

## DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S CRITICAL CASE ON THE VALUE OF EDUCATION

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### **Abstract:**

*More often, people presume the purpose of education to be learning the necessary skills to enable them to be competitive in the workplace. As a result of this misconstrue, they turn themselves into workhorses and behave like automatons, which neither knows how to think critically nor relate with one another. In his 2005 commencement speech at Kenyon College to the graduating liberal arts class, Wallace affirms that the real value of education is to disentangle people from solipsism and closed-mindedness and transform them into disciplined, compassionate citizens, who are mindful of their fellow beings. To effectively deliver this message to his audience, Wallace uses persuasive rhetorical techniques such as conversational style, parables, and repetition throughout his speech. Wallace begins his speech by adopting a conversational style, which allows him to relate with his audience and create a common ground seamlessly. Having identified the nuances of Wallace's expressions, the present paper looks at how he weaves personal anecdotes into his speech and uses a relaxed, conversational tone that diffuses any tensions within the audience, thereby enabling them to relate with his presentation easily.*

**Key Words:** *Purpose of education, real value of education, solipsism, closed-mindedness, transform, disciplined, compassionate.*

Throughout the speech, Wallace uses casual phrases such as “*The point here is...*”, “*I'm sure you guys know by now,*” and “*You get the idea,*” all which easily relate with his American audience (3; 4; 6). By adopting a relaxed, conversational style, Wallace can appeal to the audience's ethos. For instance, he states that “*if you're worried that I plan to present myself here as the wise, older fish explaining what water is to you younger fish, please don't be. I am not the wise old fish*” (Wallace 1). By declaring that he is not the “*wise, older fish,*” Wallace reduces his authority to that of the students, thereby succeeding in building a common ground between him and his audience. This attempt to relate to his audience and thus appeal to their ethos is further revealed when he says, “*If you're like me as a student, you've never liked hearing this...*” (Wallace 1).

By comparing himself to the students, Wallace invents himself as being among the audience and, in that way, establishes himself as the credible person to speak to them about the topic in question. Throughout his presentation, Wallace builds a strong nexus with his audience through his strict adherence to the conversational style with which his audience is largely familiar. Additionally, Wallace alludes to several hypothetical parables to effectively deliver his message to the audience. As he begins his speech, he gives the parable of the fish and the water. In the parable, there are three fish swimming in opposite directions. Of the three, one who is older is swimming in the other direction greets the other two younger ones who, after swimming slightly past the older one, ask themselves, saying, “*What the hell is water?*” (Wallace 1). He then reveals to the audience that the message of his parable is that the simple things in life are often the “*hardest to see and talk about*” (Wallace 1). As he concludes, he becomes even clearer.

Wallace discloses that unlike knowledge which people often presume to be the value of education, the real value of education is simple but in most cases hidden for most people. For him, the real value of education has to do with being mindful of the reality in one's environment yet this always seems so difficult

for most people to comprehend. Besides, he also uses the parable of the atheist to demonstrate the blinding solipsism and intolerance that imprisons most people to the extent that they cannot see the truth in contrary assertions. In this parable, the atheist narrates to the believer how he was trapped in a 'blizzard' but despite praying to God for help, he did not receive any assistance from him. When the believer intercepts and asks him to thank God because he is still alive, the atheist quickly rebuts saying he was helped by a few Eskimos who showed him his way and not God. By narrating this parable to the audience, Wallace seeks to persuade the students to be accommodative of other people's beliefs regardless of whether they are right or not. The emphasis is that like the atheist and the believer, no one is really sure of what they believe in. To persuade his audience to imbibe his message, he uses logical reasoning when he suggests that the students, like him who learnt to be accommodative of others, should too learn to shun arrogance and acknowledge opinions that they think contrasts their views since no one is certain of their beliefs. By using parables throughout his speech, Wallace is able to communicate effectively and deliver his targeted message to the audience which makes the presentation more engaging.

Finally, Wallace also uses repetition for most of his speech, which enables him to create a lasting memory of the intended message among his audience. For most orators, one way to emphasize a message and create an enduring memory among the audience is through repetition. Wallace uses this technique more often throughout his speech. For instance, he severally repeats "*worship*" when he says that "*If you worship money and things...then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough... Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure, and you will always feel ugly... Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid... Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid...*" (Wallace 8). His repetition of 'worship' emphasizes the message that whatever one worships has a negative connotation or consequence. As he concludes, he also repeats the phrase "*This is water*" to remind his audience of the value of education, which is his driving message throughout the speech (Wallace 9). Wallace also enforces this technique by reiterating his message to make it memorable. When he begins the speech, he gives the parable of the water and concludes it with the memorable phrase: "What the hell is water?" and as he concludes he suspects that his audience has forgotten the parable and helps them recap by urging them that "*we have to keep reminding ourselves over: This is water. This is water.*" (Wallace 1; 9).

By reconnecting the conclusion to the beginning of his speech, Wallace successfully helps the audience recap the central message of his presentation, which arguably makes the audience leave with satisfaction. Throughout his speech, David Foster Wallace skillfully uses multiple persuasive rhetorical techniques that not only successfully deliver his message but also create a long-lasting impact among the audience. He adopts an informal conversational style that easily relates to his audience, thus can seamlessly relay his message. To make his presentation more engaging and persuasive, he uses relatable parables wherever he feels there is a need to leave a lasting memory. Finally, he also heavily relies on repetition, which ultimately emphasizes his main points and makes it easier for the audience to memorize the central message of the presentation. Overall, Wallace's main message to the audience becomes even more compelling to the audience, given his suicide at barely the age of forty-six.

On a concluding note, it can be stated that the implication for education is clear; everything should be examined in the light of reason and experience. But it is also implied that one's own conclusions should be presented to others on a similar basis, accepting that they will be critically examined. Thus, the whole process of education becomes less dogmatic and authoritarian.

**References:**

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