THE DEVELOPMENT OF A GENRE:

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESSES

DELIVERED BY POPULAR

CULTURAL ICONS

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This study examines the genre of commencement rhetoric and utilizes current literature of commencement addresses delivered by traditional speakers in conjunction with an analysis of speeches from pop culture icons to establish the defining characteristics of the genre. These characteristics are: 1) acknowledging the graduates, 2) creating identification, 3) presenting the world, and 4) instilling hope.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

There are few events throughout the course of our lives that alter the paths we are traveling, and that we will undoubtedly remember forever. For those of us who are privileged enough to complete the four (or five… or six) strenuous years at an institute of higher education, the commencement ceremony is certainly one of these events. The name of the ceremony itself is indicative of the occasion's long-lasting impact on our lives. Rather than being termed simply a "graduation" ceremony, which implies honoring only the completion of students' academic achievements, universities often use the phrase "commencement" instead. The chosen term stems "from the Latin word inceptio, which connotes the 'beginning' or 'inception' of a new productive and prosperous life" (Cromie). This idea of transitioning into a new era in one's life is generally the overall theme of commencement ceremonies, and is usually most prominently manifested in the form of the commencement address.

Overview

The Commencement Address

The commencement address is the symbolic representation of ushering the young, naïve students from the safe haven of the university out into the scary unknown,

otherwise referred to as the "real world". Andrew Albanese is credited with describing the commencement address as the "university's final gift to its graduates" (qtd. in Long 7). This is the last formal chance to make an impression on these young minds before they leave the hallowed halls of their alma mater and move on to grander endeavors in the world.

While this notion of evolution has been a long-standing tradition during commencement ceremonies, it is evident that the ritual of the commencement address is also evolving. Every generation of graduates enters a world of opportunities and challenges unlike any generation that came before them. We live in a dynamic society where the world that awaits each generation's graduates is continually changing. Therefore, it is to be expected that the last words of wisdom to graduates entering this world also change along with the times, as do the speakers who deliver these prolific words.

Popular Culture

In overall terms, few entities embody the spirit of these changing times as do the commonly recognized icons of society's popular culture. Today it is often hard to get through a day without dependence on the Internet and our intake of knowledge relies more on television than a library. It seems that there are few areas of daily life that have escaped this shift away from traditional conventions of knowledge to a prominent reliance on the tenets of our popular culture.

In noting that "the youth of our country are immersed in the world of television," Thomas A. Fain, Jr., explains that today's popular culture is the means by which young people make sense of their world (590). For example, though politics are certainly a prominent part of our society, the manner in which today's youth come to understand politics is through the components of popular culture: the Internet, music, television, and the people that represent each of these.

Purpose of Study

The act of a non-traditional commencement speaker, such as a pop culture icon, addressing the traditional rhetorical situation of a commencement ceremony creates a number of questions for the rhetorical critic. What types of themes does this type of commencement speaker present? Do these themes coincide with or contradict the literature base built on speeches delivered by more typical rhetors? Do the cultural icons bring different ideas to the realm of commencement addresses, or do they simply present conventional messages in a non-conventional way? In answering these questions, this study hopes to explore the relationship between the overall genre of commencement rhetoric and those speeches delivered specifically by non-traditional speakers, as well as decipher the key unifying concepts that link all speeches of this type, regardless of speaker, into the distinct genre of commencement addresses.

Justification of Study

There are several reasons that justify conducting a study of this nature. The commencement ceremony is a monumental event in a student's life. The timing of the

occasion is immediately before these young adults set forth to make many new decisions that will have a long-lasting impact on their lives. An effective commencement address has the ability to help focus the graduates and guide these decisions. The potential impact of the commencement address illustrates the need to study the genre of commencement rhetoric.

As mentioned, popular culture penetrates nearly every aspect of our lives. The knowledge we seek today may be the same as that sought by our predecessors, but the medium by which we gain our knowledge is very different. For illustrative purposes, consider our integration of pop culture in the news. The core essence of the news has not greatly changed over the years; world events, local happenings, and politics are as much items of interest on the news front now as they have ever been. The difference is the way we get this news. We rely less on newspapers and more on television and the Internet. Changes in mass media offer both fresh sources of news and different ways of talking about the news, which affect our perceptions of the world. Likewise, the deliberate choice of popular culture icons to deliver commencement addresses rather than the more traditional option of politicians or community leaders offers the opportunity for changes to the conventional commencement speech.

The bulk of the literature regarding commencement addresses focuses on speeches performed by more traditional speakers. On the other hand, there is an abundance of information on the icons of today's popular culture, but little that evaluates their formal addresses. Because of the importance of this category of rhetoric, as well as the persistence of pop culture in today's society, there is value in studying the

combination of the two. This is an area where current literature is lacking, and this study seeks to address that void. This analysis will not only offer insight into commencement rhetoric delivered by this particular type of speaker but, in doing so, will also more clearly define the genre of commencement addresses. This will help develop a framework for the genre that is applicable to all types of speakers in order to aid future rhetorical critics in the analysis of commencement addresses and add to the overall literature base of this type of rhetoric.

Literature Review

Guidelines for a Commencement Address

Though current literature does not explicitly state the characteristics that classify an artifact as belonging to the genre of commencement rhetoric, it does lay out some general public address guidelines that the average commencement speech should follow. Joseph Wagner and Takehide Kawashima suggest that the speech be delivered with a conversational tone (Takeda 99). However, a commencement speaker should also remember that, while a conversational tone will help make the audience comfortable, "graduation is a formal occasion" and an overly "chatty tone" should be avoided (Caesar). Additionally, the language should be clear and understandable to an average audience (Takeda 99). The graduates should be the part of the audience primarily focused on, but the rhetor should not alienate the rest of the audience by speaking over their heads.

As a general rule for most public rhetors, speakers should try to find an innovative or fresh approach to capture their audience (Booher 77). If the audience is to remember a particular speech for ages to come (as is the case with commencement addresses), it must offer something new to them that they have not heard time and time again. Clichés should be avoided as triteness is not a means of inspiration (Booher 77). Instead of using exhausted generalizations, a commencement speaker should use specific examples in order to relate the speech's content directly to the graduates (Caesar). Specific guidance on commencement addresses also suggests that the speeches be brief. Hanna and Gibson are credited with the notion that "sincere, simple feelings are best" (qtd. in "Student Commencement…").

Purpose and Success of the Commencement Address

In reflecting on the conventions of commencement addresses, politician and lawyer Charles P. Taft stated "A very wise man once said that a speech should always answer an important question in the minds of the audience. I wonder what the question is today?" (qtd. in Bennet 538). Though spoken over eighty years ago, these words are as true today as they were when Taft first stated them. The graduates, the key audience members at a commencement ceremony, are in mid-pivot of a monumental turning point in their lives. As they anxiously await the formal punctuation of their college experience, they are undoubtedly asking themselves the inevitable question…. "What's next?"

It is this question that prompts former Chairman of the Department of Speech of Utica College Ralph Schmidt to claim that "the purpose of the commencement speaker should be to inspire the members of the graduating class" (33). Andrew Albanese, an

editor for the Oxford University Press, echoes this sentiment when he refers to a commencement address as "a motivational farewell" and "an amazing primer for adulthood" (qtd. in Long 7).

This is not to say that all of the attention should focus solely on the future for this is also a time to reflect on the last several years of these students' lives. Kevin W. Dean explains that "the occasion of commencement … is both a celebration of new beginning and a time of remembrance" (195). It is an opportunity to honor and praise the students for their accomplishments, to recognize their professors, and to thank their families for their support (Takeda 98).

Congratulations for completing such a challenging task are certainly in order, but as previously mentioned, it is the melding of this accomplishment with the future that distinguishes a commencement from a graduation. Albanese summarizes the importance of the convergence of past and future from another perspective when he claims that "it's not enough to tell graduates that their future lies ahead of them-they already know this. The most effective speakers are the ones who put the past in context with the future" (qtd. in Long 7). Rhetors use the technique of showing the students how their lives over the past several years will converge with their futures to encourage them to find out "what's next".

The Audience

As with any speech, it is of the utmost importance for commencement speakers to remember their audience. In his advice to commencement speakers, Schmidt defines the

target audience most clearly when he says "prepare your message for the graduates" (33). The general audience of the commencement ceremony includes family and friends of the graduates, professors, and university officials, but it is the graduates who are the honorees of the occasion. The graduates, rather than their parents or professors, are the audience the speaker is there to inspire. Just as it is important for the speaker to remember this, it is equally important for the speaker to make this evident to the graduates through the words and delivery of the commencement address. In order to be inspired by another's words, the graduates need to know that the words were written specifically for them, with their best interests in mind (Schmidt 34).

The Commencement Speaker

While the commencement address has been a long-standing tradition at university graduation ceremonies, the nature of the speech has changed. When the graduating classes were considerably smaller than they are today, it was common for the commencement addresses to be delivered by the students themselves. During the first commencement ceremony of Harvard College in 1642, each member of the graduating class delivered some variation of a rhetorical performance in order to demonstrate "before the public his status as an educated man" (Odegaard 280). This set the standard of North American commencement ceremonies for over 200 years (Odegaard 280).

However, as the size of the graduating classes grew, it became more and more difficult to accommodate a function that showcased the talents of each student. There was a transitional period that allowed only a portion of the graduates to perform orations before, in 1878, the University of Michigan "decided to omit all student speeches" and

replace them with an address performed by a distinguished speaker (Odegaard 282). Though who is considered to be a distinguished speaker has varied through the years and by university, this is the generally accepted norm for commencement ceremonies in this country still today.

Many universities choose to designate the President of the university or a distinguished alumnus as the most appropriate speaker for the occasion because these are choices that link the address back to the university and establish a common bond between the rhetor and the audience. However, the 20th century brought with it an increasing trend to invite well-known figures such as local leaders and politicians to deliver commencement speeches. In recent years, these invitations have expanded to include other celebrities and icons of popular culture such as musicians, actors, and various television personalities.

Public Figures as Commencement Speakers

There are distinct reasons to look outside of the university community for a speaker. The most obvious reason is that the commencement ceremony is meant to be a memorable occasion, and when the university chooses a famous figure to deliver the commencement speech, the university does so in hopes that the "graduates and their families will remember (it) for the rest of their lives" (Long 8). The less advertised, but equally motivating, reason for inviting well-known figures to perform at the ceremony is that it sparks publicity for the university (Long 8). This is an effective tactic for the university because "prominent speakers enhance the stature of the university in the eyes of the parents and potential donors" (Pollack 16). Not only does this add to the

university's proverbial pocketbook, but the added prestige the university stands to gain with celebrity commencement speakers (Rainey, A. A6) can help make the university a more coveted institution of higher learning for students.

In addition to the university's motivation to invite a prominent public figure to deliver the address, often the public figure has his or her own motivation to accept the invitation. Just as "money talks" when the university decides on a person for the commencement address, it also talks for the speakers. Unless the celebrity has some sort of connection to the university or ulterior motive, there is a good chance they will require a fee to speak at the ceremony. Depending on the prominence of the celebrity, these fees can be quite impressive. Mike Garibaldi-Frick, the chief executive officer of an organization that books speakers for colleges, states that his company will pay "an average of $50,000 for well-known names" (qtd. in Rainey, A. A6). It is not uncommon for the top of the public speaking food chain to be paid even more than that. Television anchor and editor Katie Couric is reported to have a lofty $115,000 speaking fee, while former United States President Bill Clinton receives over $100,000 per speech (Rainey, A. A6).

Aside from the remuneration for speaking at commencement ceremonies, another key reason celebrities accept these invitations is to promote themselves. This may be as simple as boosting ratings for television personalities or ticket sales for sports figures, but the most common use of this function historically comes from politicians and political figures. Literature abounds with examples of traditional public figures, such as

Presidents, governors, activists, utilizing these occasions to present political issues. In

fact, a number of our country's notable speeches are linked to commencement addresses.

Politics and Commencement Addresses

Mary Beth Marklein points out that former "Secretary of State George Marshall

put forth his Marshall Plan as Harvard's speaker" and that "President John F. Kennedy

called on the Soviet Union and the USA to work together to achieve a nuclear test ban

treaty during his 1963 address at American University" (1D). Martin Luther King, Jr.,

delivered the "precursor to his 'I Have a Dream' speech at Lincoln University" (Long 7).

President Lyndon B. Johnson used the 1964 commencement address at the University of

Michigan to introduce the social reforms of the "Great Society" (Long 7) and the address

at Howard University in 1965 to "clarify his leadership over civil rights" (Lawrence 35).

In more recent years, President George W. Bush delivered a commencement

speech at the University of Notre Dame in 2001 that "laid the intellectual and moral

framework for relieving the poor in America and worldwide" (Nichols, H. 16).   Former

President George H. W. Bush quite effectively utilized his 1991 commencement address

at the University of Michigan to discuss his domestic agenda. Palczewksi and Madsen

stated that the address was so effective that "critics believed that Bush's speech signaled

the initial direction of his domestic race agenda for the 1992 campaign" (19).

Another way that political speakers promote themselves and their platforms

through the use of commencement addresses is by strategically choosing where and when

they will agree to speak. It is not uncommon for a politician of one political party to

accept an invitation to speak at a college's commencement ceremony when another politician of the opposing party will be speaking at a different college's commencement within the same university. In 2001, Democratic Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton spoke to Yale's graduating class the day before President Bush delivered his Yale commencement address. The same year Republican Senator John McCain spoke at the University of Pennsylvania alongside former Democratic congressman Floyd Flake (Nichols, H. 16). This format allows for the audience to make a direct comparison of the speakers' political ideals.

Introducing political concepts and plans at commencement ceremonies allows political figures to reach out to the older members (and voters) of the audience in the professors and parents of the graduates. Just as importantly, they are also able to start recruitment of the younger generation at a point in time when many young minds are just beginning to consider the ramifications of politics on their world. Some politicians use the opportunity the same way that former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright did when she spoke at Dartmouth College and Brown University in attempts to inspire international activism (Nichols, H. 16). In fact, a speaker's political stance and motives, whether mentioned during their commencement address or not, play a large part in the community's acceptance of their role in the ceremony (Marklein 1D). For instance, ultra-liberal speakers may not be well-received if they are speaking at a conservative school or in a conservative community, and vice-versa. This is the reason that, from the audience's perspective, the commencement ceremony is not necessarily the ideal time and place for politics, though this perception certainly has not altered the practice of presenting political ideas during commencement.

Controversy over Speakers

In the world of politics, no one can please everybody, and that is also certainly true in the case of commencement speeches. When a former participant in a radical 1960's leftist organization, Bernardine Dohrn, was invited to speak at Pitzer College, conservatives argued that she was too liberal. Protestors spoke out against Republican Governor Mitt Romney when he was to speak at Suffolk University because "his views on gay marriage offend many members of the graduating class" (Marklein 1D). Complaints rolled in at Syracuse University in 2002 because the chosen speaker, Rudy Giuliani, was "unsupportive of minorities" (Marklein 1D). Even President Bush was denounced at the University of Arizona for being an inappropriate choice during an election year (Marklein 1D).

The fact that there are disputes over political speakers is almost a given in this day and age. However, the conflicts over who is chosen as a commencement speaker do not end with politicians. In 2004, there was upheaval at the University of Pennsylvania because a rock star would have the honor of delivering the commencement address. Interestingly, the rock star, Bono of U2, was actually chosen because of his world-wide work with AIDS awareness and debt relief as opposed to just his musical abilities (Marklein 1D). On the other end of the spectrum, the choice of *Automobile Magazine* founder David Davis was questioned because he was not well known enough (Marklein 1D).

The literature points out two key reasons for the controversy over commencement speakers. Molly Roth of the University of Pennsylvania makes the argument that

"anybody worth having in that role is going to polarize to some extent" (qtd. in Marklein 1D). It is reasonable to accept the idea that when a university chooses a well-known speaker of nearly any background, there stands the chance that a portion of the audience will disagree with the choice. This reinforces the idea that, try as one may, it is nearly impossible to please everybody.

The second reason behind all the controversy is that in the midst of the individual agendas of the university and the speakers it chooses, often the idea that the real focus of the occasion should be the students that are graduating is lost. For example, Stanley Fish notes "that high profile universities have an inbred tendency to invite lecturers most likely to speak in the same language as the faculty" (qtd. in Nichols, H. 17). However, it should not be assumed that the chosen lecturer speaks the same language of the students or their guests. Another issue that occurs when the commencement address veers away from the audience-centered approach is that the students are sometimes pushed to the wayside. Such an instance occurred at Rockford College when the speaker made what should have been a commencement address into an anti-war address. One of the attendees of the ceremony observed that the speaker "didn't really acknowledge that the students were there in any formal way" (Marklein 1D). It is hard to make an event such as a graduation from college feel like a special, once-in-a-lifetime event if the address delivered is the same speech that could be given any time someone wishes to get on a soapbox.

The Students' Choice of Speaker

Though the faculty, staff, parents, and community contribute to the complaints about commencement speakers, it is the students whose opinions many universities are beginning to consider. The University of Maryland, Emory University, the University of St. Francis, and Johns Hopkins are on all on the list of universities that have decided to incorporate the student body in the commencement speaker selection process (Marklein 1D). This action helps relieve university officials of some of the public's criticism of their decision and, according to sociology researcher Hilary Levy, it offers a solution to the fact that "students…are increasingly demanding a say in who speaks" at their own ceremony (Marklein 1D). Many students feel that they are entitled to a say in their commencement speaker as a reward for the time, effort and money they have invested in the university over the years (Marklein 1D).

With this new trend of student-picked speakers, the issue arises regarding what type of speaker soon-to-be college graduates want participating in their ceremony. Student-chosen speakers differ from the traditional commencement speakers of earlier eras.   Co-researchers Levy and Steven Tepper state that "as students have more input, they expect to see more athletes and entertainers" invited to speak at commencement ceremonies (qtd. in Marklein 1D). This creates a point of convergence of popular culture and commencement addresses.

This trend is already evident in the student-body choices of Bono, Phylicia Rashad, and Bill Cosby as commencement speakers (Marklein 1D). Though these speakers are not the typical politicians or community leaders so often requested for

commencement addresses, there is inherent value in opting for the students' choice of commencement representative. The presenter is at the ceremony to send a message specifically to the graduates. In order for their message to be taken to heart, the graduates must have respect for, identify with, and take interest in the sender of the message. It is probable that some, if not all, of these qualifications are already met when the students decide on a particular speaker, which only helps to enhance the effectiveness of the commencement address.

<center>Explanation of Texts</center>

It is this increasing trend of integrating the students' interest in popular culture icons into the rituals of the commencement ceremony that serves as the initial motivation for this analysis. It is previously acknowledged in this paper that the discussion of politics and public affairs has a rightful place in commencement addresses because these topics shape the world that the graduates are about to enter. However, as Geoffrey Baym states, "The boundaries between news and entertainment, and between public affairs and pop culture, have become difficult if not impossible to discern" (259). This increasingly evident societal trend permeates nearly every aspect of our lives, and is therefore a significantly important area of study in the field of communication.

In regards to the individual texts chosen for this analysis, I have chosen to focus specifically on icons of popular culture that are commonly known in our society as "political comedians". This category of icons is of particular interest because the nature of their personas ties the students' interest in pop culture to the common commencement theme of politics.

The two texts that will be analyzed are Jon Stewart's 2004 Commencement Address to his alma mater, the College of William and Mary, and Stephen Colbert's 2006 Commencement Address at Knox College. The addresses delivered by these two icons are valuable rhetorical artifacts because of the significant influence the speakers have on the college-aged demographic and because of their unique role in politics. Though their careers and popularity largely revolve around the parts they play in today's political arena, neither of these men would be accurately identified as a traditional politician.

Jon Stewart

Host of the "most reliable source of fake news", Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*, Jon Stewart was the main catalyst for prompting change in the way the American public views news and politics, especially among young adults. Alessandra Stanley claims that the age demographic of traditional college students is continuously showing a reliance "on comedy, and particularly 'The Daily Show,' as their main source of news" (1E). In recent years young people have begun abandoning mainstream news sources and tuning in to late-night comedy programs as their source of news and politics (Baym 260).

As evidence of the show's connection with the college-aged population, the National Annenberg Election Survey "found that 40% of the audience is between the ages of 18 and 29." Further linking the show to the educated target audience of commencement ceremonies, the survey also found that *The Daily Show* audience is "more educated, follows the news more regularly, and is more politically knowledgeable then the general population" (qtd. in Baym 260). Another survey that focused on awareness of national and international affairs reports that "54 percent of the regular

viewers of 'The Daily Show' and 'Colbert Report' scored in the high-knowledge category, tying with regular readers of newspaper websites" (qtd. in Smolkin 23).

There are number of factors that make *The Daily Show* and Jon Stewart so popular with young adults in America. The show uses satire, parody and comedy to offer a fresh view of politics, power and contemporary news. These techniques work to fuse public affairs with pop culture, which enlivens news by making it also function as entertainment (Baym 261-262). The show pushes the envelope of questioning our public figures, which not all mainstream news sources have the liberty to do. Audiences feel like they get more truth from *The Daily Show* because it "holds government officials accountable for their words and deeds" (Smolkin 19-21). Ultimately, the show is successful among young, headstrong, educated minds because it makes people laugh, but then it makes them think (Smolkin 23).

Some critics might claim that this type of news is a mere fad, but the success of *The Daily Show* and Jon Stewart would suggest otherwise. Even though it is "fake" news, *The Daily Show* was awarded a Peabody award because of its innovative political coverage during the 2000 Presidential election. This political prominence was further recognized when *Newsweek* named "Jon Stewart one of the twenty-five biggest influencers of the 2004 election" (McKain 415). During the same campaign, *Newsday* recognized "Stewart as the single most important newscaster in the country" (Baym 260). These examples serve as proof that the show and its host's influence on today's culture is significant and increasingly prominent (Cornfield 34).

Stephen Colbert

Former correspondent of *The Daily Show* Stephen Colbert has now joined the ranks of Jon Stewart as a popular culture icon due to the remarkable success of his own "fake" news show *The Colbert Report*. The format of *The Colbert Report* is similar to that of traditional news programs such as The O'Reilly Factor. The content of the *Colbert Report* is similar to that of *The Daily Show*, only "more freewheeling and silly" (Peyser, et. al. 50-51). The audience demographic is also consistent across such public affair parody programs as studies reflect that *The Colbert Report* also has a major following of young, educated adults (Smolkin 23).

Though Jon Stewart may be on the cutting edge of transforming the news, it is Stephen Colbert who is quickly becoming one of the most notable cultural icons of the day. In 2005, Colbert used his show segment "The WORD" to introduce his own made-up word "truthiness". The term quickly became integrated into our culture's daily language, and in 2006 was named Merriam-Webster's Word of the Year. That year, Colbert also introduced the world to "Wikiality" when he rallied his fans (known as the "Colbert Nation") to corrupt a section of the popular Wikipedia.org. Other effects of Colbert's influence over the Colbert Nation are visible in Colbert's stunt to win a contest to have a Hungarian bridge named after him and successfully winning a public poll to name a hockey team's mascot the "Steagle Colbeagle" (Ward 12).

However, Colbert's boldest stunt yet centers on his involvement in the politics of the current Presidential campaign. In October of 2007 Stephen Colbert declared his candidacy in the Presidential race in South Carolina (Rainey, J. "No Comic…" 14A).

Though his running was initially viewed as nothing more than a publicity stunt, polls soon reflected just how much of a pull Colbert had with voters. By November, he was polling nationwide at 2.3 percent among Democratic voters (Nichols, J. 5) and at 12 percent against serious Presidential contenders Rudy Giuliani and Hilary Clinton (Morrison 27A).

Much of Colbert's preliminary success was directly due to his influence on pop culture. The Colbert Nation backed Colbert more whole-heartedly than ever before as they formed the most popular internet political group, "1,000,000 Strong for Stephen T. Colbert" (Nichols, J. 5). The group was formed by 16 year-old Raj Vachhani on the popular website Facebook, a site that is geared specifically towards teenagers and college students. Within one week of the group's formation it had over one million members and the site was visited so often it placed "a strain on Facebook's server capacity" (Stelter 4C).

Perhaps the media and other political candidates did not take Colbert's brief run for the Presidency seriously, but, like his fans, Stephen Colbert thought of it as more than just a publicity stunt for his show. In addition to providing a good laugh, Colbert was hoping to promote his home state of South Carolina and raise charitable donations. Just as importantly, he also hoped to urge "many young people who watch his show to register to vote" (Rainey, J. "No Comic…" 14A). His efforts have led Colbert to become what some call "the age's semiofficial pundit" (Peyser, et al. 51).

Focus of Study

The focus of this study is Stewart and Colbert's commencement addresses delivered to audiences primarily composed of their own target audience members. These findings will be compared and contrasted to more typical commencement addresses that have been examined in current literature. This compilation of similar characteristics among commencement addresses delivered by both traditional commencement speakers and popular culture icons will provide an initial framework for defining the genre of commencement addresses.

As an introduction to this study I will first discuss the concept of genre and its use in rhetorical analysis, as well as explore the current literature in an attempt to identify the defining elements of the commencement rhetoric genre. I will then evaluate the two commencement addresses to determine common threads among commencement rhetoric delivered by popular culture icons, and report the results in relation to relevant literature. Finally, I will discuss conclusions regarding the findings and their implications of the overall genre of commencement addresses.

CHAPTER II

CRITICAL ANALYSIS AND GENRE

Wilchelns, Thonssen and Baird have expressed the notion that the purpose of the rhetorical critic is to evaluate the effects of discourse (Fisher 288-289). Critics utilize a number of different rhetorical methods to accomplish this goal. Generic criticism is a method that involves the classification of an artifact into a group made up of similar discourse. Not only has generic criticism proven to be a valuable method of rhetorical analysis, it also has importance to the overall discipline of rhetorical studies because it provides a starting point for many of the other critical methods to build upon. Walter Fisher stated that "there is no criticism that is not generic criticism on one or more levels" (4). Therefore, the exploration of this method is not only important to critics interested specifically in generic criticism, but it is also fundamental to those involved with a variety of critical methods.

As mentioned, this research seeks to clarify guidelines for evaluating commencement addresses as a distinct genre. In order to suggest standards to define the genre of commencement addresses, it is first necessary to define genres, generic criticism and the elements that are involved in forming a genre. To obtain a full understanding of the method, it is also important to discuss the purpose of genre-specific rhetoric, the

manner in which this critical method is currently used, and the limitations that generic criticism presents. This chapter will then look to current literature on this specific type of discourse in order to discern specific characteristics of this genre of rhetoric.

Genre Defined

In general terms, a genre is defined as a category of compositions "characterized by a particular style, form, or content" ("Genre"). Kathleen Hall Jamieson builds upon this definition by adding that the formation of rhetorical genres "implies that significantly similar characteristics inhere in works of the same type regardless of author and period of production" ("Generic Constraints" 162). Jamieson also adds that artifacts that are classified into one rhetorical genre are distinguishable from those in other genres ("Generic Constraints" 162).

In addition to these definitions, it is important to recognize that the similarities that shape the boundaries of a genre are comprised of both conventions and prohibitions (Brown, Epolito and Stump 1). It is not entirely accurate to only claim that artifacts within the same genre all contain similar elements. Often generically related artifacts also exclude particular elements. The genre of eulogy offers a good example of this. While it is customary in a eulogy to speak of the deceased's positive characteristics and contributions, it is also an accepted norm that the rhetor will omit any negative comments about the deceased. Simply stated, what the rhetor leaves out of a speech is sometimes just as important as what he or she chooses to include.

Genre as a Critical Method

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell states that "if criticism is to be justified, it must have intrinsic worth, it must perform a unique function for society and for our discipline" ("Criticism" 9). Evaluators of rhetoric must realize that genres are not simply a "naming device" used to describe a group (Browne 55). Generic criticism provides a framework which is used to guide rhetorical critics through their analysis. Northrop Frye claims that this type of criticism illuminates many "relationships that would not be noticed as long as there were no contexts established for them" (qtd. in Jamieson, "Antecedent Genre" 415). Jamieson reiterates the importance of generic criticism in her cautionary statement that "the critic who ignores genre risks clouding rather than clarifying the rhetoric he is attempting to explain" ("Antecedent Genre" 406-407).

Walter Fisher explains that the concept of genres is foundational to rhetorical criticism because "generic concepts…determine the character of specific acts of criticism" (290). If the critic is able to classify an artifact into a specific genre, then they are able to evaluate the artifact based on the rules of that genre (Fisher 295). This method may be performed on multiple layers of analysis. For example, if an artifact is perceived as deliberative rhetoric, it will be evaluated based on qualifying standards for the deliberative genre (Fisher 290). Likewise, if the same speech can also be classified into a more specific group, such as the genre of nomination speeches, then it can be evaluated on a different level by examining how well the artifact also abides by the generic standards of all nomination speeches.

The Formation of a Genre

In discussing the nature of genre, Fisher explains that genres are a species of discourse that are inductively formed by comparing similar artifacts (291). Jamieson states that genres are formed "in response to a rhetor's perception of the expectations of the audience and the demands of the situation" ("Generic Constraints" 163). In other words, an audience will form certain expectations based upon various factors, and a rhetor will create discourse with the goal of satisfying these expectations, as well as any other needs established by the rhetorical situation. In combining the ideas of these two scholars, it is reasonable to conclude that genres are formed by comparing discourse that was created to satisfy similar expectations in like situations.

Rhetorical Situations

Before an audience is called forth and expectations are formed, a rhetorical situation must occur to beckon them. Lloyd Bitzer links the formation of rhetorical genres to the situations that prompt the discourse when he states that "from day to day, year to year, comparable situations occur, prompting comparable responses" (qtd. in Jamieson, "Generic Constraints" 163). Events spark rhetorical situations. These are often profound or memorable happenings that are of interest to multiple members of a society. Examples of such events include the induction of a new president, wrong-doings of public figures, graduations, award presentations, crises of varying magnitude, and deaths. Jamieson explains how the loss of life prompts rhetoric via the example of a man's loved ones gathering upon his death ("Generic Constraints" 163). It is customary in this culture for some of these loved ones to deliver eulogies. Had the man not died,

these particular acts of rhetoric would have never occurred. Therefore, this is a clear example of an event creating a situation that prompts discourse. The repeated occurrence of similar rhetorical situations lends way to the formation of a genre.

Historical Bearing on Genres

History also affects rhetorical genres. It does so in two respects. First, it is important to recognize that history influences the creation of a genre through tradition. Tradition influences both the rhetor and the audience. Jamieson supports this idea in reference to inaugural addresses when she acknowledges that the "pattern established by Washington's inaugural runs through at least a portion of most other presidential inaugurals" ("Generic Constraints" 165). When given the opportunity, most rhetors will avoid recreating the wheel and instead look to their predecessors for guidance on how to address similar situations.

A notable influence history has on genre is through the reliance on antecedent genres to frame subsequent discourse. Jamieson is quick in her discussions of genre formation to include the use of antecedent genres in conjunction with rhetorical situations ("Generic Constraints" 163; "Antecedent" 414). When a unique situation occurs for the first time, there may not be a standard precedent established with which to frame necessary discourse. In this case, a rhetor will look to the past to glean guidance from the most similar situation they can find. For example, during the early days of our country's development, Congress chose to reply to Washington's speeches in manners similar to those of the Royal Governors responding to the Royal Throne (Jamieson, "Antecedent" 412). Members of Congress sought out the next closest genre they had been exposed to

in order to structure their responses. They used the format familiar to Royal Governors'

responses as a starting point on which to build their own genre of Congressional replies.

Though it is not an explicit notion in the reviewed literature, tradition also

influences the perceptions of the audience. Parts of an audience's expectations are

created from what they have learned to expect. The first time a young person attends a

funeral, it is likely that he or she does not know what will occur rhetorically. This is not

to claim that the person does not have personal needs created by the situation that seek to

be satisfied by the ceremony, but rather that they may not know just how these needs will

be met. Once the person attends a funeral for the first time, they will be exposed to the

traditions of the eulogy genre and the manner in which this rhetoric can meet their

emotional needs after the death of a loved one. Later in life, when the person is again

presented with the unfortunate occurrence of death, they will draw upon their previous

experience to shape their expectations of the funeral ceremony. Audiences come to

expect that one rhetorical situation will be addressed in a like fashion to how previous

similar situations have been addressed.

The Role of the Audience

As is common in many critical methods, the audience must also be considered

when discussing generic criticism. The philosophical question "when a tree falls in the

woods and no one is around to hear it, does it really make a sound" might be answered

by the rhetorical critic as "who cares about the sound if there is no audience?!" There

are several generally accepted purposes for delivering speeches and with each purpose

rhetors must ask themselves the same question. When delivering an informative speech,

whom do they seek to inform? In presenting a persuasive speech, whom are they trying to convince? During a demonstrative speech, whom is the speaker attempting to teach? In each case, the simplest of answers is the audience. There is little reason to produce rhetoric if no one will ever consume it.

Audiences are crucial to the world of rhetoric because they develop expectations that establish purpose for and initiate the creation of discourse (Jamieson, "Generic Constraints" 163). As stated, a rhetorical situation must present itself to create an audience. However, these concepts of rhetorical situation and audience work hand-in-hand. If an event occurs that no one cares about (i.e. there is no audience for it), then it does not create a rhetorical situation and does not necessarily merit discourse. On the other hand, it is the fact that there is an audience that has needs to be met in regards to the event that necessitates rhetoric in the situation.

The denotative meaning of the word genre suggests that similar situations will have similar audiences. This works in two respects. First, the audience members of any one particular event are likely to have common expectations amongst themselves. The source of these expectations ranges from innate needs, like the expectation to be reassured during a crisis, to complex expectations that have evolved with experience, such as expecting a public figure to accept accountability of their wrong-doings. The expectations built upon past experience reiterate the influence of history on audiences, and leads to the second manner in which audiences relate to genre.

Not only are members of an individual audience similar to each other, but it is also probable that the audience as a whole is similar to other audiences presented with the

same rhetorical situations. Over time these similar audiences with their shared needs and expectations become relatively consistent within a grouping of similar situations and their accompanying rhetoric. Therefore, the audience becomes an important component in forming a genre.

Generic Expectations

An audience's expectations of rhetoric also play a very pertinent role in generic criticism. Generic criticism recognizes the standards of a group of discourse, allowing the rhetorical critic to evaluate artifacts accordingly (Fisher 295). One of the key reasons rhetors adhere to these standards of rhetorical genres is because the "existence of standard forms of address guarantees a sense of continuity" (Jamieson, "Generic Constraints" 165). Rhetorical genres create the expectation in both audiences and rhetors that a speech will consist of "a definite style, certain types of arguments, a given world view, and standard assumptions" consistent with the standards of its genre (Jamieson, "Generic Constraints" 166). Since a genre embodies the consistency of the artifacts within it, the genre itself has a huge influence on the audience's expectations of the rhetoric.

The Rhetor's Use of Genre

After acknowledging the roles that the situation, history, audience and expectations have in forming a genre, it becomes necessary to discuss the manner in which the rhetor uses these elements in creating and delivering generic-specific rhetoric. The strong link between genres and audience expectations summons the first of these

points of discussion – what happens when a rhetor defies these generic expectations? As with the defiance of any norm, the betrayal of generic expectations and standards can have positive or negative impacts.

Positive Defiance

Jamieson notes that should a group of rhetors look to an "inappropriate generic antecedent" for standards of rhetoric's creation and delivery, breaking this tradition may prove to be a positive course of action ("Antecedent" 414). The example she offers again refers to political discourse in the United States. As mentioned, when our country first began our forefathers used British standards as a starting point in framing their rhetoric. However, over time it became evident that this new country had a need for a new type of discourse. Woodrow Wilson recognized this and altered his state of the union address accordingly. In this case, defying the then current, but inappropriate, generic standards in efforts to establish a new framework was the correct choice. Jamieson supports this in stating that "the address was well received, indicating that after 123 years, Congress, the President, and the people had successfully broken with an inappropriate generic antecedent" ("Antecedent" 414).

Negative Defiance

However, if there is no need for a change to a genre's standards, then defying the expectations of a genre is likely to have negative effects. Jamieson claims that "the human need for a frame of reference lures the mind to generic classification" ("Generic Constraints" 167). This means that it is a natural process for both the audience and the

critic to classify rhetoric before ever hearing it based upon the situation, the manner in which the rhetoric is presented (i.e. how it is marketed or billed), or past experience (Jamieson, "Generic Constraints" 168). The expectations that are born out of this act of pre-classification influence how the rhetoric will be received. In order to show how defying these expectations can change an audience's reception, Jamieson uses the example of a play that is marketed as a comedy. In this case, the audience arrives at the play expecting to laugh and be entertained. Should they instead be presented with a dramatic performance, the audience will likely respond negatively because the "generic misclassification created expectations which the play was not designed to fulfill" ("Generic Constraints" 166).

Another example of the negative impact created by the defiance of generic expectations is a rhetor's disregard of a genre's "rules". Jamieson explains that "one element in the implied contract between rhetor and audience is the clause stipulating that he fulfill rather than frustrate the expectations created for the audience by previous rhetoric generated in response to similar situations" ("Generic Constraints" 167). Generic standards exist to aid a rhetor in fulfilling an audience's expectations. When the rhetor fails to do this, their discourse is likely to be deemed a failure as well. For example, Charles Percy's eulogy for Robert Kennedy failed to follow the rules of a eulogy in that the speech focused on Percy's own agenda rather than the life and death of the deceased (Jamieson and Campbell 149). As a result, this speech created controversy and failed to fulfill the purpose of this type of discourse.

The Role of Personal Influence

Opting to abide by or disobey generic standards introduces the concept that personal influence affects genre-specific rhetoric. The conscientious choices a rhetor makes as to which elements to use from each genre allows for a "mingling of generic conventions, wherein arguments and images shift according to demand" (Browne 56). However, these are not the only choices a rhetor can make in order to craft discourse that is uniquely theirs.

One of the first choices a rhetor makes is what medium to use in relaying their message. Discourse may take place in many different forms, some of which include essays, letters, pamphlets, and both formal and informal orations. Some genres lend themselves better to one form over others, but some other genres leave the rhetor open to make such a decision. The deliberate selection of a medium becomes an important factor in the creation of discourse because some rhetorical forms allow the author to include strategic stylistic options that further enhance their arguments (Browne 56).

Another important choice that is left in the hands of the author is the point of view from which they will deliver the discourse. The rhetor must decide whether they will opt to speak as individual or as a figurehead for "the institutions they represent rhetorically" (Jamieson and Campbell 156). The choice to speak on behalf of an institution tends place more limitations on a rhetors other choices, whereas attempting to "bend institutional forms to their will" allows rhetors to create discourse that supports both the institution and their own individual motives (Jamieson and Campbell 156-157).

Once decisions have been made about rhetorical forms and points of view, the rhetor must decide how to use specific generic components to support their own purpose. The rhetor does have some say-so as to what will be included and what will be excluded from their discourse. While genres offer a defined structure of do's and don'ts, there is often room to work within the finer details. Jamieson and Campbell explain this through the example of a eulogist constrained by the notion that he or she should not "propose policies inconsistent with those advocated by the deceased" because it goes against the rules of a eulogy that the speech needs to honor the deceased and reunite the community (148). If the rhetor agrees with the views of the deceased, he is likely to mention policy in the eulogy in hopes of creating identification between himself and the deceased. Conversely, if the rhetor has conflicting views with those of the deceased, the rhetor may choice to ignore the topic of policy all together in order to refrain from defying the overarching goals of a eulogy (Jamieson and Campbell 148).

There is a fine balance that must be maintained between adherence to the rules of a genre and the exertion of a rhetor's personal choices within a rhetorical work. On one hand, a need for genre-specific rhetoric is created because specific needs must be met and there is a generally accepted, prescribed manner in which to accomplish this. On the other hand, not every situation is identical and a rhetor must make contemplated decisions that will lead to not only satisfying the generic needs of the audience, but the needs specific to the point in time that is at hand (Jamieson "Antecedent" 414-415).

The Critic's Use of Genre

The discussion so far has made a case that genres are "more than a naming device" used to simply lump rhetorical works in to groups (Browne 55). Genres create expectations for an audience, set the tone and topic of discourse, and provide structure for the rhetor to work within in order to satisfy personal, situational, and audience needs. However, there are additional concepts to be mentioned in regards to the rhetorical critic's use of generic criticism.

While the rhetor must understand the rules and implications of creating their rhetoric within a genre, the critic must also be familiar with the rules of genre. As noted in previous sections, "When a critic compares a contemporary critical object to great specimens of that type, he is merely formalizing a natural process" (Jamison "Generic Constraints" 167). Although this process is natural, there is a formalized manner of evaluating rhetoric by generic standards.

Evaluating Specifics

Critics must familiarize themselves with the guidelines of the genre that dictate the specifics of a genre's artifacts. Generic guidelines include both rules and defining characteristics of a genre's discourse. The rules of a genre suggest the bare-bone basics that should be included in a work in order for it to be include in a genre, and include the definite goals to be met. Other characteristics attributed to a genre are the specific nuances of rhetoric that set it apart from other genres, including tone, strategy, and posture . There are occasions when guidelines are established by the actual institutions

that instigate the discourse. For example, Jamieson explains that in the eleventh century, formal rules were "written to define the rhetorical characteristics of papal correspondence" so that the discourse produced accordingly would be distinguishable as coming from the Papal Chancery ("Antecedent" 410).

The other manner for discerning the rules of a genre is a rhetorical critic defining the generic guidelines. For example, Ware and Linkugel specifically delineate the four strategies of apologia as denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence (275). The critic should also reference the audience's expectations in defining guidelines. Jamieson and Campbell do this when they claim that "a eulogy will acknowledge the death, transform the relationship between the living and the dead from present to past tense, ease the mourners' terror at confronting their own mortality, console them by arguing that the deceased lives on, and reknit the community" (147). This last example is particularly important because it exemplifies how guidelines not only include specific rules but also explain the strategies that should be employed in following the rules.

Dynamic Genres

In realizing that there are specifics that define a genre, it must also be noted that they are not necessarily steadfast rules immune to change. Fisher claims that "if genres are to be useful to a critic, they must capture what is permanent and what changes in discourse across time" (293). As mentioned, there are times when new genres are established based upon guidelines of antecedent genres (Jamieson, "Antecedent" 412). This is often just a starting point and as the new genre develops it will change to fill the specific needs of its audience.

The standards of a genre will also evolve with changing extrinsic factors. One example of this is the manner in which the tone and content of the genre of congressional discourse was forced to change in response to controversial Presidential rhetoric (Jamieson, "Antecedent" 413). Another example of an extrinsic force evoking generic modification is the ever-changing nature of society. As society evolves, so does an audience and their needs. The rhetorical critic must anticipate and acknowledge these changes, while maintaining recognition of the core elements of a genre.

The Need to Define a Genre

The general guidelines of a genre are often common knowledge. However, it is important to the rhetorical critic to have the specific guidelines explicitly stated. Whether done knowingly as a strategic move or not, rhetors will often exclude certain components of a genre, as well as add non-standard elements to their discourse. It is these additions and exclusions that make each artifact unique, but it is the overall essence of a work that groups it in to a genre. It is for this reason that the rhetorical critic should be well-informed as to what the standards of a genre are.

While there is not any single method that can be used to fully understand a work (Fisher 293), evaluating discourse in terms of genre offers the critic a context in which to initiate a critical examination. Generic criticism can provide explanation of rhetorical choices and illumination of disguised relationships in order to lead to clarification and a better understanding of the work (Jamieson, "Antecedent" 415). It is because of this inherent need for the rhetorical critic to understand generic criticism that this study seeks to contribute to the construction of the formalized genre of commencement addresses.

Though there has been significant analysis of commencement rhetoric, current literature is lacking the actual definition and characterization of the genre, inhibiting an actual generic critique. As mentioned, most critical techniques in some way involve generic elements. A review and compilation of these generic elements that are presented in current literature offer insight about the rules of the commencement rhetoric genre.

The Genre of Commencement Rhetoric

In evaluating the commonalities within commencement rhetoric presented in current literature, four prominent themes emerge that help define the rules for the genre of commencement addresses. These themes are: 1) acknowledging the graduates and their achievements, 2) creating identification between the speaker and the graduates, 3) presenting the world and its challenges, and 4) instilling a sense of hope for the graduates' future. The literature review reveals that these four elements are found in commencement rhetoric indiscriminately of speaker type.

Acknowledge the Graduates and Their Achievements

The first defining element of a commencement address is that the rhetor will acknowledge the honorees of the occasion and commend them on their achievements. Peter Magolda has observed in a number of various commencement addresses that the speaker will open their remarks with congratulatory statements to the graduates (qtd. in Hanson 5-6).

Kazuko Takeda made the same observations in an analysis of commencement rhetoric delivered by the presidents of Humboldt State University and Nihon University.

Dr. Masaru Suzuki of Nihon began the introduction of his address by "congratulat(ing) the students on their graduation" (Takeda 97). Dr. Alistair McCrone of Humboldt expanded his congratulatory sentiments to include the acknowledgement that commencement was a time for "parents, relatives, and friends to recognize and applaud the achievement of the graduates whom they love and respect" (Takeda 98).

In her address to Wellesley College, Barbara Bush offered an audience-centered approach that exemplified the notion that commencement is a time for celebrating this transitional era of the graduates' lives (Dean 195, 198). This shows how rhetors use their precisely chosen words in conjunction with other characteristics such as tone and posture in order to acknowledge the graduates and their achievements.

Create Identification

Though it is an integral aspect of a commencement address, offering congratulations alone does not make a commencement speech. Anyone can say "congratulations" to the graduates, but universities take special care to choose commencement speakers that the graduates will relate to. Burke and Reynolds both emphasize a direct correlation between an audience's ability to identify with the speaker and the overall success of the speech (Dean 196).

Rhetors use a variety of different techniques to create a sense of identification. In Nichols' study of eight commencement addresses, she asserts that the speakers "identify with their audiences by using inclusive language" (Hanson 7). In addition to the artifacts Nichols reviewed, Irish poet Eavan Boland also exemplifies the use of inclusive language

in his commencement address at Colby College through the repeated use of such words as "us", "our" and "we" ("Closing").

Speakers at commencement ceremonies also use narratives, anecdotes, and familiar references as a means of establishing identification for their audience. Bill Cosby told a humorous story of an experience after his daughter's graduation in order to help the graduates of George Washington University relate to him ("Closing"). Barbara Bush told her audience "stories of other women with whom the audience might relate" and referenced several traditions specific to the culture of the college she was speaking at (Dean 194). Ann Richards also used narratives in her Mount Holyoke address because they help "strengthen(s) the rhetor/audience relationship" (Hanson 14).

In using personal narratives and anecdotes to create identification, speakers are using the relationship-building technique of self-disclosure. Speakers opening up about their personal lives and sharing their emotions allows the audience to see them as personable individuals. Ann Richards referred to her personal friendship with a Mount Holyoke graduate in order to establish "a conversational connection with her audience" (Hanson 12). Barbara Bush spoke to her audience on a personal level as she shared "with ease and confidence the choices she made in her life" (Dean 194). In her address at Wellesley College Oprah Winfrey discussed not only her past, but she also offers insight into her beliefs, thoughts, and emotions ("Closing"). Even Dr. Suzuki of Nihon University chose to express "himself fairly emotionally" in his address to the graduates in order to reveal a personal side that his students may not have all been familiar with (Takeda 100).

Whether achieved through the use of language, narratives, or self-disclosure, the establishing of identification between the speaker and the audience is crucial in commencement addresses. Identification establishes a level of trust in the speaker. This helps reinforce the speaker's messages because it allows the audience to view the speaker as an individual who is not all that different from themselves. This relationship increases the audience's likelihood of believing the speaker's portrayal of the world they are about to enter and their ability to be successful in that world.

Present the World and its Challenges

Once the speaker has acknowledged the feats the graduates of accomplished thus far, they must prepare the young minds for what lies ahead of them. This includes presenting the state of the world that the graduates are inheriting and the challenges they will meet as they become part of this world. The state of the world is generally portrayed in two different ways: on one hand it is a problematic place riddle with unceasing challenges; on the other hand, for every problem there is an opportunity to find a solution.

In her multi-address analysis, Nichols states that the speakers "allude to a bleak future facing the graduates" (Hanson 7). The root of this bleak world phenomenon that seems to pervade commencement rhetoric resides in current affairs and global politics. Kofi Annan spoke to Duke graduates about the necessary activities of the United Nations and the global battle with AIDS; Vice President Dick Cheney stressed the gravity of the war on terrorism to the cadets at West Point; reporter Chris Hedges questioned the war in Iraq (Dillon 41). When talking about politics in commencement addresses, the rhetor

may not only be preparing the audience for the state of the current world but may also be foreshadowing events to come. An example of this is when former President George Bush "signaled the initial direction of his domestic race agenda for the 1992 campaign" in his 1991 commencement address at the University of Michigan (Palczewski and Madsen 19). Takeda attributes similar forewarnings presented by Dr. Suzuki to the rhetor's concerns for the graduates, and to the notion that if the graduates are aware of the problems they will be better able to handle them (100).

The idea that the graduates will have to deal with these problems is the second tangent of this component of commencement rhetoric. Bill Cosby reminded his audiences that, though it may not be perfect, "this is the land of opportunity" and that the graduates are now being tasked with working these opportunities ("Closing"). Archbishop Desmond M. Tutu assured the graduates at the University of Pennsylvania that differences in the world can be dealt with and conflicts resolved (Dillon 41). Emerson College graduates were informed by Spike Lee that no one else is going to take care of these problems for them and that they need to be prepared to do the work themselves ("Closing"). Dr. Suzuki offered the idea that is "one of the students' responsibilities to improve and to make the future of the whole world better" --- a daunting task to say the least (Takeda 98).

After discussing the situation, the next step in satisfying this need is to give the graduates encouragement to find the answer to this question.

Instill Hope

Now that the graduates have been confronted with the reality of what they face once the ceremonies are over and they exit the auditorium, some if not all of them are probably scared out of their well-educated minds. Leaving an audience with overwhelming anxiety is certainly not the earmark of a successful commencement address so the final feature of speeches in this genre is to instill a sense of hope in the graduates that they have all the tools they need to be successful in such a challenging world.

The first part of giving the graduates hope for their future is to offer them advice that they can reflect on from time to time when they find themselves needing guidance in facing the challenges of the real world. This advice is varied and ranges from very specific suggestions to general guidelines. There is a common theme in commencement advice that in order to be successful you must work hard ("Closing"). Sydney Pollack drove home the importance of compassion at Binghamton University (Dillon 41). Former United States Senator George J. Mitchell encouraged the young audience to strive for respect and fulfillment in life by reaching out to others (Dillon 41). Dr. McCrone stressed the importance of relationships (Takeda 98). Antwone Fisher emphasized the significance of "leaving something behind for others to learn from" (Dillon 41).

Once a speaker offers their audience these words of wisdom, there is no guarantee that the audience will have the confidence in themselves to actually do these things. Therefore, the second half of giving the graduates hope is to reassure them that they have the ability to face the challenges of the world. Health and Human Services Secretary

Tommy G. Thompson reassured the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire graduates by stating, "A few simple things are in your power, and they are all you need" (Dillon 41). Dr. McCrone encouraged graduates to "not be excessively modest about their personal achievement, their education, or their abilities", implying that these characteristics are worth being proud of (Takeda 98). Some rhetors employ tactics to suggest to students that if they were able to become successful, the graduates can too. President George W. Bush takes this route as he draws upon established identification with the graduates at Yale and states: "To the c students I say, 'You, too, can be president of the United States'" (qtd. in Marklein 1D).

This literature review has defined genre as a critical method and discussed the manner in which genres are formed and used. This information provided a foundation to discuss commencement rhetoric as a distinct genre. As a result, this study concludes that there are four defining characteristics that discourse within the commencement rhetoric genre share. These characteristics are acknowledging the graduates, creating identification, presenting the world, and instilling hope. The discovery of these generic elements suggests that other discourse considered to fall into this genre will also share these characteristics, regardless of the rhetor. The following analysis of two commencement addresses by pop culture icons will evaluate this hypothesis.

Chapter III

EVALUATION OF TEXTS

Since genres are built upon similarities in artifacts, I approached the analysis of these texts with the goal of evaluating the commonalities between the two texts within the framework established by the review of current literature. This compilation will aid in generalizing the findings, and help strengthen the argument for the rules of this genre.

Text Analysis

Acknowledging the Graduates and Their Achievements

Stewart and Colbert both make it a priority in their speeches to clearly state that they are there to speak to the graduates. Stewart blatantly states multiple times that he is there for the purpose of honoring the graduates (par. 7), and that he is in fact honored to be the person chosen to address them (par. 29). Colbert also comments that the occasion is about the graduates finishing college and entering a new era in their lives (par. 14), and that it is an honor for him to be a part of the ceremony (par. 31). Both rhetors expand on this acknowledgment of the graduates by mentioning the hard work, intense learning, grueling hours, compounding debt, and endless sacrifices that the students had to incur to arrive at their graduation day (Stewart par. 7, Colbert par. 14)

The speakers also pay homage to the graduates' personal character and intellect. Stewart comments on the "internal sense of decency" that he attributes to students of William and Mary (par. 23) and Colbert talks of Knox College's foundation of diversity that permeates its culture (par. 13).

Though less obvious, the rhetors make it evident that they are speaking to an educated audience. Jon Stewart uses examples ranging from the internet, Kabala, and *Friends* to Abu Ghraib and the War on Terrorism to aid in making some of his points (pars. 10-12, 18, 23). Likewise, Stephen Colbert references his own show, *The Colbert Report*, various examples of technology, and even Wile E. Coyote to relate his messages to the graduates (pars. 1, 3, 16, 29). Colbert even specifically acknowledges the audience's wit after making a joke about a drinking game that requires knowledge of the Dred Scott decision (pars. 9-10). The use of politics, current events and popular culture references implies that the audience is knowledgeable, worldly and savvy about the culture of the day.

Stewart and Colbert also offer defining characteristics of this whole generation of graduates. Stewart defines this generation as decent and strong, and negates the notion that they are unprepared "for the sacrifice and the tenacity that will be needed in the difficult times ahead" of them (par. 25). Colbert takes a slightly different approach to defining this generation. He says that this generation is cuddled and soft and that they may not be tough enough for the challenges that lie ahead of them (par. 21). However, the comparisons that he makes to his own "tough" generation mock children's car seats and padded mortarboard on the graduation caps, making it clear that he is being facetious

and is more likely posing an achievable challenge to the graduates rather than insulting their capabilities (pars. 21-23).

The specific instances from Stewart and Colbert's speeches support the idea of celebrating the graduates and their hard work. The culmination of the examples from both current literature and the rhetors focused on in this study suggest that rhetoric belonging to the genre of commencement addresses should acknowledge the graduates as the focus of the occasion and congratulate them on achieving their goal of the past four years.

Creating Identification

The two rhetors offered multiple examples of self-disclosure in their speeches that are used to create identification between them and their audience. Stewart and Colbert both made references to their own time in college. Jon Stewart attended the College of William and Mary twenty years prior to being invited back to offer their commencement address (par. 15). In addition to the reference to his alumnus status (par. 5), Stewart also mentions several cultural attributes of the university that stand as testament to his time spent on the campus. He quips about his unenthusiastic nostalgia of the school song, his discovery of the school's sports team, "The Tribe", and the years he spent in the Yates dormitory (pars. 2, 15-16). These examples represent a bond between Stewart and the College of William and Mary.

Stewart also goes beyond establishing an association with just the university; he offers more insight into his college years by discussing his personal characteristics as a college student. His humorous descriptions of his acne-covered, oversized head, his

"repugnant personality", and his unimpressive academic standing paint a picture of a mediocre college kid who could be someone that any one of the graduates might know (pars. 16-17, 21). In making these statements Stewart builds upon his established association with the university in order to create a connection with the students as well.

Jon Stewart also talks about his life after college. A comment about his initial uncertainty about the decisions he made post-graduation is an offering of his emotions during his time in the stage of life that the graduates are about to enter (par. 19). Additionally, he presents the outcomes of his decisions as he mockingly glorifies his celebrity life (pars. 18-19) and even likens his current honor as the commencement speaker to Benjamin Franklin and Queen Noor of Jordan (par. 5).

Stephen Colbert utilizes the same strategies of self-disclosure in his commencement address at Knox College. Colbert states that the occasion reminds him of his own graduation from Northwestern University (par. 5). Though he did not attend the college he was speaking at, he tries to make a connection to the school by making a joke in which he pretends that he went to Knox College (par. 9). He embellishes this joke by reminiscing over his fake memories. Like Stewart, Colbert mentions the school sports team, the Prairie Fire, and drops the name of the dormitory, Seymour Hall (pars. 9, 12). Even though this "memories" are contrived, they prove the same purpose as Stewart's memories. Colbert's exhibition of his knowledge about Knox College creates an association between him and the school.

Colbert also gives some details about the type of student he was. An incomplete course and an overdue library fine kept him from receiving his diploma on two different

occasions (pars. 5-6). However, despite his "slow start" he, like Stewart, also went on to do big and better things in life than his college years may have suggested (par. 7).

Stephen Colbert brings up the fact that he was "named by *Time* magazine one of the 100 Most Influential People in the World" (par. 7). Later in the speech, Colbert builds upon his image of success when he offers the advice to the graduates to "get your own TV show. It pays well, the hours are good, and you are famous" (par. 30). He also alludes to his own success as he pokes fun of himself for receiving an honorary "doctorate in fine arts for doing jack squat" (par. 30). Though Stewart and Colbert both use humor in speaking of their current status in life, they both clearly get the point across that if they were average students in college and could become such successes, so could any of the graduates they are addressing. This notion provides dual functions: it is inspiring and it associates the speakers with the graduates' future selves.

Presenting the World and its Challenges

The next distinguishable characteristic in the two speeches is that the rhetors discuss the graduates' transition out of college, the current state of the world they are entering, and the graduates' role in it. Stewart initiates the concept of a transition by repeatedly referring to life after graduation as "the real world" (pars. 7-8). Colbert also delineates between life at the university and life in the real world (pars. 14-15). He describes the life that the students are used to at school as great place that has been a safe haven from the chaotic world that exists beyond the halls of their university (par. 15).

In order to give the graduates an idea of the challenges they will face in the real world, the rhetors use real-life examples of current affairs and politics to paint a picture

for the audience of what is waiting for them. Stewart uses the examples of 9-11, Abu

Ghraib, the War on Terrorism, and an allusion to a President with a questionable past to

exemplify the real world as a place riddled with problems (pars. 11-12, 21, 27-28). In

fact, Stewart makes a humorous, yet daunting oversimplification of the status of the

world when he states plainly that "we broke it" (pars. 8-10).

Colbert mentions the United State's current border problem and job scarcity, and

alludes to tensions with Iran to express the concerns present in the real world today (pars.

8, 17, 19-20). He also memorably quips that "they are playing for KEEPS out there" and

that "the world is waiting for you people with a club" in order to drive home the idea that

the real world is anything but the cushiony bubble they have been living in for the last

four years (pars. 14-15).

Stewart and Colbert realize that a speaker cannot present the audience with the

idea of this outside world without addressing the audience's role in it. Stewart tells the

graduates that, for better or for worse, this is the world that his generation is leaving to

them (par. 9). He acknowledges the uncertainty that this poses to the graduates (par. 14)

and reassures them that this world can be as exciting for them as it is daunting because

the possibilities that exist in such a world "are infinite and the results uncertain" (par. 22).

Colbert's speech reiterates the theme that the world is here for the graduates'

taking when he tells the audience that their generation is here to replace his (par. 24). He

admits that there are challenges that each of them will be face with and that these

challenges will not be easily overcome (par. 21). Though Colbert does not explicitly

make the statement, his message implies that, despite the outcome, the world out there is anticipating the graduates' arrival as much as they are (par. 15).

It is evident throughout the genre that rhetors consistently address this concept of an intimidating "real world" and the role that the graduates are about to take on in this world. They do so because they too have gone through this same turning point in their own lives and recognize the rhetorical need of their audience to discuss the infamous "what's next" question plaguing their minds.

Instilling Hope for Surviving the Future

The last recurring theme these rhetors present is that of the graduates' future lives in this real world. Stewart and Colbert both address the uncertainty that characterizes the real world and that will surely confront the graduates time and again throughout the course of their lives. Stewart informs the audience that the lives that they live today are not necessarily predictive of the lives they will have tomorrow (par. 19) and that there is no way to know every detail of their life's plan and every choice that they should make (par. 20). Colbert uses the metaphor of an improvisational sketch to exemplify that life is full of surprises (par. 16) and that every detail of the lives that lie ahead of them are potential unknowns (par. 17).

The speakers address this idea of uncertainty in life and the fact that the world is at times just plain scary because the audience is already concerned by this fact. The graduates have a need at this point in time to be reassured that they are going to survive this precarious adventure on which they are about to embark. Therefore, the rhetors must

respond to this need, and they do so in the form of offering the graduates their wisdom and advice.

Stewart advises the graduates to embrace the uncertainty in life because fighting it will drive a person crazy (par. 22). Each person has to choose his or her own path and have faith that they are making the right decisions (par. 19). Stewart emphasizes that sometimes you have to "let the chips fall where they may" (par. 24) and judge yourself by your own standards of success (par. 23). Stewart's message to the graduates is that if they do these things and always strive to do better than what came before them, they will not fail (par. 11). The hope that he offers the audience is that since life is always changing, no matter how horrible the real world can be at times, it always gets better (par. 26). He offers the poignant example of the events of 9-11 to prove this point by showing that even in the face of pure tragedy we can still survive (pars. 27-28).

Stephen Colbert has similar words of advice for the young graduates. He too encourages the audience to be open to the possibilities that life's uncertainty creates (par. 25). A world with challenges in it is a fact of life and the only way to survive is to be tough enough to face those challenges (par. 21). Each person needs to utilize their strengths to gain success and make the most out of their youth for that is the time to make mistakes, learn from them, and earn one's wisdom (pars. 24, 28).

The advice that is offered is both of these speeches can be classified into one overall idea: The world is full of problems; these problems can be fixed; and these young graduates are the people who have the ability to do so. Furthermore, Stewart and Colbert have the proof to support this idea. They created the identification needed to show that

they were at one point just like the young graduates in the audience, and now they are successful individuals that have stood up to life's challenges in order to get to where they are today (Stewart par. 18, Colbert par. 7). If they can be successful despite the daunting challenges of the real world, so can every one of the graduates in the audience.

Chapter IV

CONCLUSIONS

Conducting this study by evaluating commencement addresses by political

comedians Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert served dual purposes. First, these two

rhetors represent pop culture icons, a group of rhetors that are becoming increasingly

popular commencement speakers, and the evaluation of their addresses offers insight into

rhetoric delivered by this particular type of speaker. Second, by analyzing the generic

themes present in the rhetoric of this sub-genre of commencement addresses by pop

culture icons, and then presenting the findings in relation to commencement rhetoric from

a variety of different types of speakers, this study presents results that can be generalized

to the overall genre, regardless of sub-genre by speaker type.

General Findings

The literature review found that other critics consistently referenced four core

themes that they found in commencement rhetoric.   These four themes are: 1)

acknowledging the graduates and their achievements, 2) creating identification, 3)

presenting the world and its challenges, and 4) instilling a sense of hope. Though other

critics may not have been specifically discussing these themes in a direct reference to the

generic elements of commencement addresses, the repetition of these themes in abundance throughout multiple critical works suggests that they are core characteristics of the genre that have just not been framed as such.

The analysis of Stewart and Colbert's rhetoric shows that their speeches support the framework of the commencement genre that was gleaned from the literature review. The majority of the referenced commencement speakers in the literature review were traditional speakers, many of them politicians. This study has presented the argument that Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert represent a sub-group of less traditional speakers that includes the pop culture icons of today's society in the United States. The consistency of presented themes from both groups of speakers validates the above mentioned themes as the core elements of speeches belonging to the genre of commencement rhetoric. True to the defining concepts of genre, these core elements are present in commencement rhetoric regardless of the type of speaker.

Differences by Type of Speaker

In acknowledging these similarities between commencement rhetoric of traditional and non-traditional speakers, it is important to also note the differences between them. The differences presented by Stewart and Colbert were minor in content, but more prominent in posture and tone. As stated, the content of their speech was very much in line with other commencement addresses; however, there were subtle differences. The initial review of commencement rhetoric revealed the importance of political discourse in this type of speech. Seeing as that a significant number of traditional speakers are politically oriented, many of their commencement addresses are

pathways for presenting political platforms. They use the opportunity to speak to young new voters in order to persuade them to side with their political efforts. Stewart and Colbert also discussed politics and world events in their speeches, but did so from a different point of view. As opposed to attempting to persuade the audience towards one belief or another, they used their speeches to try to motivate the graduates to take an interest in the world and the politics that govern it.

Constraints

There are specific constraints that contribute to this difference. The first constraint is the social role that both Stewart and Colbert assume. They are political comedians; they are not true politicians. These men were invited to speak at the schools because of their social roles as comedians, and there is an expectation that they present themselves in these roles. Therefore, it would be unacceptable for them to present political policy in attempts to persuade the audience in any significant manner. Instead, Stewart and Colbert are constrained to utilize the topic of politics for informative purposes. This example exemplifies the manner in which audiences develop expectations of their speakers based on the speaker's historical presence in society, and that these expectations mold the manner in which the speakers present their messages.

The second constraint is particular to this genre. There is a generic constraint created by the rhetorical situation that limits Stewart and Colbert from relying too heavily on their own personal views. This study has established the importance of an audience-centered approach to commencement addresses. All four defining elements of the genre are reliant on this approach. Many political speakers may circumvent this constraint by

creating a world with their discourse that represents their own views, and then speak to the audience from the stance that the graduates are already living in this subjective world the rhetor has created. However, Stewart and Colbert, constrained by their social roles, did not take this approach because an over-expression of their personal beliefs would have diverted attention from the graduates. Too many personal opinions might have also polarized the audience, and thusly inhibited the formation of identification with the speaker.

Use of Humor

Additionally, Stewart and Colbert differ from more traditional speakers in the manner in which they present their speeches. They are both considered to be comedians and, expectedly, used a greater amount of humor to accomplish the goals of their discourse than a traditional speaker typically would. Colbert takes this even further to include several instances of sarcasm in his speech. This use of humor and sarcasm creates a far more conversational tone than is present in many commencement addresses by traditional speakers. Both Stewart and Colbert seem to have been mindful of the fact that they were speaking to a young audience that was probably familiar with their shows and presented their speeches in a manner that would have likely created stronger identification between audience and speaker.

Thomas O. Sloan offers additional insight into the use of humor when he highlights the fact that humor generates a generally uniformed response from the audience, which in turn creates a bond not only among the individual audience members, but also between the audience and the rhetor (359). This bond reinforces the audience's

ability to identify with the speaker. The nature of humorous discourse can also "serve to emphasize or make memorable features of the speaker's argument" (Sloan 359). These ideas support the notion that this change in tone through the use of humor has the potential for positive perceptions of the discourse.

Positive Defiance

This difference in tone certainly represents a form of defiance from traditional commencement rhetoric and, due to the likelihood of solidifying the identification with the audience, it can be considered positive defiance. As commencement addresses are increasingly delivered by members of the popular culture, one can probably expect to see more of this type of defiance. If this proves to be so, this shift in the type of speaker will help to shape the dynamic evolution of the commencement address and progress the genre from the stigma of the boring "get ready for the real world" lectures that it is so often associated with to an entertaining, memorable, and motivating group of discourse.

Sloan also explains that "humor won't work unless it is appropriate to the audience, speaker, and occasion" (359). The demographic of the commencement address audience consists primarily of young adults who derive both a sense of entertainment and identification through the use of humor. The occasion of the commencement ceremony is meant to mark a memorable event in the audience's lives, and as stated, humor helps to emphasize messages, making them more memorable. These two statements are true of any commencement ceremony.

The speaker, however, is the variable when it comes to using humor in a commencement speech. Humor is most definitely appropriate when the speaker is a

comedian, such as Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert. However, the fact that humor has a tendency to be "unstable and perverse, resisting rules and abstractions" suggests that it is not a communicative strategy that would be appropriately employed by all speakers (Sloan 359). This study offers theoretical backing to suggest that humor is a positive form of defiance in commencement rhetoric, but not all speakers are capable of appropriately using the strategy. This presents the possibility that popular cultural icons, specifically comedians, are potentially more effective commencement speakers than traditional rhetors because of their social roles that shape their discourse. The scope of this study does not encompass a quantitative exploration of the effectiveness of commencement speakers, but this idea does offer the opportunity for future research on this subject.

<p style="text-align:center">Additional Limitations</p>

In the search to answer the questions that have prompted this analysis, it is important to acknowledge additional limitations of this study. The first limitation is that this study focuses on a very specific type of popular culture icon, the political comedian. Since so much of the current literature regarding commencement addresses involves politically-oriented figures, the rhetors chosen for the focus of this study represent a happy medium between traditional commencement speakers and other popular culture icons. Additional research to include other types of popular culture icons, such as actors, musicians, and artists, would add to the breadth of the literature concerning the genre of commencement addresses. Doing so would help solidify the notion that commencement addresses belong to their own unique genre, and the rules of the genre are consistent regardless of the type of speaker.

A second limitation is that this study deals specifically with products of today's popular culture, though the idea of pop culture is not a new concept. Another approach to evaluating this phenomenon would be to conduct a chronological analysis of commencement rhetoric to evaluate the manner in which it has changed over the course of time while still maintaining enough similarity to be classified within the same genre.

The final and most important limitation of this study is that, traditionally, the success of the artifacts can only be judged by the standards set forth in current literature. Current literature offers very little evidence of clearly defined generic characteristics for commencement addresses, and therefore few standards by which to judge this genre. While this fact creates the need and justification for this study, it also limits the scope of it because there is little to compare the results to. It must be accepted by the reader that this study merely seeks to establish a clearer starting point for evaluating commencement rhetoric as a genre.

Overcoming these limitations would result in an endeavor that extends the scope of this study, though each limitation offers the potential for valuable future research that would add significant information to the current literature.

Final Thoughts

The results of this study are an exploration of the relationship between commencement addresses delivered by traditional and non-traditional speakers, and the suggestion that there are four elements that are present in the rhetoric classified in the genre of commencement addresses. These characteristics are: 1) acknowledging the graduates and their achievements, 2) creating identification between the speaker and the

graduates, 3) presenting the world and its challenges, and 4) instilling a sense of hope for the graduates' future.

Though the specific manner in which a speech achieves each of these characteristics is a stylistic choice that is at the discretion of the rhetor, these four generic concepts are essential in defining the artifacts presented in this study as commencement addresses. However, it is important to note that in reviewing the specific results of this study, one of the four elements did seem to emerge as the most pivotal component of commencement addresses. The need to create identification between the speaker and the audience seemed to be the driving force behind many of the messages in the evaluated texts. As stated, if the audience does not identify with the speaker, they will not have as much trust in the speaker's message. Therefore, congratulatory statements, reflections on the state of the world, and advice for the future do not carry as much meaning for the audience if they do not relate to the person offering these messages. Again, the evaluation of this idea is outside of the boundaries of this study, but this notion of identification being the key element of commencement rhetoric is an important question to be explored in future research.

It is my hope that this study contributes significance to the literature base for both commencement addresses and generic criticism, and offers a starting point on which to build a literary foundation for the culmination of these two rhetorical interests. There is currently a very limited literature base of commencement rhetoric, and it is this researcher's personal opinion that this is a direct representation of the fact that as a society, we are diminishing the importance of the commencement ceremony. It is now

common for universities to have only one commencement address, though each semester there are multiple commencement ceremonies.

The graduates at the ceremonies without commencement speakers are missing the opportunity to not only hear the encouraging words of wisdom that these speeches present, but they are also missing out on a memorable right of passage that formally marks this transitional point in their lives. I hope that this study sparks a greater attention to this genre of rhetoric, and in doing so, encourage universities, faculties, and students to be more mindful of commencement events and the rhetoric that marks them.

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VITA

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