

Ms. Thompson

AP Language

September 3, 2014

Analysis of “How I Replaced Shakespeare”; Joel Stein, *Time Magazine*, Dec. 10, 2012

In his passionate, yet sardonic column, “How I Replaced Shakespeare,” journalist Joel Stein reminds his well- educated, career focused audience that literature has value, both in our lives and in the classroom. Stein’s column addresses the new Common Core State Standards, which have changed the focus in English classrooms from fiction to non- fiction. Although the supporters of this change in schools argue that the change only “upsets people who love literature,” Stein argues that it should upset all of us. He argues that great works of fiction, such as *Hamlet* and “The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock” teach us what it is like to be human, and that when we only give students “useful” reading, they are missing an essential piece of their education. Perhaps, education isn’t so much about preparing you for a job as it is about preparing you for life.

Joel Stein starts off his column with a personal anecdote in order to develop a little ethos with the audience. His discussion of the emails he receives from his readers gives him a right to talk about the subject. His belief that his writing is not nearly as important as Shakespeare’s makes him likeable. Then, he introduces the other side of the argument, and at first it is a fair and unbiased introduction, until in paragraphs 3-6 he begins to pick it apart, bit by bit. This section is full of specific examples that are supposed to appeal to your sense of logic, as long as you are familiar with his references. It’s not until he has thoroughly defeated the argument behind the common core that Stein introduces his own thesis. Stein allows the reader to wade slowly into his argument, slowly enough that by the time he gets there, we almost believe that it is our own argument, possibly weakening his opponent’s resistance to the ideas.

Joel Stein's sense of humor is perhaps his most effective rhetorical weapon. His sarcastic, self-proclaimed "modern wit" fills this piece. Some of the humor is intelligent, such as his references to George W. Bush's amusing habit of accidentally making up words, Jack London's poor writing, and Nigerian scams; other bits of humor are personal, such as his discussion of Steven Baumgarten and his science class and getting "to second base" using T.S. Eliot; some are edged with biting commentary, such as his decision in the end of the column to get rich off of the new curriculum instead of trying to fight against it. This humor is appealing to Stein's audience for many reasons. The most obvious is that it makes him appear to be more likable. It also helps him take the edge off of his argument. His argument is passionate, forceful even, in places. But just when he begins getting pushy, he backs off and insults himself or George Bush, and it's hard to be offended, even if you don't agree with him.

I really liked this article. I am a high school English teacher, and because of that, as Wilhout asserts, I think fiction is incredibly important. So I was already in agreement with him before he started; he didn't really have to work hard to convince me; I was just incredibly entertained. However, I don't know if it would be effective for a reader who didn't initially agree with him. As an English teacher, I believe that it's impossible to read James Joyce or William Faulkner without gaining an appreciation for the true value of fiction. So I feel like his targeted audience, those who don't believe in the power of fiction, may miss and therefore lose the power of some of his references. Most likely, they have not read the books he is referencing, and if that is the case, this piece loses its power.