



Rhetorical Analysis of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*

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In this sharp and detailed rhetorical analysis, Jensen Link stresses Founding Father Thomas Paine's appeals to timeliness, credibility, foresight, emotion, and audience identity in his pathbreaking pamphlet *Common Sense*. This essay was written for Writing I with Dr. Ben Wetherbee.

IN THE MOMENTOUS pamphlet known as *Common Sense*, the clocklike language ticks down to the very seconds, as Americans disputed among themselves on how the revolution would proceed, with many turning to the topic of the British. The author, Thomas Paine, shows why it will be detrimental to be ever so loyal and content with the British, for it will lead to the Americans' demise. In the chapter of *Common Sense* titled "Thoughts on the Present State of American Affairs," Paine uses rhetoric in the forms of effective timing to encourage a befuddled country, credibility behind his writing, planning for the future, enthymemes that show the audience's identity, and fiery passion that evoked a need for justice and independence.

First and foremost, Paine knew that while America was struggling with which side to be on; it would be the perfect time to write about what is happening to persuade people to join the movement and

fight against the British. This form of *kairos* could not have been better, because it gave a troubled nation an answer pertaining to the present, the past, and most importantly the future of the colonies. This timing brought in a warm welcome to some feelings that he had wanted to get out to the public for quite some time.

Paine's emotions speak for himself as accents his argument with feelings of passion. He discusses key information, like how "men of all ranks have embarked in the controversy, from different motives, and with various designs; but all have been ineffectual, and the period of debate is closed." He shows the multiple failures that others have had in debating the subject because of the diverse motives they had. He also shows that he is willing to offer his opinions but remains able to back up his information as factual instead of fictional. For instance, his own personal perspective: "I make the sufferers case my own, and I protest, that were I driven from house and home, my property destroyed, and my circumstances ruined, that as a man, sensible of injuries, I could never relish the doctrine of reconciliation, or consider myself bound thereby." The historical condition that Paine describes, property being destroyed and being driven from one's home, shows that he has understood the level of barbarity from the British, which shows the credibility one would have if they experienced it firsthand.

Another example Paine uses to persuade the audience to believe in him emerges when he rebuts the argument that the British are helping the colonists because of how much colonists have flourished under British rule. Paine immediately provides an example to counter this argument by discussing how "We may as well assert that because a child has thrived upon milk, that it is never to have meat." This example shows that America can only grow and become independent by being self-sustaining. This also reveals to the audience that the reliance the Americans have had on the British. It makes the average British citizen appear as some sort of pawn for the King's personal gain, which colonists can conceptualize and relate

too, which can sway the audience into viewing Paine's appeal to independence as credible.

After proving his side of the story, Paine shows the logical steps he is willing to take to rule out a monarchy once and for all. Paine understood the importance of having a structure of law and order, so he informed the public on how he plans to rebuild the country in a way that promotes justice over absolute authority. He first discusses how people need to throw away the idea of having one absolute ruler. Instead, he offers "a committee of twenty-six members of Congress, Viz. Two for each colony." This shows his capacity for inductive reasoning, as he shows hypothetical examples of a democracy that challenged traditional norms while assisting to bring in multiple opinions in the lawmaking process, emphasizing democracy over monarchy. The most important point that Paine proposes is the Continental Charter, or "securing freedom and property to all men, and above all things, the free exercise of religion." This is a form of enthymeme that directs the audience to a prenotation of the Magna Carta of England, which only gave a vague sense of freedom that was signed by a king. Paine wants to distance the Colonies from the Magna Carta and instead create something better, which will give the average person the freedom ordained by God. With the account of the previous laws the British forced onto the colonies, Paine shows the colonist experience and what it takes to fight for liberty.

The most important part of *Common Sense* was the rush of feelings infused into the pamphlet. The encouragement that Paine brings on is astonishing when he discusses the thousands that have sacrificed their lives to be at battle with the British, such that "All they *now* possess is liberty, what they before enjoyed is sacrificed to its service, and having nothing more to lose, they disdain submission." Paine's language shows the level of action that the colonists are taking to push what they believe and what they enjoy. This is also relevant to the audience, as it makes them feel a sense of duty to help those who are struggling for the freedom they deserve. Paine's passion gets to shine when countering an argument that,

since the British is powerful, they would protect the colonists from attackers. Yet again, Paine dismisses this blasphemy and expresses his emotions clearly, claiming that Britain’s “motive was INTEREST not ATTACHMENT; and that she did not protect us from OUR ENEMIES on OUR ACCOUNT; but from HER EMEMIES on HER OWN ACCOUNT, from those who had no quarrel with us on any OTHER ACCOUNT, and who will always be our enemies on the SAME ACCOUNT.” This reflective attitude warns that if British rule continues, the colonists will lose the reason why people fled the British in the first place—their freedom.

Thomas Paine did not know if his words would reach the public, but they did, and by storm, with over 120,000 pamphlets in circulation three months after publication. His work helped organize and inspired the colonial army, which may have changed the outlook for the whole war and contribute to why we have freedom to this day. Paine’s pamphlet was welcomed by the community because of its perfect timing, the use of experience, vision of the future, and the love put into it. In this pamphlet, Paine wanted to reveal this in the most basic of terms to show what everyone was missing, some common sense. ►►

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PAINE, THOMAS. “Thoughts on the Present State of American Affairs.” *Common Sense*, 1776, *UShistory.org*, 1995, www.ushistory.org/paine/commonsense/sense4.htm. Accessed 6 Oct. 2020.