

The Great Influenza: Rhetorical Analysis

In one of the most recent outbreaks of infectious disease since the Black Plague, the 1918 flu epidemic caused mass hysteria around the world. In this excerpt from "The Great Influenza", John M. Barry describes in detail about many things relating to this epidemic, including the side of a scientist and the methodologies of research. The author analyzed the tactics and qualities of scientists of the time to paint a picture of uncertainty as well as certainty that faced the early 20th century gripped by the flu. To convey to his audience what a scientist's or researcher's role consists of, Barry uses figurative language, syntax, and diction to elaborate.

Barry begins the excerpt by conceptualizing certainty in the minds of scientists. The passage begins with "A scientist must accept the fact that all his or her work, even beliefs, may break apart upon the sharp edge of a single laboratory finding." He continues by stating that "certainty creates strength... uncertainty creates weakness" (1-3). By using syntax and parallel structure the author indicates that mental inquiry and understanding of the subject in question is a necessity for the scientist. This contrast of certainty lays the framework for the succeeding paragraphs. The second and third paragraphs build on this assumption by putting forth the basic qualities and describing the difficulties of a scientist and their work. He continues to explain scientists in a metaphor as ones merely existing on the frontier or precipice of technology, taking experimental steps into the unknown which may lead to their downfall. Barry describes the innovation of the scientist as "seeing through the looking glass into a world that seems entirely different". However, he cautions the formulation of new theories by saying that "science teaches us to doubt", further exemplified by his example of Einstein, who would not accept his own theories until they were thoroughly tested by others.

Barry continues to use a hypothetical example by using imagery in a situation of finding the right tools to do the job for rock analysis. He states that "in the wilderness the scientist must create ...everything." This choice of diction in the form of simple words stresses the role that scientists and researchers play on society. There are multiple questions to simulate the thinking tendencies of a scientist as he changes from one thought to another as they are deemed infeasible. The very uncertain approach of a scientist, always changing, is reflected by these short possible thoughts of a scientist. Finally, the scientist prevails. The post pioneer scientists then flood the scene, taking advantage of the breakthroughs. This metaphorical representation of innovation in thought is continued when the following workers flesh out the scientific theories raised by the original scientist.

Throughout the course of the excerpt Barry uses different rhetorical strategies to define the role that scientists and researchers play. For a scientist to become successful, they have to think outside of the box to solve insurmountable problems. By applying this knowledge to the epidemic faced by the people in 1918, the scientific method alludes to the solutions created by the scientists of the time.