1.3: Definitions of Rhetoric and the Rhetorical Situation

The art of creating effective arguments is explained and systematized by a discipline called rhetoric. Writing is about making choices, and knowing the principles of rhetoric allows a writer to make informed choices about various aspects of the writing process. Every act of writing takes place in a specific rhetorical situation. The three most basic and important components of a rhetorical situation are:

- Purpose of writing
- Intended audience,
- Occasion, or context in which the text will be written and read

These factors help writers select their topics, arrange their material, and make other important decisions about their work.

Before looking closely at different definitions and components of rhetoric, let us try to understand what rhetoric is not. In recent years, the word "rhetoric" has developed a bad reputation in American popular culture. In the popular mind, the term "rhetoric" has come to mean something negative and deceptive. Open a newspaper or turn on the television, and you are likely to hear politicians accusing each other of "too much rhetoric and not enough substance." According to this distorted view, rhetoric is verbal fluff, used to disguise empty or even deceitful arguments.

Examples of this misuse abound. Here are some examples.

Example (PageIndex{1}):

A 2013 Washington Post article “GOP tries pushing back against “war on women” rhetoric,” by Nia-Malika Henderson describes a comment made by former Republican presidential candidate and Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee during the Republican National Committee annual winter meeting. Huckabee suggested that some women "believe that..."
they are helpless without Uncle Sugar coming in and providing for them a prescription each month for birth control because they cannot control their libido or their reproductive system without the help of the government.” Some Democrats pointed to Huckabee’s statement as proof that the Republican party was waging a “war on women”. However, in the article, Chelsi Henry, a Republican woman stated, “What war on women? That just political rhetoric”. The word “rhetoric” in this context implies a strategy to deceive or distract.

Another example is the title of the now-defunct political website “Spinsanity: Countering Rhetoric with Reason.” The website’s authors state that “engaged citizenry, active press and strong network of fact-checking websites and blogs can help turn the tide of deception that we now see.” (http://www.spinsanity.org). What this statement implies, of course, is that rhetoric is “spin” and that it is the opposite of truth.

Here, perhaps, is the most interesting example. The author of the video below, posted on Youtube, is clearly dissatisfied with the abundance of “rhetoric” in Barack Obama’s 2008 campaign for the White House.

What is interesting about this clip is that its author does not seem to realize that she is engaging in rhetoric as she is criticizing the term. She has a purpose, which is to question Obama's credentials; she is addressing an audience which consists of people who are perhaps considering voting for Obama; finally, she is creating her video in a very real context of the heated battle between Senators Obama and Clinton for the Presidential nomination of the Democratic Party.

Rhetoric is not a dirty trick used by politicians to conceal and obscure, but an art, which, for many centuries, has had many definitions. Perhaps the most popular and overreaching definition comes to us from the Ancient Greek thinker Aristotle. Aristotle defined rhetoric as “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion"
(Ch.2). Aristotle saw primarily as a practical tool, indispensable for civic discourse.