

Fall/Winter 2018-2019

AP/EN 3391 3.0M (W)

Powers of Persuasion: Argument and Prose Style

Course Director:

Brett Zimmerman
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Delivery Format:

Seminar

Time:

Thursdays 2:30-5:30pm

Description:

We are inundated with rhetorical performances—that is, attempts to persuade: television and radio personalities, the print and electronic media, religious leaders, politicians, advertisers, teachers, parents, family, friends. Most parties attempting to swing us to their points of view are harmless, many are well-meaning and benign. It is often the case, though, that tyrants, narcissists, racists, and other sociopathic personalities sway millions of people to their toxic perspectives. How terrifying it is to consider that, arguably, the most effective rhetorician of the twentieth century was Adolph Hitler. And how did a racist, sexist, unempathetic chronic liar become President of the United States in our own time? He did so in part by tapping into the darkest emotions of the electorate and by relying on a culture of anti-intellectualism and the complete inability of millions of Americans to think critically. When such poisonous persuaders gain power, the results can be devastating on a global level. Even in the world of literature we have famous instances of overwhelming rhetorical performers: Poe's insane homicidal narrators, Melville's Captain Ahab in *Moby-Dick*, Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost*. As scholars, we need to learn to see through the rhetoric to admire the persuasive skills of the authors; more importantly, as socially and politically conscientious citizens we are compelled to analyse, deconstruct and, if necessary, expose and counter with our own rhetorical skills the suasive performances of others.

This course examines the art of suasion within the context of prose fiction, nonfiction, and oratory (speeches) in the American tradition. Emphasis is on texts from the modern, rather than the ancient or medieval, period. The critical tool employed is terminology from stylistics, classical rhetoric, and what the

Americans call speech communication theory. This course is designed for students doing a major or minor in English but students in Professional Writing and Creative Writing are also strongly encouraged to enroll. Unlike courses in those streams, however, "Powers of Persuasion" does not teach the history of rhetoric or require students to submit a portfolio; rather, it trains students to analyse with considerable critical depth the following: (1) the rhetorical efforts of literary characters who attempt to persuade other characters or the readers; (2) the prescriptive or otherwise propagandistic utterances of the authors themselves within their medium of fiction or nonfiction; (3) and, most significantly, a selection of some of the most noteworthy and influential speeches and written documents in U.S. history, from early Americans to Barack Obama.

You will not be asked to read novels or other long texts; instead, you are evaluated on the basis of weekly short-text analyses, most of which we take up in class and a few of which are submitted for grading. We have no essay assignments; we do have a single end-of-term open-book test done in class. To train you in the critical vocabulary necessary for these tasks, we study all three types of oratory (ceremonial, judicial, deliberative), looking at their use of figurative rhetoric, lexical sets, topoi, and Aristotelian appeals. With a few brief lessons on the informal logical fallacies as well, students complete the course with a profoundly improved ability to read, analyse, and evaluate literature and the spoken word. Additionally, when time permits, we study a selection of magazine ads to see how visual components, not just the spoken or written word, can also have a persuasive function. This course, which has immediate real-world applications, is for serious students.

Category:

C

Historical Requirement:

Period II (1700-1900)

Requirements:

On-Page-Analyses (4 or 5) 65%
participation: 15%
final test: 20%

Reading List:

Zimmerman, Brett. *Powers of Persuasion: Argument and Prose Style: Muse Americana*. Course Kit.

Zimmerman, Brett. *Powers of Persuasion: Argument and Prose Style: Readings and Exercises*. Course kit.

Zimmerman, Brett. *Powers of Persuasion: Argument and Prose Style: Supplemental Materials*. Course kit.

Open To:

Yr 2,3,4