

ENGL 4670
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AN INTRODUCTION TO RHETORICAL THEORY:
BITZER'S "THE RHETORICAL SITUATION"

Due: Tue, 02 Sep

Now that we've begun to get an idea of the kinds of features that rhetoricians study (by looking at some informal observations of rhetoric scholars on President Clinton's speeches in response to the Oklahoma City bombing), we will develop these observations by taking our first look at rhetorical theory. Lloyd Bitzer's "The Rhetorical Situation" (1968) has been one of the more influential contributions to rhetorical theory in the last fifty years. It is a good text for beginning students of rhetoric, I think, for two reasons: (1) Bitzer's writing is straightforward, making his theory easy to comprehend; and (2) Bitzer's thinking represents an important trend in twentieth-century rhetorical theory (and philosophy of language) in its focus on language as a *situated act*, that is, the idea that the proper understanding of a text depends upon knowledge of the *situation* in which the text is produced. Of course, it is common sense to regard the *situation* as important; but what is more important is how the notion of "situation" is theorized; that is, how we answer the question, What should we regard as the most significant components of such situations?

Here are a few things to consider as you're reading Bitzer's article:

1. Bitzer thinks we should regard certain uses of language as "rhetorical"; what is his definition of rhetorical discourse? Do you think Bitzer would consider his own article as "rhetorical discourse"?
2. What does Bitzer mean by "rhetorical exigency"?
3. According to Bitzer, what aspects of "audience" should we give special attention to?
4. What does Bitzer have in mind when he talks about rhetorical "constraints"?

In addition to reading Bitzer's "situational" theory of rhetoric, we will examine President George W. Bush's first address to the country following the September 11 attacks. By reading these two texts, we will want not only to compare President Bush's first address to President Clinton's first address but, more important, to develop our comparisons with the help of Bitzer's theory. I've attached the text of Bush's address; Bitzer's article is available via Walker's subscription to JSTOR:

Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 1, no. 1 (1968): 1-14.

If you have any difficulty accessing Bitzer's article, I'll be happy to help; just email me.

Short Written Assignment (1 double-spaced, typed page): Describe what you think is an interesting point of comparison between Clinton's and Bush's first speeches to the country; and in doing so, consider whether or not Bitzer's theory helps in making the comparison. For example, are there interesting comparisons to be made on the basis of Bitzer's ideas of "rhetorical exigency," "rhetorical audience," or "rhetorical constraints"?

Additional Background and Bibliographical Information

Background

Lloyd Bitzer's "The Rhetorical Situation" occupies a significant place in the development of contemporary American rhetoric studies. It was first published as the lead article in the inaugural issue of *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, an important journal founded by faculty in the Department of Philosophy at Penn State University in order to establish a North American venue for discussing *the rhetorical dimension of philosophical argument* along the lines explored by Belgian philosopher Chaim Perelman in *La Nouvelle rhétorique: Traité de l'argumentation* (Paris: PUF, 1958) [*The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1969)]. We will read some Perelman later in the

semester. Bitzer is now Professor Emeritus of Communication Arts at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Bibliographical Information

Because Bitzer's article has been so influential, I thought I'd provide a little bibliographical information for those who may want to look further into the idea of "the rhetorical situation."

I. Works Cited by Bitzer

A curious feature of Bitzer's article is that he refers only to one other text; however, this text is one of the more influential twentieth-century works on the nature of language, written by the British anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942), "The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages" in C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning* (New York: Harcourt, 1923), 296-336.

II. Related Work by Bitzer

"Functional Communication: a Situational Perspective." *Rhetoric in Transition: Studies in the Nature and Uses Of Rhetoric*. Ed. Eugene E. White. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1980. 21-38.

"Rhetoric and Public Knowledge," in *Rhetoric, Philosophy, and Literature: An Exploration*, ed. Don M. Burks (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 1978), 67-93.

III. Scholarship and Criticism

If you find yourself interested in Bitzer's ideas, here is list of articles that examine or use his theory. Vatz's "The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation" is an influential critique.

Booth, Paul, and Amber Davisson. "Visualizing the Rhetorical Situation of Hurricane Katrina: Photography, Popular Culture, and Meaning in Images." *American Communication Journal* 10, no. 1 (2008). *EBSCOhost*.

Brinton, Alan. "Situation in the Theory of Rhetoric." *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 14 (1981): 234-48.

Consigny, Scott. "Rhetoric and Its Situations." *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 7 (1974): 175-86.

Ervin, E. "Rhetorical Situations and the Straits of Inappropriateness: Teaching Feminist Activism." *Rhetoric Review* 25, no. 3 (2006): 316-33.

Garrett, Mary, and Xiaosui Xiao. "The Rhetorical Situation Revisited." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (1993): 30-40.

Gorrell, Donna. "The Rhetorical Situation Again: Linked Components in a Venn Diagram." *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 30, no. 4 (1997): 395-412.

Jamieson, Kathleen M. Hall. "Generic Constraints and the Rhetorical Situation." *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 6 (1973): 162-70.

Johnson, Janet. "Twitter Bites and Romney: Examining the Rhetorical Situation of the 2012 Presidential Election in 140 Characters." *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 2, no. 3/4 (2012): 54-64.

Larson, Richard L. "Lloyd Bitzer's 'Rhetorical Situation' and the Classification of Discourse: Problems and Implications." *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 3 (1970): 165-68.

Miller, Arthur B. "Rhetorical Exigence." *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 5, no. 2 (1972): 111-18.

Vatz, Richard E. "The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation." *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 6 (1973): 154-61.

_____. "The Mythical Status of Situational Rhetoric: Implications for Rhetorical Critics' Relevance in the Public Arena." *Review of Communication* 9, no. 1 (2009): 1-5.

George W. Bush, "Address to the Nation on the Terrorist Attacks (September 11, 2001)," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George W. Bush* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Administration, 2004), 2001 Bk. II: 1099-100. [Paragraph #s added.]

[1] Good evening. Today, our fellow citizens, our way of life, our very freedom came under attack in a series of deliberate and deadly terrorist acts. The victims were in airplanes, or in their offices; secretaries, businessmen and women, military and federal workers; moms and dads, friends and neighbors. Thousands of lives were suddenly ended by evil, despicable acts of terror.

[2] The pictures of airplanes flying into buildings, fires burning, huge structures collapsing, have filled us with disbelief, terrible sadness, and a quiet, unyielding anger. These acts of mass murder were intended to frighten our nation into chaos and retreat. But they have failed; our country is strong.

[3] A great people has been moved to defend a great nation. Terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America. These acts shattered steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve.

[4] America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining.

[5] Today, our nation saw evil, the very worst of human nature. And we responded with the best of America -- with the daring of our rescue workers, with the caring for strangers and neighbors who came to give blood and help in any way they could.

[6] Immediately following the first attack, I implemented our government's emergency response plans. Our military is powerful, and it's prepared. Our emergency teams are working in New York City and Washington, D.C. to help with local rescue efforts.

[7] Our first priority is to get help to those who have been injured, and to take every precaution to protect our citizens at home and around the world from further attacks.

[8] The functions of our government continue without interruption. Federal agencies in Washington which had to be evacuated today are reopening for essential personnel tonight, and will be open for business tomorrow. Our financial institutions remain strong, and the American economy will be open for business, as well.

[9] The search is underway for those who are behind these evil acts. I've directed the full resources of our intelligence and law enforcement communities to find those responsible and to bring them to justice. We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them.

[10] I appreciate so very much the members of Congress who have joined me in strongly condemning these attacks. And on behalf of the American people, I thank the many world leaders who have called to offer their condolences and assistance. America and our friends and allies join with all those who want peace and security in the world, and we stand together to win the war against terrorism. Tonight, I ask for your prayers for all those who grieve, for the children whose worlds have been shattered, for all whose sense of safety and security has been threatened. And I pray they will be comforted by a power greater than any of us, spoken through the ages in Psalm 23: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me."

[11] This is a day when all Americans from every walk of life unite in our resolve for justice and peace. America has stood down enemies before, and we will do so this time. None of us will ever forget this day. Yet, we go forward to defend freedom and all that is good and just in our world.

[12] Thank you. Good night, and God bless America.