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Rhetorical Analysis - Final

How Many Ways Can a Person Read?

In 1969 a noted and award winning writer and poet by the name of Donald Hall wrote an article titled “Four Ways of Reading” (“Reading for Writers” 22). Originally published in the New York Times, it was written for the subscribers of the same with their vast differences in education and life experiences. The four ways of reading discussed in it are as varied as the people that will be reading the essay. Hall seems to have this audience in mind as he uses a playful tone and varying sentence structures to convince the reader of the four reading types he has discovered in both his professional and personal life. Through the use of multiple rhetorical strategies, Donald Hall guides his audience through the logical process of his experiences and walks beside us as he discovers the four ways that people read.

His work experience would have steeped him in a world where language, and the manipulation of it, was very important. At the time this essay was written Mr. Hall would have been about 41 years old and nearing the end of his eighteen year English teaching career at the University of Michigan. He had received a Bachelor’s degree from Harvard and a B. Litt. from Oxford University two years later. Following his formal schooling, a number of years were spent at Stanford and Harvard reading and writing after which he moved on to teach at the University of Michigan (“Reading for Writers” 22). As a seasoned reader and writer, Donald Hall had a vast wealth of experience consuming the written word, which put him in an authoritative position to write this essay on reading.

This understanding of language is evident as he explores why people read and how the value that a person’s selection of what they read reflects upon what they are seeking at that time in their life. He theorizes the reason why people read what they choose to read. He shares how he has been affected by different types of reading and explains what the four main types of reading are: for information, literature, intellectual

dissection, and as a narcotic means of escaping reality. He argues that these four different types of reading require varying degrees of effort from the reader, but they also provide varying degrees of rewards.

It is interesting that Hall does not state his thesis until the beginning of the third paragraph of his essay. Instead of stating it at the end of paragraph one, which is customary, he instead uses the first two paragraphs to introduce the topic of reading and the value that is placed on it in our society. He uses language such as “reading is an inactivity, and therefore a badge of social class” and “reading gives off an air of gentility” (“Reading for Writers” 23). By writing in this fashion, he uses logos (logic) to introduce his thesis statement. He first establishes the reason why people read before addressing the topic of his essay regarding the four types of reading. This is his logical approach to the topic; if we can discover why we are reading it will naturally lead us into what we choose to read.

This appeal to logos (logic) as he introduces us to why people read, naturally leads the reader into the pathos (emotions) that affect what a person chooses to read. As he walks the reader through the events that led him to love literature, he establishes his credibility as a reader of the written word. He helps the reader to understand that what we read is based on our current life experience. What mood are you in? That will tell you what you need to read. Where are you in your life? That will also tell you what you need to read. He answers this unasked question over and over as he discusses the four different ways that we read.

Hall’s bias is clearly shown towards literature as his favorite type of reading in the language that he uses as he describes the same. He uses words such as “...to read literature is to be intimately involved with the words on the page, and never to think of them as the embodiments of ideas which can be expressed in other terms” (“Reading for Writers” 24). He says that “great literature, if we read it well, opens us up to the world, and makes us more sensitive to it, as if we acquired eyes that could see through things and ears that could hear smaller sounds” (“Reading for Writers” 24). Does that also imply that if I do not agree with him then I must not be reading literature well?

Hall repeatedly attempts to convince the reader of the obvious correctness of his opinion by using different verbal images, and then following those images with a clear opinion drawn from the same. Half of each paragraph is a transition into the next thought or idea, and he weaves arguments of each reading type into the fabric of his paragraph. There is no single paragraph devoted to each reading type. By weaving them in and out of one another he keeps the reader on the alert. Where is he going with this line of thinking? Then he shows you. Sometimes the powerful sentence is stark and short. Other times, as in his conclusion, his final sentence is...rather winding and drawn out. And yet it ends suddenly.

I felt a little empty at the end of his essay, like he had taken me for a ride and then pushed me out the door before we had successfully reached the end of our journey together. He told me about literature, reading for information, reading to intellectualize and compartmentalize each element of the text, and reading to escape. And then, suddenly, at the end of the essay, he brings in a fifth element that does not seem to fit at all. A woman is in the backyard reading a play as it performs in her imagination. As the reader I can feel the flow of his words as each sentence seamlessly flows together, connected only by a semi-colon. This is an effective way of bringing the reader to feel the lightness of the moment that this woman is having, but one is left to wonder if he is drawing all four ways of reading into one? Regardless of his reason, it is a rather unusual way to end an essay. Perhaps he is trying to imply that we push our own bias' and opinions on the text we read and by so doing create an entirely different genre of reading. However, his reasons for doing this are not clear and leave me feeling a little unsettled.

Regardless of the reason you are reading this essay, Hall's use of rhetorical strategies effectively draws the reader through his thought process and leaves one to understand how he arrived at the conclusions he draws. I can clearly see the logical pattern of his thoughts, and though his bias is clearly shown towards his favorite type of reading, literature, I find myself looking at the other types of reading in a way I had never seen them before. Each type of reading has a time and a place in each person's life. Each type of reading carries its own benefits and limitations to each person's existence.

Works Cited

1. "Reading for Writers" , Bedford/St Martin's 2012, page 22 - 25.