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“The Ways We Lie” by Stephanie Ericsson. Rhetorical Analysis

In her prominent article “The Way We Lie”, Stephanie Ericsson argues that the acceptance of some lies as not harmful, natural, and even necessary has grave consequences for the culture and corrupts person’s spirit. She suggests that if people engage in any sort of lying to themselves or to others, they both lose faith in people and become more tolerant to lies. Therefore, her message is that people should not look for excuses for lying, as this is only another delusion, but refuse from it, no matter how difficult it seems to do. The author employs a casual tone and a wide range of rhetorical devices masterly combining ethos, pathos, and logos, which makes the essay powerful, accessible, and convincing.

The author’s tone and style of writing matches her intended audience and the purpose of writing. To make the social change possible, it is important to make all the population consider and, therefore, reconsider, their perception of lie and lying. Therefore, the audience Stephanie Ericsson addresses is a general population at large. The essay is written not for children to develop a right understanding of truth and lies in them, but for grown-ups, engaged in many ways of lying in their daily lives, as well as teaching their children to do so. Consequently, the author chooses casual tone with colloquial speech and many daily life examples, which can be best accepted by common people. The splitting of the text into smaller sections instead of presenting the work as a single piece makes the essay easier to read. What is more, if a reader gets distracted starting thinking over author’s words or examples from one’s own life, he will easily find the necessary

passage and follow. Though Ericsson gives many personal examples, the context of the argument is cultural and social, as these examples are common in our culture, and the author suggests that our culture of telling lies shapes our society.

The author masterly appeals to readers with the help of ethos, pathos, and logos. In particular, Stephanie Ericsson employs ethos when incorporation quotations of famous people and references to studies, strengthening her arguments and enhancing their credibility. The work contains many examples, as every section in the essay actually starts with the quotation, predicting, as well as summarizing its topic. For example, the explanation of the role of omission is introduced with the words of R.L. Stevenson, "The cruelest lies are often told in silence" (Ericsson 124), and the section on delusion starts with the words of Eric Hoffer, "We lie loudest when we lie to ourselves" (Ericsson 128). With the help of quotes, the author demonstrates that her ideas are trustworthy, as they are shared with great respectable people. References to studies of psychologist Laing and Janis, and historical events, Pearl Harbor in particular, serve the same purpose. Ericson also establishes her credibility by avoiding preachy tone, instead being frank in her personal stories. In particular, she shares such personal details as what her bad day looks like, how she was lying to the bank, to the friend, to the client, how she is working in pajamas, etc. (Ericsson 120, 122). From the very beginning, Ericson positions herself as one of general public who is used to telling white lies and cannot imagine living without them. By appreciating that the choice to refuse from lying is a difficult one, she also pays respect to the readers' practices and makes them not resent her words as mere philosophizing or building theoretical argumentations having nothing to do with real world.

Pathos, that is appeal to readers' emotions and values, is realized though personal stories one can identify oneself with, examples, demonstrating grave consequences of lying, and personal

anecdotes, as well as though vivid emotionally colored language. For example, anyone can identify oneself with someone telling the friend he looks good, rejecting or cancelling the meeting not wanting to go, or returning products guaranteed under normal use even when the use was reckless. It is important that some light examples are intermixed with those, which demonstrate that the lie can change someone's life (like lives of the family of the dead soldier announced missing), cause serious bodily and psychological harm (like in the story about Father Porter), produce religious and cultural deception (like in the case of omission of Lilith in the religious narrative), and even change the course of the history (as it was the case in Pearl Harbor). The fact that these examples are not ordered starting with little white lies and finishing with lies having serious consequences, but are all intermixed, makes readers perceive they can never know what consequences their current not harmful lie can bring about.

As stated earlier, the author uses vivid emotionally colored language to appeal to the readers' emotions. The introduction and the conclusion contain the whole paragraphs of repetitive rhetorical questions suggesting that the issue is difficult to resolve at once, but people should engage in asking themselves these questions to understand the change is necessary. The following example of the rhetorical question also contains stylistic repetition and colloquial expression, which enhances its effect and makes it even more striking: "How much do we tolerate before we become sick and tired of being sick and tired?" (Ericsson 128). There are many other colloquial words and phrases throughout the essay: "ducked out", "looks like hell", "bucks", "raised his eyebrows", "good-ole-boy cohesiveness", "handy", etc. (Ericsson 121, 122, 125, 127). Another recurrent stylistic device is enumeratio. For example, "We lie. ... We exaggerate, we minimize, we avoid confrontation, we spare people's feelings, we conveniently forget, we keep secrets, we justify lying to the big-guy institutions." (Ericsson 120). Ericsson's metaphors are sustained and

ingenious: “a crowded graveyard of disenchanted former friends” (122), “the victim crawls into the hole, ashamed” (124), “giving those hungry with truth a candy bar of misinformation instead of a balanced meal” (125), the lie is described as the means to “lubricate the daily machinery” and the acceptance of lie is portrayed as “a moral cancer, that eventually shrouds and reorders reality until moral garbage becomes as invisible as water is to fish” (128). All these stylistic devices have great emotional impact.

Logos is applied through the essay's structured presentation and logical reasoning. The essay has a clearly defined introduction, a well-structured main body, and the conclusion. The author also appeals to logic when giving dictionary definition to *lie*, suggesting there is a logical framework for defining actions as lying (Ericsson 121). Though examples to each type of lie evoke emotional reaction, too, their primary purpose is to prove the particular type of lying can do harm. The author invites the reader to analyze the actions and the motives of the good-wishing friend telling another he looks fine, a sergeant reporting the soldier missing, the Catholic church, ignoring the facts, Clarence Thomas, accusing the court for the purpose of deflection, Christian writers, distorting the original Eden narrative, Pearl Harbour commanders, etc. Therefore, readers can see that though lies usually originate not from evil motives, but from good intentions, the wish to protect oneself or one's group, or simple laziness (as in the case of stereotypes), it can have grave consequences.

To conclude, the author employs appropriate tone and a wide range of rhetorical devices, including ethos, pathos, logos, rhetorical questions, stylistic repetitions, analogies, enumerations, and metaphors, which makes the essay powerful and convincing.

Works Cited

Ericsson, Stephanie. "The Ways We Lie" pp. 120-129. Web. 25 Feb. 2016

Harris, Robert A. *A Handbook of Rhetorical Devices*, 2010. Web. 25 Feb. 2016