

10/03/14
ENGL 106
John Sherrill

The Rhetorical Gladiator

“I remain unconvinced that my death has a fixed 100% probability, CMV [Change My View].”(Reddit n.p.) Paulogy, an anonymous user on the website Reddit, posts a challenge that demands an answer, and in doing so, creates a rhetorical coliseum in which he is emperor. Any writer answering paulogy’s prompt offers himself as a gladiator and must fight not in a void, as Bitzer points out in “The Rhetorical Situation”, but for the approval of a vocal audience (5-6).

A key challenge in this battle is working within the constraints of digital media. The Reddit audience is a diverse internet community of users that post questions, pictures, links, blogs, and other digital content; all vying for a chance at Reddit’s “Frontpage” (Shaer). This format, while wonderful for a reader, presents frustrating problems for the author. As Lev Manovich explains, almost any form of digital media is subject to the whims of those accessing it; and that is a feature certainly applies to Reddit (27-30).

If a Reddit post is well liked, the author can receive temporary fame as thousands of readers view the post and “upvote” to raise visibility and show their approval. On the other hand, if a post is disliked, it will often be ridiculed and “downvoted” so no others see it. Winning the argument means winning the crowd and every strike on the keyboard must be tailored towards the Reddit “hivemind”; where if one user turns on you, the rest are sure to follow (Herkewitz n.p.). However, for many Reddit users, or “Redditors”, the reward of others possibly reading and upvoting their comment far outweighs the risk of derision. If a gladiator

competes for freedom, a Redditor competes for fame. It is one of these ambitious users that responds to the rhetorical situation created by paulogy, bravely entering the coliseum wielding the familiar rhetorical blades of logos and pathos with an artful blend of footwork (Sheehan, Paine 148-149; Bitzer 5).

Sahasrahla, another Reddit user, steps into the arena carefully. "...to have a non-zero chance of dying you have to live forever...I should be able to name any time in the future and you'll still be around" (Reddit n.p.). This is the basis of sahasrahla's argument. He turns paulogy's own statement against him, very subtly planting seeds of doubt. Starting 100 years from now to beyond, sahasrahla paints a picture of paulogy's existence as an immortal.

The first time he truly brandishes his rhetorical weapons is with logos, or common sense, at the 200 year mark (Sheehan, Paine 148-149;Reddit n.p.). For paulogy to still be alive 200 years from now, sahasrahla describes a scenario in which significant medical advances have been made that allow organs to be replaced and brain cells regenerated. Additionally, he points out that not only would this technology need to exist, paulogy would need to have access to it. From there, he jumps from year to year, taking us successively farther into paulogy's future and the unique circumstances of his existence at each milestone. This approach is very well chosen for two reasons. For one, Reddit's audience is very science orientated and there are whole Reddit communities devoted to exactly the type of speculation sahasrahla is engaging in (Shaer n.p.; Reddit n.p.). As such, most Redditors are already familiar with sahasrahla's line of reasoning and it is a safe bet on sahasrahla's part that they will accept the general concept of his argument. Secondly, these are broad statements, logical conclusions based off general knowledge of the world and reasonably easy to accept, thus helping sahasrahla avoid having to provide sources for his statements or draw on non-existent credibility. While not ideal for a

rhetorical argument, it is necessary in this unique situation of internet anonymity and sahasrahla executes it well. These descriptions also successfully plant the first seed of doubt in paulogy's statement. To live 200 years requires a lot of "ifs" and also creates the question, how does one define being alive (Reddit n.p.)?

The 200 year mark is also the first time sahasrahla strikes with pathos, or emotions (Sheehan, Paine 148-149). Would you even want to be alive 200 years from now? This is not sahasrahla's main argument, but it runs parallel to his use of logic as seen in his description of a million years into future, "How much memory can the human mind hold, anyway? Do you remember your childhood, your first kiss, the face of your parents?...Are you still human, even?" (Reddit n.p.) Sahasrahla uses emotion filled imagery as a way to draw his audience in. One should keep in mind the nature of Reddit. Not only must sahasrahla change the view of paulogy, he must also appeal to those with the power to downvote him. He uses pathos to slip between the armor of audience, carefully manipulating their emotions to be more receptive of his argument. At the 100,000 year milestone he even uses humor, "You've managed to go a thousand centuries without your head getting crushed under the back wheels of a bus. Kudos." This style of humor is prevalent across Reddit and combined with the powerful imagery sahasrahla uses, he makes it difficult for the average Redditor to dislike him (Lunsford 317-318; Herkewitz n.p). Ultimately, sahasrahla's use of pathos drives his points home, especially in the final stroke of his argument. Pathos and logos are the flashy steel of sahasrahla's armory but those are not the only weapons at his disposal. A much more subtle blend of footwork and maneuvering guides every swing of his rhetoric.

At first glance, it may seem as if sahasrahla has committed a fatal misstep. His entire argument is built off one assumption after another, and comes dangerously close to the logical

fallacy of a “slippery slope argument” (Lunsford 219). However, sahasrahla’s apparent mistake is actually designed to simultaneously strengthen his logic and weaken paulogy’s. If, at any stage, paulogy or another user points out that one of sahasrahla’s descriptions seems unlikely, the entire argument from that point forward will come tumbling down-but not on sahasrahla. No matter how unlikely sahasrahla’s vision of the future may be, as long as it is possible, it supports paulogy’s belief that there is a chance at immortality. To attack sahasrahla, is to attack paulogy. This is why sahasrahla bides his time so long. In total, sahasrahla describes 20 different stages into the future, each one becoming less and less likely for paulogy to survive to. Not until the last possible opportunity does he finally argue that immortality is impossible, and even then, he does not compromise his argument.

With the final twist of his rhetoric, sahasrahla describes a future where the sun has died out long ago, galaxies winked out one by one, and paulogy is all that remains of an empty, dying universe. This is the final culmination of sahasrahla’s argument, a brilliant weave of emotion and logic. Pathos prepares the reader to accept sahasrahla’s argument without anger or mourning at the loss of immortality and logos provides the reader with only one possible, satisfying conclusion. The universe is finite, and thus, so is everything contained in it: even paulogy (Reddit n.p).

The gladiator puts down his sword, but did he win? In short, absolutely. Sahasrahla submitted his comment over a year ago, and to this day it remains one of the top posts of all time in that particular Reddit community. Paulogy responded directly to sahasrahla and purchased him a subscription for “Reddit gold”, a way for users to reward particularly good comments on Reddit (Reddit n.p.). Even from a purely rhetorical perspective, his argument was still a success. His use of logic and common sense allowed his argument to be both approachable and

convincing and by introducing emotion at key points, he was able to win over the crowd as well as Paul. Sahasrahla took possible weaknesses in his argument and turned them into strengths where a possible logical fallacy became a brilliant tactical maneuver. For at least that day, Sahasrahla won internet fame and walked away from the coliseum a rhetorical gladiator.

Works Cited

Bitzer, Lloyd F. "The Rhetorical Situation." *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 25.1 (1992): 1-14. JSTOR. 1

Jan. 1992. Web. 12 Sept. 2014. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40237697>>.

Herkewitz, William. "Upvotes, Downvotes, and the Science of the Reddit Hivemind." *Popular*

Mechanics. Hearst Communication, Inc., 8 Aug. 2013. Web. 19 Sept. 2014.

<<http://www.popularmechanics.com/science/health/nueroscience/upvotes-downvotes-and-the-science-of-the-reddit-hivemind-15784871>>.

Lunsford, Andrea A. *Everyone's an Author*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2012. 275-328. Print.

Manovich, Lev. "What Is New Media?" *The Language of New Media* (2002): 19-63. Print.

Reddit. "I Remain Unconvinced That My Death Has a Fixed 100% Probability, CMV." *Reddit: The*

Front Page of the Internet. 3 May 2013. Web. 12 Sept. 2014.

<http://www.reddit.com/r/changemyview/comments/1dn43v/i_remain_unconvinced_that_my_death_has_a_fixed/>.

Shaer, Matthew. "Reddit in the Flesh." *New York: News and Politics*. New York Media LLC, 8

July 2012. Web. 12 Sept. 2014. <<http://nymag.com/news/features/reddit-2012-7/>>.

Sheehan, Richard, and Charles Paine. "Rhetorical Analyses." *Writing Today*. 2nd ed. Boston:

Pearson, 2013. 143-149. Print.