

From Wellesley to Yale, 1969-1979:  
A Textual Analysis of Hillary Rodham's Early Rhetoric

*"The truth is that sometimes it is hard even for me to recognize the Hillary Clinton that other people see. Like millions of women across our country, I find that my life consists of different, and sometimes paradoxical, parts. Often those parts are reduced to a snapshot of one moment in my day, when in fact I wake up every morning trying to figure out how to mesh my responsibilities to my family, my public duties and the friend who might be stopping by for dinner.*

*No doubt the same is true for many people, whether they are beauticians, bankers, teachers or truck drivers. It is just that the complexity of my role is played out in public."*

--Hillary Rodham Clinton, July 23, 1995

Examining the rhetoric of Hillary Rodham Clinton is something that can't be reduced to a single snapshot. There's the wife, mother, daughter, lawyer, former First Lady, former U.S. Senator, former presidential candidate and current Secretary of State which equally influence and impact her rhetoric. Despite her rigorous education, Clinton's journey (from a budding youth during the tumultuous 1960s to a polished politician with an Ivy League gloss) was an evolution in which she perfected her rhetorical skills. During her formative, educational years, from 1969-1979, she began to grasp the social change of a generation and became passionate about what she believed was the biggest inequity of society and would synopsise her entire career: children's rights. I will attempt to show how this passion was used rhetorically through her speeches and writings as well as provide how this education became the foundation which contributed to her very public and highly-profiled career.

In this paper, I will examine her college thesis and commencement address, her creation of a new journal at Yale Law School, her appearance before the League of Women voters, and two law articles she had published in 1973 and 1979 (a third article

from 1977 repeats much of the writing from the 1973 law article). Her college thesis and commencement address reflects her early struggle to develop a persuasive public voice. It is in this time period she struggled with her Methodist upbringing against the backdrop of the civil unrest of the 1960s and her grasp of the Democratic Party after being raised a Barry Goldwater Republican. In the second section of this study, her legal writing is examined to note her progress into that of an eloquent rhetorician.

### **Taking a Stand at Wellesley: Senior Year, 1968-1969**

Rodham headed to Wellesley, Massachusetts, in the fall of 1965 after graduating from Maine Township High School South in Park Ridge, Illinois—a suburb of Chicago. When applying for colleges, Rodham admitted she didn't know where to go. Her father suggested she not to go to “beatnik” colleges like Mississippi or Radcliffe. Two teachers suggested she apply to Smith and Wellesley. Rodham applied to both but ultimately chose Wellesley based on the photographs of the lake on campus which reminded her of Lake Winola, twenty miles northwest of Scranton, Pennsylvania, where Rodham's family spent each summer (Living History 25). It was a drastic change from a mostly conservative Republican upbringing. “I arrived at Wellesley carrying my father's political beliefs and my mother's dreams and left with the beginnings of my own” (27).

After three years of college, Rodham still held fast to her Republican values against the other women who disagreed with her. But as 1968—one of the most traumatic years in the civil rights struggle with the deaths of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr.—drew to a close, Rodham faced a major identity crisis. Rodham was beginning to write her thesis as she prepared to graduate and focus her attention on “the next step.” Rodham didn't know what to research in her thesis but ultimately decided on a fellow

Chicagoan. In her senior Honor's thesis for the political science department, Rodham chose to write about community organizer Saul Alinsky, which represented the reversal of a four-year identity struggle during one of the more tumultuous periods of American history. In the first of five chapters in her 90-page thesis, Rodham assesses the man she interviewed, known mostly as a "radical" and does an effective job of not painting him as the radical so many claimed him to be:

The epithets are not surprising as most people who deal with Alinsky need to categorize in order to handle him. It is far easier to cope with a man if, depending on ideological perspective, he is classified as a 'crackpot' than to grapple with the substantive issues he presents. (1)

Her thesis is devoted at length to his life in the autobiographical sense—where he grew up and the bulk of his early writings. She eventually recognizes how "much of what Alinsky professes does not sound 'radical.' His are the words used in our schools and churches, by our parents and their friends, by our peers. The difference is that Alinsky really believes in them and recognizes the necessity of changing the present structures of our lives in order to realize them" (6). Thus, she concludes at the end of her thesis that, if in fact what Alinsky fights for is true and his efforts become realized, "the result would be social revolution. . . . As such, he has been feared—just as Eugene Debs or Walt Whitman or Martin Luther King has been feared, because each embraced the most radical of political faiths—democracy" (73). Her conclusion is somewhat of a cliché and certainly leaves more substance desired, despite success in not painting Alinsky as a radical.

Rodham reflected back when she became First Lady, (possibly to create a more politically correct response to her critics as Carl Bernstein suggests), she said, "I basically

argued that [Alinsky] was right. Even at that early stage I was against all these people who came up with these big government programs that were more supportive of bureaucracies than actually helpful to people” (quoted in Bernstein 57-58).

As her time at Wellesley drew to a close, Rodham was unanimously chosen to speak at her Wellesley College graduation ceremony. If “protest is an attempt to forge an identity” (“1969 Commencement Address”), then what Rodham proposed to her graduating class on May 31, 1969, was a call for an identity rooted in social action. Standing in front of a crowd of 400, including the guest speaker, Republican Sen. Edward Brooke of Massachusetts, whom she campaigned for in 1966 as the president of the Wellesley Young Republicans, Rodham took aim at his speech after he “acknowledged that our ‘country has profound and pressing social problems on its agenda’ and that ‘it needs the best energies of all its citizens, especially its gifted young people to remedy these ills.’ He also argued against what he called ‘coercive protest’” she later recalled (Living History 40). After sitting through his speech and being respectful, she “took a deep breath” and blasted back:

Part of the problem with empathy, with professed goals, is that empathy doesn’t do us anything. We’ve had lots of empathy; we’ve had lots of sympathy, but we feel that for too long our leaders have used politics as the art of making what appears to be impossible, possible. ... [W]e have found, as all of us have found, that there was a gap between expectation and realities. But it wasn’t a discouraging gap and it didn’t turn us into cynical, bitter old women at the age of 18. It just inspired us to do something about that gap. (“1969 Commencement Address”)

The transcript of her speech was rather short, about four pages, and was a patchwork effort

attempting to convey her ideas to a mixed audience of peers and strangers. The main goal of her speech was to combat the feelings of a young generation battling four years of civil unrest. But onstage, Rodham is confronting her dilemma where she is supposed to be respectful to the guest speaker, but can't resist ad libbing parts of her speech to attack him. This is why at times her speech drifts around and there is a lack of cohesiveness. She jumps from her class's accomplishments to an analogy about trust, power and responsibility, and finally concludes with a poem written by a close friend summarizing how each student must "practice with all the skill of our being the art of making possible." She does, however, despite the general lack of cohesiveness, stress her defense of the "indispensable task of criticizing and constructive protest"—a direct attack at Sen. Brooke.

Rodham uses a method of rejecting conventional methods of persuasion, which at this point she probably isn't fully aware she's doing, in an attempt to compete with Sen. Brooke. Scott Baker notes how writers' self-reflection, much like what Rodham did on stage, and rejection of the original speech, influence the ways we communicate: "As we persuade one another that our theories and findings are true, we also reflect on the rhetorical strategies employed to create such truths" (Baker 234). As writers, Baker says, we may go one direction, but as we start to persuade others, our reflection may take us in a new direction altogether.

It certainly was not easy to compose her speech, which she was still laboring over the night before. She recalled a moment when one of her classmates approached her and confessed she was glad she wasn't in Rodham's shoes. Rodham remembered how her friend said "she wouldn't want to be me for anything in the world. She wouldn't want to

live today and look ahead to what it is she sees because she's afraid. Fear is always with us but we just don't have time for it. Not now" ("1969 Commencement Address").

Despite fear, she recalled later in her autobiography, *Living History*, how "the senator seemed out of touch with his audience: four hundred smart, aware, questioning young women. His words were aimed at a different Wellesley, one that predated the upheavals of the 1960s" (40). She recognized how it may not have been the most cohesive speech ever given, "but it struck a chord with my class, which gave me an enthusiastic standing ovation, partly, I believe because my efforts to make sense of our time and place—played out on a stage in front of two thousand spectators—reflected the countless conversations, questions, doubts and hopes each of us brought to that moment, not just as Wellesley graduates, but also as women and Americans whose lives would exemplify the changes and choices facing our generation at the end of the twentieth century" (41-42). She took this moment as motivation for her entrance into law school.

### **The Glossing Begins: Legal Rhetoric at Yale**

In the fall of 1969, Rodham entered Yale Law School which helped to focus her rhetorical style into a more formal, legal fashion. She and some friends began a new, alternative law journal called, *The Yale Review of Law and Social Action*, in the spring of 1970. Rodham was listed as one of the board members who wrote in the first issue, along with the other editors:

This, the first issue of *Law and Social Action*, begins our exploration of areas beyond the limits of traditional legal concerns. For too long, legal issues have been defined and discussed in terms of academic doctrine rather than strategies for social change. *Law and Social Action* is an attempt to go beyond the narrowness of

such an approach, to present forms of legal scholarship and journalism which focus on programmatic solutions to social problems. (quoted in Bernstein 65-66)

Rodham is clearly more comfortable in this style (being able to carefully choose her words) than giving a speech (having to read her notes and engage the audience as well as be spontaneous). Her talent is making comparisons with what *has been* done versus what *should be* done. Carl Bernstein notes the language in the introduction picked up where her commencement address left off, even though at times her “oratory could still slip precipitously into vague and perplexing generalities if the subject required conceptual analysis”:

This seemed especially true in her appearance before the League of Women Voters, when she assumed the mantle of generational spokesperson. If she was speaking about a clearly defined subject, her thoughts would be well organized, finely articulated, and delivered in almost perfect outline form. But before the league audience she again lapsed into sweeping abstractions—though it was not hard to understand what she was getting at. . . . “Our social indictment has broadened. Where once we exposed the quality of life in the world of the South and of the ghettos, now we condemn the quality of work in factories and corporations. Where once we assaulted the exploitation of man, now we decry the destruction of nature as well [Rodham told the group].” (70)

This appearance in front of the League of Women Voters was around the time she began her law journal, and although her written rhetoric was sharpening, her speaking was still in disarray. Rodham’s use of phrases like “the exploitation of man” and “decry the destruction of nature as well” are part of her vague rhetorical repertoire she relies on when

she has to speak in front of groups. But her writing about how her journal intends to step outside of standard academic doctrine into strategies for social change is clear and effective. It's interesting to note the differences between the two methods of delivery.

After spending an extra year in law school, Rodham graduated in 1973, joined the Children's Defense Fund in Washington and published an article in the *Harvard Educational Review* that culminated her study of children's rights, which Rodham believed was "a slogan in search of a definition" ("Children Under the Law" 487).

Rodham began a successful, probing analysis with cleaner prose in her search for such a definition: "... the dividing point at twenty-one or eighteen years is artificial and simplistic; it obscures the dramatic differences among children of different ages and the striking similarities between older children and adults. The capacities and the needs of a child of six months differ substantially from those of a child of six or sixteen years" (489). Her academic work about children's rights was characterized by historian Garry Wills as "one of the more important scholar-activists of the last two decades" (quoted in Bernstein 76).

Rodham clearly argues in a straightforward manner how the contradictions between America and its goal of achieving a familial, child-centered society and how society falls far short in achieving this:

Unfortunately, the state has not proved an adequate substitute parent in many of the cases where intrusion has resulted in the removal of a child from his home (491). ... Age may be a valid criterion for determining the distribution of legal benefits and burdens, but before it is used its application should be subjected to a test of rationality. (507)



Rodham takes responsibility for what she's arguing, and clearly, her prose is cleaner and more readable, despite the fact she is a bit wonkish on the policy details. Her tool of carefully explaining the situation and where it needs to go from there shows her patience in assessing a situation. She also paints analogies and recalls painful memories when she talks about her time at the Yale-New Haven Hospital, where she spent an extra year in law school assessing the situation of child abuse and neglect:

I saw children whose parents beat and burned them; who left them alone for days in squalid apartments; who failed and refused to seek necessary medical care. The sad truth, I learned, was that certain parents abdicated their rights as parents, and someone—preferably another family member, but ultimately the state—had to step in to give a child the chance for a permanent and loving home. (Living History 50)

Rodham is using pathos as a way to advance her fight for children's rights. She is no longer relying solely on logos. Tugging at the heart strings of the audience works to her advantage. Having identified that soft spot in the heart of her readers opens the door for more support from those who may have originally been uninterested in the topic. Rodham is using another tool Leslie Miller describes as debunking the family myth, "calling not for analysis but for remedial action." Miller notes how most textbooks on family sociology show "family scholars are increasingly aware that the homage paid to the domestic ideal is unjustified when family life 'itself' ... comes under scrutiny" (266). Rodham continues this in her conclusion of the article, where she argues how state intervention should only be used as a last resort and for medically justifiable reasons. Just because a parent may do something that the community objects, she argues, as long as the child isn't harmed in a way that requires medical attention, the child shouldn't be removed by the state. On one

hand this seems like a rational approach by limiting the role of the state or federal government in the home (in order to appeal to conservative critics), but it almost feels like a lack of protection for children who may, for example, be mentally abused. Rodham doesn't clarify what she deems is "medically justifiable." Rodham knows the importance of juxtaposing the different conditions and painting them against a backdrop of squalid conditions, despite the fact she wants a limited use of state intervention.

Finally, in 1979, she published, "Children's Rights: A Legal Perspective." Rodham discovers the decreasing standard for children and their place within the legal system. Her way of carefully examining each aspect of what needs to be accomplished (in order to accomplish the overall goal) proves coherent and consistent with her new adapted rhetorical style. Rodham breaks down the piece into four broad categories that she admits "cannot possibly cover all of the ramifications for children's rights or any particular individual child's rights ... but we can raise questions and look at the subissues that each relationship suggests" (22).

Rodham's attention to policy detail and use of analogies prove her point which otherwise may fall flat on those who aren't familiar with legal jargon. When she describes how the law has trouble defining at what age a child becomes an adult competent to stand trial and participate in his or her own defense, Rodham paints a historical picture:

Children in the Middle Ages became adults at the age of seven, at which time a boy was apprenticed to a tradesman, or otherwise sent out to find his fortune, and a girl was trained for future domestic responsibilities. ... During the nineteenth century in this country, the idea of compulsory education provided an opportunity for children to be trained, and took them out of an increasingly smaller work force,

so that they would not compete with adults. ... Because children now remain in the family for longer periods ... the opportunities for intrafamily disputes have increased dramatically. [Thus] the fears that many people have about the formulation of a family policy or a law of children's rights arise from their concern about increasing government control over intrafamily disputes. (24-25)

This use of painting a backdrop for her readers is best so they won't get lost in her articulate details. Putting it in a historical context makes it relatable to the reader, thus establishing a trust between Rodham and her audience. According to Richard Harvey Brown:

The sequential ordering of a past, a present, and a future enables the structuring of perceptual experience, the organization of memory, and the constructions of the events, identities, and lives that they express. ... This rhetorically constructed narrative unity provides models of identity for people in particular symbolic settings or lifeworlds. (191)

Another question she raises, and takes great pains to point out an aspect of the situation which overwhelmingly gets overlooked, is how certain types of state intervention is critical, but when those in the care of the state are being neglected, who is watching the state? "Will the staff be adequate to the task of serving as substitute parents? Who will hold the institution and staff accountable" (27)? She points out how lawsuits were filed in situations where children were treated unfairly under state supervision. "In some cases, the rights that were violated were similar to rights adults might claim in analogous situations, such as in training schools where children were subjected to cruel and unusual punishment or in mental institutions where children were deprived of due process and protection" (27).

In her conclusion Rodham recalls her past experiences in this area are analogous to other social scientists in the field. “Interested adults should be alerted to the work that must be done to inform the public and decision makers about children’s needs, interests, rights, and responsibilities and to secure positive action” (35).

She recognizes the road ahead toward comprehensive children’s rights is tough, and finishes her argument with one answer: “The first thing to be done is to reverse the presumption of incompetency and instead assume all individuals are competent until proven otherwise. ... All procedural rights should be extended to children. They are entitled to legal representation in any proceeding in which their interests are at stake” (33-34). Rodham’s summary clearly encompasses her argument in a few simple sentences leaving the reader passionate to continue her work.

### **Conclusion: From Wellesley to Yale: 10 Years Later**

Rodham’s progression within 10 years is noteworthy. Struggling with her inherited Republican upbringing from her father and the process of self-discovery at a new place with a new ideology is one of the contributing factors to her passion for social service. Being alone for the first time gave her the focus to expand her mind from “That’s a tool of the Eastern Establishment!” (when discussing *The New York Times*) to writing a thesis about Saul Alinsky. Instead of being afraid to challenge conventional roles for women, Rodham decided to take a big step and create her own destiny. Using speeches and articles, she raised awareness for these issues. Every time she gave a speech and wrote an article, her rhetoric sharpened because she focused what she wanted to say based on what she experienced during these 10 years.

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