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**Rhetoric:**

**A Slippery Slope to Manipulation in Fight Club**

Rhetoric has long been debated as a practice between those who say its purpose is for the betterment of society, and those who say it is detrimental due to its potential to corrupt society. The truth of the matter is that this long withstanding argument is a moot debate. The real purpose of rhetoric is dependent on those that are using it and those that are interpreting it. Rhetoric, when powered by the right people, can inspire and offer hope to those seeking a source of comfort through words. Unfortunately, rhetoric is not partial to the good intentioned and can sometimes successfully be used in order to manipulate individuals in ways that may not be in their best interest. Such is the latter case of Tyler Durden, one of the main characters in the movie Fight Club played by Brad Pitt.

Tyler is a confident, good looking, eloquent man who is essentially attempting to create his own army of men under what he deems “Fight Club”. When first addressing the men he sets off on this speech as a basis for Fight Clubs existence:

Man, I see in Fight Club the strongest and smartest men who've ever lived. I see all this potential, and I see squandering. God damn it, an entire generation pumping gas, waiting tables; slaves with white collars. Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don't need. We're the middle children of history, man. No purpose or place. We have no Great War. No Great Depression. Our Great War's a spiritual war... our Great Depression is our lives. We've all been raised on television to believe that one day we'd all be millionaires, and movie gods, and rock stars. But we won't. And we're slowly learning that fact. And we're very, very pissed off. (Fight Club)

This speech is labeled as a deliberative speech because the point is to establish goals and pursue actions. (Herrick 85) Although the speech may ostensibly seem to be a mere rant or criticism of society, the real purpose behind Tyler’s words is to inspire those men into a future course of action. When dividing the three methods of speech, Aristotle reserved deliberative for last because “like deliberation in general, it focuses on the choice of future action rather than on the assessment of past actions and character.” (Yack 421)

When presenting his speech, Tyler uses his delivery as a way to further engage his audience. Delivery is the control of ones voice and body language relevant to the focused subject matter. (Herrick 103) The sixteenth and seventeenth century serves as examples of the dangers in making delivery and style the only components to the art of rhetoric because both were a time when the presentation mattered more than the actual concept. (Suillivan 46) As Tyler delivers his speech, he is in the middle of an audience who are all standing in a close knit circle surrounding him. When speaking, he continuously walks around the circle, while deliberately making eye contact with the men as much as possible. Some sentences end more abruptly while others are accentuated, but all are presented in an aggressive manner. The fact that the speech is made in such tight proximity assists in making his theatrical delivery. With the audience being so close, he is better able to gain a presence of intimidation and illustrate a strong sense of urgency to the men.

The style of language Tyler uses in his speech is geared toward his audience. He knows the men will be affected to the kind of revolutionary undertones prevalent in his speech such as when he says “Our Great War's a spiritual war... our Great Depression is our lives.” His decorum, which is the appropriate use of language in a speech, (Herrick 92) is made suitable to his audience. Knowing he has men from all walks of life around him-he uses language that is simple yet will still evoke emotion no matter who is listening. One way he does this is by using profanity like “God damn it” and “so we can buy shit we don’t need.” The use of profanity makes the speech seem angrier and more aggressive, thus making those emotions resonate with his audience and in turn make them feel the same way.

Tyler uses strong emotional language in order to stir up the men’s feeling of resentment toward society. In order to do so he uses Aristotle’s idea of appeals, which aim to evoke some sort of emotional response or establish loyalty and commitment from the audience. (Herrick 14) He establishes this relationship of loyalty by eliciting emotions through the artistic proof of pathos, defined by Aristotle as “putting the audience in the right frame of mind.” (Herrick 88) Tyler utilizes his rhetoric in order to elicit enough anger in the men that would lead them to believe that enough is enough. At the opening of Book II, Aristotle defines anger as “an impulse, accompanied by pain, to a conspicuous revenge for a conspicuous slight directed without justification toward what concerns oneself or what concerns ones friends.” (Herrick 88) By appealing to the men’s emotions and eliciting their anger, Tyler is able to persuade that some sort of unjustifiable revenge needs to be acted out on the rest of society.

Tyler’s persuasive skills not only lead the men to join his club in which they all fight one another, but eventually after establishing their trust, creates his own army of terrorists. Those who partake in this Fight Club seem to be the kind of men who have given up on life and are looking for something new to live and have hope for. Completely aware of their state of mind, Tyler uses his rhetoric to take advantage of their vulnerability. He never says exactly what his goals are for these men, but instead leaves it to their own interpretation, which allows them to still believe in their own intelligence through the means of his guide. (Arnold 49) The speech does not necessarily direct, but rather puts his audience in a state of mind that would allow them to unknowingly become more compliant. This idea is similar to the belief of Greek author Thucydides who said “All possible points should not be punctiliously and tediously elaborated, but some should be left to the comprehension and inference of the hearer, who, when he perceives what you have omitted becomes not only your hearer, but your witness, and a very friendly witness, too.” (Arnold 48)

By omitting certain truths behind his intentions Tyler is using the rhetorical strategy of an enthymeme, which is a rhetorical syllogism without one of its parts. (Herrick 82) Aristotle believed this rhetorical device was an essential part of persuasion in any speech. (Herrick 82) Tylers convincing words lead the men to believe that by fighting and engaging in these acts of violence they can live for something more than just themselves and now have an actual purpose in life.

The rhetoric in this speech is an example of how easy it is to use language in order to negatively impact an audience. The actual purpose behind Tyler’s words does not matter for these men because his rhetoric was purposely devised to be that way. Often times, when assessing the morality of a speech, it seems that the style or context become the justification for its morality rather than the purpose behind the speech itself. (Santilli 28)

The fact that rhetoric could disguise certain intents and be used for the purpose of deceit is precisely the reason why philosophers like Plato were adamantly opposed to it. Plato believed that a rhetorician’s only goal was to persuade an audience through manipulating public opinion. (Herrick 59) Plato equated the use of rhetoric as a way to flatter and convince an audience rather than a means of relaying truth. (Triadafilopoulos 743) The preachy rhetoric used by Tyler in his speech leads the men to believe just that. They have been manipulated into thinking his rhetoric is teaching them new absolute truths rather than Tylers own opinion of the truth. He uses the Greek concept of kairos, which is “the belief that truth is relative to circumstances” (Herrick 45) by assessing his own idea of certain truths to the circumstances he knows the audience will have a positive response to. This idea can also be linked to what is known as situated truth, which is to adjust a speech in order for everyone in the audience to cohesively think and feel the same way. (Herrick 103) Engaging the audience into similar states of mind makes it easier for Tyler to establish a standard of conformity which assists in him eventually possessing an overall control over the men.

The influence Tyler’s speech exemplifies is the kind of rhetorical mind control Plato sought to oppose. He was concerned with how rhetoric “only created the impression of well-being without delivering the real product.” (Herrick 63) Tyler’s speech seemingly praises, or as Plato would say, flatters the men when he says things like “I see in fight club the strongest and smartest men who’ve ever lived.” By flattering the men he is gaining their trust which further establishes his control over them. Plato continually stresses against this ability for rhetoric to delude unsuspecting listeners. (Triadafilopoulos 744)

The speech Tyler makes in Fight Club is an example of rhetoric being used in a negative way. But although Tyler is the one actually speaking the rhetoric, it is the audience’s willingness to listen that makes his rhetoric dangerous. The men were looking for something more in life and saw Fight Club as the cathartic means of achieving that something more. They did not care about the reason or logic behind what they were doing-but instead focused on the instinctual feelings that Tyler was able to provoke. While all uses of rhetoric are different depending on the speaker and the audience, in such circumstances as Tyler Durden, Plato may have had a point when he wrote “Preferring that political discourse be couched in language that appeals primarily to a person’s reason as opposed to their passions and appetites.” (Triadafilopoulos 744)