

Rhetorical Analysis: The Rhetoric of Coal Bumper Stickers in Southwest Virginia

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A Rhetorical Analysis

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In Central Appalachia coal mining has been a way of life and means of sustaining it for hundreds of years. It is a trade that has been proudly passed down from generation to generation beginning as early as the 1800s. The term “miner,” is generally associated with tradition, community, and heritage, but recently it seems that community and tradition has been divided by politics, religion, and an invisible, yet profoundly idealistic line between those who purportedly support coal and those who do not. Through analyzing coal-centric bumper stickers, my primary goal was to gain a greater understanding of coal rhetoric in Southwest Virginia.

A trade that has been notoriously known as either “feast or famine,” the coal industry has seen its fair share of finger pointing and name blaming when coal has been on the decline. Recently, however, Republicans created the rhetoric slogan, “The War on Coal” founded on the pretense that the [Clean Power Plan](#), enacted by President Obama, is a “divisive” plan geared towards cutting mining jobs. In reality, the CPP’s primary goal is to create cleaner coal burning plants that reduce carbon pollution and, if need be, eliminate older plants that do not burn clean fuel. The War on Coal has been a powerful rhetorical tool in shaping political beliefs and a means of garnering support for the Republican Party in Southwest Virginia. Despite the fact that the only consistent variable in the coal industry is that it is historically inconsistent, it seems as if

The War on Coal has equated a failing coal economy in Southwest Virginia with President Obama and the CPP.

Even though a majority of bumper stickers do not specifically display the words, “The War on Coal,” its premise is the most likely source for many coal bumper stickers where I found sentiments such as pride; heritage; political affiliations; and patriotism that were used to establish an assumed two party system between those who support coal and those who do not.

Politicians run ads stating they “stand with coal,” in the hopes to gain the popular vote in Southwest Virginia. Some rhetor’s use the Bible to support their personal opinions about the war on coal. Because heritage and community are intrinsically tied with religion and politics in Southwest Virginia, the relationship between coal and religion and politics creates a legitimization process that supports pro-coal, hegemonic ideas wherein self-described pro-coal activists possibly feel justified about alienating and, at times, villainizing “non-supporters” of coal.

Using postmodernism, I analyzed how coal is personified on bumper stickers, and how hegemonic, pro-coal ideologies are represented. I used the internet as an instrument to view bumper stickers as presentational symbols. I looked at approximately 500 coal related bumper stickers and choose 17 as the most accurate representations of coal bumper stickers found on cars, trucks, and coal trucks in southwest Virginia. I spent approximately 24 hours analyzing the bumper stickers and approximately 31 days interpreting and writing about coal bumper stickers.

According to the book, postmodernism approaches, “focus on how meanings are constructed through language and its rules, denying the preexistence of a single truth or meaning that language simply reflects,” (pg. 278). Even though postmodernism theorizes that there is no singular truth, hegemonic ideas are founded on the idea that there is. The discourse used in the

bumper stickers embraces the hegemonic idea of a singular truth, and how one chooses to interpret these bumper generally signifies whether you are pro-coal or anti-coal.

Pro-coalers often times portray anti-coalers as “hippies” or “tree huggers,” who are less concerned with how Southwest Virginian’s make a living, and more concerned with protecting and preserving the Appalachian Mountains. Sometimes, anti-coalers *are* anti-mountaintop removal activist, but there are some, however, who are more concerned with the marginalized groups that popular, pro-coal hegemonic ideas suppress – coal miners and communities whose health are effected by coal runoff and pollution.

This dichotomy creates *binary opposition*, “a hierarchical relationship based on a belief that there is an underlying ‘center’ or sense of order that is real and reliable,” (pg. 280). Let’s apply this notion of good vs. bad to a pro-coal bumper sticker that reads, *Thanks to Coal I Can Pay My Bills*. Here, a reality is being created wherein coal is personified as the ultimate good. Thanks to coal, the electricity and water stays on; the car insurance is paid; and there is food in the fridge. It also begs the audience to consider the alternative – without coal, I cannot pay my bills. Again, the binary opposition creates two realities wherein pro-coal equates to what is desirable (the ultimate good) and anti-coal equates to what is undesirable (the ultimate bad).

In analyzing bumper stickers, I noticed aggressive and intimidating language, such as, *PROVE you’re against coal mining turn off your electricity* (caps added), and *Obama HATES coal*. The first example is a fallacy of reasoning. It evokes an overwhelming mental image of a forced demonstration of illogical beliefs – if you are not willing to live without electricity, then you must be pro-coal. The second is an example of hasty generalization and is founded on untruth. Both are rhetorical images designed to not only elicit a response, but to serve as a signifier for pro-coal ideologies.

When analyzing bumper stickers, *pride* emerged as a pattern. *Proud Mom of a Coal Miner*, and, *Proud Wife of a Coal Miner* are two examples of how pride creates a hierarchy in Southwest Virginia. This notion of pride is intrinsically linked to heritage. The bumper sticker, *Like Father Like Son*, for example, provides the base for a silhouette of a coal miner crawling through the narrow channels of a mine shaft. The idea of pride as a direct result of being related to or being from coal mining lineage could shape the audience's desire to belong to the vast majority of the pro-coal community.

This idea of belonging also dictates who can speak about coal and who cannot for fear of being scrutinized. For example, I posted *My Kentucky Home*, an article written by Silas House, on a social media website. The article's primary focus was centered on communities who were being marginalized by coal corporations in Kentucky. Silas used the example of a young boy who died in his crib due to an illegal blasting operation conducted by a local coal operation. A lifelong friend of mine, who identifies as pro-coal, read the article and interpreted it as an anti-coal statement. She proceeded to say that, "coal fed [her] kids," and, "coal has paid [her] bills," and that, with all things in life, there will be causalities. Because I am not married or engaged to a coal miner, and because I posted an article that did not paint coal in a flattering or "pro-coal" light, I was publically flogged. She has quit speaking to me since.

The book refers to this as, *rules of formation* which is, "the unwritten rules that constrain and direct social discourse, ultimately controlling what is and is not spoken about and in what way," (pg. 286). That is just one example among many of how sometimes, in a pro-coal community, anyone who is perceived as anti-coal, whether they truly are or not, is abruptly shut down, turned off, and turned away.

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I discovered aggressive and biased political ideologies in relation to pro-coal sentiment when analyzing bumper stickers. *Two Things Coal and Barack Obama Have in Common: 1) There both black 2) AMERICANS SHOULD BURN BOTH!!*, *Hey Mr. President, Coal Pays My Bills (Welfare Doesn't)*, *The War On Coal It's An Obamanation*, *Coal Keeps America Strong* are several examples of politically driven bumper stickers. In relation, there were two images of coal miners set against an American flag backdrop. One is crawling on his hands and knees with the headlamp light on, with a banner on top and bottom that reads, *American Coal Miner The Last of A Dying Breed*, and the other is a cartoon miner set against an American flag backdrop while urinating on text that reads, *Obama*, and to the left it reads, *Save Coal*. The political aspect of the pro-coal bumper stickers is interesting, because the discursive patterns enforces both pro-coal and national pride hegemonic ideas, to the extent that, if one was to disagree, it would imply that they are both an anti-coaler and unpatriotic.

Politically, bumper stickers are a means of stating allegiance to one group or another. In Southwest Virginia, words such as *coal*, *electricity*, *America*, *pride*, *strong*, and, *miner* are examples of *ideographs*, “slogans or single words that are used freely and frequently in a society, are often mistaken for the technical language of a political philosophy, and influence each person’s reality,” (pg. 283). These ideographs are a way of stating which political group the driver associates with, because *coal*, *electricity*, *America*, *pride*, *strong*, and, *miner* are terms that are generally associated with pro-coal/Republican ideologies in Southwest Virginia. For example, if an individual was to state, “I am pro-coal,” in some circles, would be to inadvertently state that they were also anti-Obama, simply due, in part, to the reality created by hegemonic pro-coal ideologies.

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The vast majority of coal bumper stickers are regressive statements, because they perpetuate dominant, hegemonic ideologies that silences the voices of marginalized groups. For the most part, coal bumper stickers are based on a good guys (PC) vs. bad guys (AC) strategy that seems to send the message that -- when it comes to coal, either you are with us, or you ain't.

References

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