades ago, centuries ago, can still be relevant today is something that Rowland McMaster contemplates in his essay *Why Ready?*. It is obvious that with the continued development of technology and the influx of its usage in the last few decades, the issue (stasis) of whether or not old texts, long texts, should continue to be read has arisen. This question is what McMaster address within his essay when he states, "Literature...bestows an intellectual benefit in satisfying curiosity about other minds and cultures and about our own...it encourages a critical assessment of our personal and social values" (50). In other words, he is urging his audience to consider the importance of upholding the value of written texts and reading these texts to find deeper meaning.

By linking reading with a greater understanding of the human person, of other cultures, of the self, McMaster shows his awareness of the commonplace values within society today. Some of these values seem to include: acceptance, uniqueness, wealth, power, and popularity. When he claims that reading leads to, "Satisfaction of curiosity about that human experience extended in

time and space” and “the satisfaction of a scientific desire to see things as they really are and, by knowing others, to know ourselves” McMaster shows that he acknowledges the values within society (McMaster 45). In other words, he is appealing to the commonplace values within society today in order to make an argument for the continuation of reading literature. This is reiterated when he states, “The benefits of literary culture are not obscure: they are intellectual, moral, and aesthetic,” which appeals to many of the values previously listed (McMaster 45).

Finally, it is relevant to mention that the the stasis for McMaster, the issue of an increase in short, sporadic writing, is what lead to the kairotic moment he is writing in. As previously stated, there is an increase in technology in recent years that has lead to a depletion of the reading of long intricate texts. McMaster jumps on this moment, creating it into an opportunity to address the need for the continuation of the exploration of these texts. Texts such as *A Room of One's Own* and *On Christian Doctrine* are what McMaster is arguing should continue to be deliberated.

To conclude, St. Augustine, Virginia Woolf, and Rowland McMaster are three authors from very different periods in time, but they share a common strength. These three writers were able to see the stasis, an issue, of their time and find a kairotic moment in which they could argue for some kind of betterment in society. They each show their awareness of the commonplace values of the time and cater towards the audiences they are addressing. Each of these works are written about vastly different topics, but seem to share a common thread: the ability to continue to have relevance today. By exhibiting signs of kairos, stasis, and commonplace within their works, Augustine, Woolf, and McMaster are able to form effective rhetoric that is still relevant today.



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