

Stephen King Is Right, We're All a Little Nuts – And That's Okay: A Response to Stephen King's "Why We Crave Horror"

Rosalind Rohrbaugh

Created in Professor Longhany's ENC 3315 Argumentative Writing Course

Abstract

Rhetorical scholar Jay Heinrichs discusses thoroughly in his publication "Thank You for Arguing" the utilization and effectiveness of argumentative rhetorical tools. He explores the roles logos, pathos, and ethos play in persuasion and what other specialized tools (including Kairos, storytelling, and commonplaces) contribute to this trio of foundational concepts.

Rhetorical scholar Jay Heinrichs discusses thoroughly in his publication "Thank You for Arguing" the utilization and effectiveness of argumentative rhetorical tools. He explores the roles logos, pathos, and ethos play in persuasion and what other specialized tools (including Kairos, storytelling, and commonplaces) contribute to this trio of foundational concepts.

Popular director Ti West's sexually charged horror nightmare *X* made it to streaming platforms in April 2022. The first night I could access it, I sat in my living room with the lights low and took the ride. It was every bit as sadistic as I had imagined (and hoped) it would be, and I remarked to my mother later that the entire movie was "beautifully vicious." I have since rewatched *X* four times. But why? Why do people find pleasure in horror? Why do we engage with the macabre at all? Well, acclaimed horror writer (and one-hit director) Stephen King presented his opinion on these questions in his 1981 article written for *Playboy* titled "Why We Crave Horror." King begins his article with the bold comment that "we're all mentally ill" and that those outside of asylums hide it better (1). We are all filled with potential darkness, even violence, King asserts (1). However, our engagement with horror and gore is the tonic that quells those pieces of ourselves. Horror "keeps the gators fed," as King puts it in the last line of his article, so that

we can live in our masked, even unconscious, insanity with peace and balance (4). King takes multiple successful rhetorical approaches in his essay to drive this point home, and with some guidance from expert arguer Jim Heinrichs and his book *Thank You for Arguing*, we'll identify some of those approaches and what makes them successful.

To take a deeper dive into specific ways King utilizes effective persuasion, we must first explore his explicit use of ethos both inside and outside his article. Ethos, otherwise known as "argument by character, employs the persuader's personality, reputation, and ability to look trustworthy" (Heinrichs 38). By identity and reputation alone, King holds excellent credibility in addressing the topic of his text. King, after all, is steeped in the horror genre. If one googles "top horror writers," they are hard-pressed to find a list that does not include King's name near the very top. A horror writer since the 1960s, King has had rich experience in the workings and reactions this genre solicits.

We can have a sense of faith in King due to these facts, facts that he also backs up using Heinrichs' definition of storytelling, "a well-told narrative" that "gives the audience a virtual experience" (99). In this case, King offers his readers a written experience, taking them along with him to explore his own relationship with horror. King shares a personal anecdote about his relationship with horror. He expresses his enjoyment of "morbidity unchained, our most base instincts let free" through exposing himself to "the most aggressive" horror films, such as *Dawn of the Dead* (King 3). For him, horror lifts "a trap door in the civilized forebrain" and throws "a basket of raw meat to the hungry alligators swimming around in the subterranean river beneath" (3-4). With the employment of his reputation and knowledge of the horror genre and individuals' relationships with all things terrifying, alongside his openness regarding his personal experiences that pay credence to his ultimate point of what horror does for the mind, it is no question King knows how to handle ethos.

King ultimately recognizes darkness both in himself and in others. To him, it is a shared trait we are all capable of, and with this point King makes his most substantial claim at the best time in his piece, his *Kairos*, by writing: "the mythic horror movie has a dirty job to do. It deliberately appeals to all that is worst in us" (3). *Kairos* is, in a large part, "the art of seizing the occasion," and King successfully does this with his bold assertion concerning the meat of his argument (Heinrichs 283). We need horror because horror appeals to our darkest halves, which is something King wants us to believe we all possess in some state or another. King also weaves elements of pathos throughout these points, the "argument of emotion," personifying and creating imagery – like the alligator-infested marsh that is in our minds – to give life and color to the statements he is making (Heinrichs 38). He wants us to shutter, chuckle, sigh thoughtfully, and consider the metaphorical reptiles that drive what Freud called our "Id," the primitive and hidden part of ourselves that is naturally sadistic (Cherry, "Id, Ego,

and Superego”).

King practices the use of pathos in a rather subtle and unspoken application of a concept known as “expressed love” for his readers (Heinrichs 157-59). While he cannot “love us with his eyes,” he can do so with his words (157). He tries to connect with his audience by suggesting he shares the audience’s (albeit unconscious) values, and that he has the audience’s needs at heart (the need to appreciate the role horror plays in the health of their mind). He maintains an almost compassionate tone in his writing. Nothing is critical in his recognition of “the potential lyncher” in all of us (2). Instead, he is pretty matter-of-fact and openly sympathetic in his willingness to relate to this disconcerting reality of the human psyche. He wants to comfort us in our macabre normalcy.

Of course, King does not fail to employ logos, “a set of techniques that use what the audience is thinking” and finds it logical to back up what he is trying to say (Heinrichs 37-38). He appeals to the most commonly acceptable and conscious portions of his reader’s thoughts by acknowledging the prized emotions we are taught to embrace as the logical norm, emotions that serve as the law and order of the human mind. They are emotions that serve as justifications against our more monstrous sides, explanations as to why we try to ignore or deny darker ruminations. “Love, friendship, loyalty, kindness – there are all emotions that we applaud, emotions that have been immortalized in couplets of Hallmark cards,” King writes, even attaching a bit of a commonplace analogy (otherwise known as “any cliché, belief, or value” that can serve as “boiled-down public opinion”) as a framing technique for his point (King 2-3; Heinrichs 118, 134). “When, as children, we hug our rotten little puke of a sister and give her a kiss, all the aunts and uncles smile and twit and cry, ‘isn’t he the sweetest thing,’” King writes, offering this point as a lovely little enthymeme (3).

The enthymeme is “the logical sandwich that contains deductive logic” (Heinrichs 146). When a child makes the choice to hug that little puke of a sister, he gains the common reaction from older relatives of praise, therefore, compelling him away from the perceived wrong choice, the one that might encourage him to kick his sister in the back of the knee. It is the motivation for praise as opposed to punishment that drives the child’s thinking and actions towards what is civil and what is right. This cements early on the point King is attempting to dispel: our thoughts and impulses must always bend in the direction of love and goodness.

However, he follows up this enthymeme with a supplemental one: “if we deliberately slam the rotten little puke of a sister’s fingers in the door, sanctions follow” (King 3). These enthymemes are purely logical and represent my supporting point above, that we are steered as far away from our darker sides as possible, starting at a young age. King ends this point by saying, “anticivilization emotions don’t go away, and they demand periodic exercise” (3). His entire article asserts that this demand is fulfilled best through engaging with horror (instead of any kicking or slamming directed towards little sis). This point gives us a hint

into the exigence, the real motivation, of King's writing. He wants his audience to recognize how horror helps more than it harms. Since the establishment of horror, it has always been an easy scapegoat to blame for delinquent behavior and societal violence, but King flips that belief entirely on its head through his persuasion. He wants us to believe that horror is a way to regulate bad or disturbing behavior by giving us a safe outlet to explore those naturally occurring sides of ourselves.

With all of that said, what conclusion can we reach about King's persuasive abilities? First we must acknowledge that there will always be vehement haters of the macabre, and to those people, they are as sane as sane comes and imply avoiding the poison that horror injects into the mind. To those like King, though, they are running away from truths within themselves that will always exist, thrashing about. What can be undoubtedly asserted is that King comes to the batting cage with multiple successful rhetorical approaches and invokes practical elements of argumentation to prove his point. Through the application of effective ethos, pathos, and logos, alongside more specialized rhetorical tools such as commonplaces, enthymemes, Kairos, and storytelling, King effectively persuades us that we as people need horror to keep our demons, no matter how subconscious and invisible to ourselves they may be, from stirring too harshly. King displays a great deal of "disinterest," otherwise known as the ironic implementation of deep interest in a topic, throughout his argument, comparing his own needs with ours and appealing to the idea that we all share a similar set of said needs (Heinrichs 201-10). He, too, keeps his argument brief and to the chase, a nice "susser," one could say (218). King makes our need of horror make sense.

As surprising as some of King's assertions may seem, he is expressing an opinion that, in a sense, has been expressed before. One could compare King's idea of our inherent need for horror to the concept of Aristotle's catharsis and our need for emotional release. Allan H. Gilbert discussed Aristotelian Catharsis in his 1926 text "The Philosophical Review," in which he parrots the definition of tragedy in *Poetics*, "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude" that through predominant emotions of "fear" and "pity" allows for the "proper purgation of these emotions" (301).

From a tragedy perspective, Aristotle found that through the unapologetic arousal of pity and fear through fictional tragedy, audiences could atone for their own internalization of these emotions and cope with the weight that pity or fear may bring. Perhaps, we could place King as an Aristotelian figure in horror. Replace pity and fear with violence and death. Feeding the gators nurtures the catharsis. After all, we live in stressful times when our mind marshes can get extra rambunctious. The gators do not just exist there. They are frequently poked by contentious political situations, climate disasters, pandemics, long work hours, rising costs, and rampant rudeness. No wonder the minds of many may be very much in need of the blood bathed catharsis that horror can bring.

A TIME article published in 2016 headlined "America's Anger Is Out of

Control” (Kluger) explained people are tired, frustrated, and enraged, and these emotions manifest unrest within the deepest recesses of our brains. We need ways to express and engage with that aggression in a safe manner. The nature of our world, combined with our unconscious and predisposed anti-civility, leads to a desire to blow off steam. This idea is as true today as it was in 1981 when King first published this essay for the audience of *Playboy*, an audience that at the time was most likely mainly male (as the horror genre, after all, is dominated by men). For me, this is one of the only shortcomings of this text, as to exclude a large population of women from the conversation demonstrates a lack of consideration for women’s roles in establishing the genre itself (i.e., Mary Shelly and Shirley Jackson – two horror Queens that existed well before King). However, this problem does not take away from King’s effective usage of the rhetorical tools he applied. To close, in King’s eyes, horror serves a very important purpose for humanity and the health of the mind, and he convinces us well of this idea. For the sake of my health, I am going to go watch *X*’s prequel, *Pearl* now that it has finally hit streaming.

Works Cited

- Cherry, Kendra. “Id, Ego, and Superego: Freud’s Elements of Personality.” *Verywell-mind*, 13 Sept. 2022, <https://www.verywellmind.com/the-id-ego-and-superego-2795951>. Accessed 19 Sept. 2022.
- Gilbert, Allan H. “The Aristotelian Catharsis.” *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 35, no. 4, Jul. 1926, pp. 301-14, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2178979>. Accessed 28 Feb. 2023.
- Heinrichs, Jim. *Thank You for Arguing: What Aristotle, Lincoln, and Homer Simpson Can Teach Us About the Art of Persuasion*. 4th ed., Broadway Books, 2020.
- King, Stephen. “Why We Crave Horror.” *Playboy*, 1981, <https://faculty.uml.edu/bmarshall/lowell/whywecravehorrmovies.pdf>. Accessed 16 Sept. 2022.
- Kluger, Jeffrey. “America’s Anger Is Out of Control.” *TIME*, 1 June 2016, <https://time.com/4353606/anger-america-enough-already/>. Accessed 30 Sept. 2022.

Convergence Rhetoric



Rosalind Rohrbaugh is an English Major in her senior year with a dual focus on Creative Writing and Writing & Rhetoric. Post-graduation, she hopes to pursue an M.A. in Rhetoric and Composition to prepare for her goal of pursuing a career in academia. In her free time, Rosalind loves watching A24 movies and collecting horror mementos, and she is what *The Shining*'s Jack Torrance would call "a confirmed ghost story and horror film addict."