

Observations about “A Shocking Start for a Freshman,” by Dick West

“The times, they are a’ changing,” wailed a popular song of the late ‘60’s and early ‘70’s. That certainly was the context for the difficult summer months of 1970 when Dick West, a columnist for the *Dallas Morning News*, addressed editorially what he perceived to be a disturbing trend in higher education. What he wrote shocked many of his readers and does so still for many readers today. A closer examination, however, reveals what I find even more disturbing in how easy we can be persuaded by a master in the trade.

Dick West’s editorial, “A Shocking Start for a Freshman,” is one of the most carefully crafted pieces of persuasive rhetoric that I have ever found in its genre (type). It appeared in the *Dallas Morning News* on Sunday, August 10, 1970, just three days following the horrific murder of a state judge and bailiff in a California courtroom by condemned felons on trial for an additional murder of a fellow inmate in the Soledad maximum-security prison.

The murders outraged readers throughout the world and fed white racism and racial biases against African American activists and blacks in general when Angela Davis, an African-American activist, self-professed communist, and a law student at UCLA, was accused of providing the weapons and an escape van. While the two felons were shot dead as they murdered the judge outside the van on the street, Davis was in flight to New York where she was arrested as she stepped off a plane. She was returned in chains to California to stand trial for murder but was subsequently acquitted of all charges.

An even broader context for the editorial was the Viet Nam War. With five years still to go in the debilitating conflict, there seemed no end in sight, and the nightly news on each station began with a body count of GI’s killed in combat that day. College and university campuses across the nation were the seedbeds for often volatile reactions and demonstrations against the war and American foreign policy in Southeast Asia. As the war dragged on, thousands of young men fled to Canada to avoid the military draft. Others, retreating to communes with the “hippies” of the ‘60’s and the more politically wired “yippies” of the 70’s, rejected the conservative values that they claimed supported an inhumane war effort that was killing hundreds of thousands of North Vietnamese non-combatants and children. Publication in 1970 of Daniel Ellsberg’s *The Pentagon Papers* revealed that American troops had been engaged in a secret war in Laos for more than a decade. Earlier in the same year, when President Nixon announced his release of American troops to pursue North Vietnamese soldiers into Cambodia, the anti-war movement intensified its campaign, culminating in the National Guard shootings of student demonstrators at Kent State University in Ohio in April. There seemed no middle ground either racially, politically, or socially across the country, and anyone over 30 was not to be trusted. Traumatizing events of the past two years still fed the frustration: it had been only a little more than two years since the deaths of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy.

What seemed to foment further division between the generations was a liberal bias in higher education that seemed to many outside the universities a rejection of the whole panoply of western ideas and ideals. The canon of the great “classics” of Western thought were being trashed in deference to a radical literature of questionable worth. The apparent outrage of a Dallas mother complemented the conservative political posture of the *Dallas Morning News* and its editorial staff. So much, then, for the context.

In “A Shocking Start for a Freshman,” Dick West appeals to the conservative sympathies of his anticipated audience, a “white male, middle-class, conservative, and probably (higher) uneducated” readership. His thesis is that America’s colleges and universities have sold out the classics that are being flushed “with the ameba and scum to an uncertain destination in the sea,” a claim that he announces only toward the end of his editorial. Of course, the thesis, itself, was a carefully calculated lie, and any reader would know as well who had ever entered the traditionally required two courses of college sophomore survey literature courses where the literature of the world was spread out like a reading smorgasbord.

In “selling” his thesis in more than twenty paragraphs before it, Dick West orchestrates an appeal built upon additional lies: that 1) the purpose of higher education is to serve “the best interests of [the] country,” that 2) the “clenched fist” [“Black Power” logo] symboliz[ed] communism,” and that the content of “The Hidden Trend in Psychoanalysis” led to the murders in the San Rafael, California, courtroom three days before. Most important, citing only 9 out of 41 chapter titles, West implies that the textbook for freshman English, Phase Blue, was contributing to the rejection of traditional American values.

In fact, Dick West appeals to some of the darkest suspicions and fears that white people have about black people, and particularly about young black males. In the context of such fears in 1970, every white, conservative, middle-class father of a young white “fine young girl” knew exactly what would probably happen if his innocent, victimized young daughter were to go “out to the park [. . .] to dig on some music and to rap about what we can create.” In his monograph forty years before, “Negro Character as Seen by White Authors” (Journal of Negro Education, 1933), Dr. Sterling Brown had identified seven different racial stereotypes, including the “Brute Negro,” a young black male who is dominated by only one human instinct—lust (only temporarily satisfied by the sexual conquest of a white woman). “Fine young girl” would probably be raped, if not murdered.

Rhetorically, Dick West employs a rich variety of persuasive devices that he orchestrates with all the precision of a musical arranger. Nothing happens accidentally or whimsically anywhere in the editorial, and while there is nothing inherently ethical or unethical in the devices themselves, a number of them are often referenced in philosophy texts as classical logical fallacies: “begging sympathy,” “stereotyping,” and “guilt by association” (innuendo), to mention only three.

Dick West knew his audience only too well, and the reaction was predictable. The college received hundreds of telephone calls, most from irate men, some of them influential political figures who threatened to bring political action against the university and to intimidate its state funding. By 9:30 a.m., senior administration at the then “North Texas State University” had closed the college bookstore and ordered Phase Blue pulled from the shelves and its adoption by the English faculty rescinded. That decision triggered months of charges and countercharges within the university, claiming violations of academic freedom. For a number of faculty and university staff, the whole event was one of the blackest moments in their career at the University.

Many contemporary readers are still initially shocked by West’s claims, supported, of course, by his masterful use of more than a dozen rhetorical patterns. For that reason, it seems useful to continue its study. Hopefully, a careful analysis of West’s powerful piece will reveal its ethical shortcomings and remind us, as readers of the popular media, just how vulnerable we can be.

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