

# Oprah Winfrey at the Golden Globes: Using Epideictic Rhetoric to Celebrate an Alternative Vision for America

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Oprah Winfrey currently occupies the role of one of the most influential women and effective African American philanthropists in history. Winfrey's acceptance of the Cecil B. DeMille award at the 2018 Golden Globes provided her with a kairotic moment to address and amplify what has come to be known as the #MeToo movement, a global movement to end sexual harassment and assault. This paper analyzes Winfrey's epideictic rhetoric and the alternative vision for America she creates during a time of political polarization. Beginning with an examination of the role of Winfrey's situated and invented ethos in this example of epideictic rhetoric, the paper then examines Winfrey's use of rhetorical figures in constructing her message of feminist empowerment and equity. Ultimately, the paper concludes that Winfrey's effectiveness stems from the power of her humility to address the need felt by millions across the globe for an alternative, inclusive, just America.

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On January 7, 2018, Oprah Winfrey walked on stage at the Golden Globe Awards ceremony to deliver a speech that would not merely thank the academy, but also inspire every member of her audience to think more deeply and critically about some of the most important societal issues of this generation. The Hollywood Foreign Press Association's Golden Globe Awards has recognized excellent film and television for 75 years, annually bestowing awards and honoring the industry's best works. Although there are more than 25 different categories that range from "Best Screenplay" to "Best Actress in a Motion Picture Made for Television," one of the most unique awards remains the "Cecil B. DeMille Award for a Lifetime Achievement in Motion

Pictures." The Hollywood Foreign Press Association presents this award for those who have made outstanding contributions to the world of entertainment. From honoring Walt Disney in 1953, to recognizing Meryl Streep in 2017, the Cecil B. DeMille consistently celebrates individuals who have helped change and shape society (Hollywood Foreign Press Association).

Mr. Cecil Blout DeMille was an American filmmaker and often referred to as a founding father of cinema, producing 70 silent and sound feature films. The Hollywood Foreign Press Association decided to name the award after Mr. DeMille because of his international recognition and respected name. In 1952, Mr. DeMille received the first eponymous award

at the Golden Globes for his Academy Award Best Picture film, *The Greatest Show on Earth*.

Since 1952, the Cecil B. DeMille award has been presented annually to a total of 50 men and 14 women (Hollywood Foreign Press Association), celebrating the contributions of individuals in the entertainment industry. The award is primarily presented to well-known and distinguished actors and actresses rather than television stars (with the exception of Lucille Ball), further contributing to the excitement of honoring its first African American woman.

In 2018, the Golden Globe Awards chose to recognize a woman well-known across America for her inspiring talk show that has captivated millions: Oprah Winfrey. With her effective use of both situated and invented ethos embedded in her powerful rhetorical choices, Winfrey managed to create an alternative vision for America. As Winfrey stood on stage, she constructed a vision characterized by empowerment and inclusivity, opposed to the one built on injustice and corruption. This paper begins by exploring the contextual background of Winfrey's speech to situate itself in the time period in which it was given. It delves into both the situated and invented ethos which Winfrey created for herself, closely examining the components of effective ethos. The paper concludes with an analysis of Winfrey's stylistic rhetorical choices and shows how her use of epideictic rhetoric enabled her to reach women around the world, empowering them to find their voice and, ultimately, speak their truth.

### **The Context of Winfrey's Speech**

In 2006, activist Tarana Burke coined the phrase "MeToo" in an attempt to encourage women to show solidarity with one another,

especially with respect to sexual assault. In 2017, the phrase gained a hashtag and went viral on several social media platforms. The spark came from Alyssa Milano, an American actor and activist, who used it in support of a friend's sexual assault allegations against American film producer, Harvey Weinstein (Borge). Milano posted a tweet suggesting that if the social cause were re-energized, she hoped people would gain a better sense of the magnitude of the issue (@Alyssa\_Milano). Since then, the #MeToo movement has become a worldwide phenomenon, searched for on Google in 196 countries in 2017 (Langone). Because of the attention drawn back to the movement, people around the world, both men and women, recognized that this once-fledgling movement's time had come. *Time* magazine named "The Silence Breakers" as the 2017 Person of the Year, honoring not one individual, but all of the women involved, including Milano.

On January 1, 2018, the National Women's Law Center announced the creation of the Time's Up movement, a legal defense fund that would raise money for both men and women to fight against sexual assault. The movement was founded on the premise that every person had the right to earn a living, to take care of themselves and their families, without the impediments of harassment and sexual assault, especially in the workforce (Langone). At the 2018 Golden Globe Awards, almost all of the women in the audience wore black or clipped a "Time's Up" pin to their clothing to show support for the movement. Oprah Winfrey received the Cecil B. DeMille Award and spoke about the growing need for women to emerge from the shadows and share their stories, their truths. Her speech spurred another hashtag, #OprahforPresident, not because she necessarily exhibits presidential

ambitions, but rather because of the powerful vision for America she created in her nine and a half minute speech.

In addition to her established situated ethos, Winfrey used rhetorical devices such as enargia, anaphora, polysyndeton, and *kairos* to create invented ethos that allowed her to deliver a compelling, memorable speech that sent an extremely influential message: the time is up for ignoring problems, and the time has come to take a stand.

### **Situated Ethos and Epideictic Rhetoric**

Winfrey has comfortably situated herself in the homes of millions over the past 30 years. *The Oprah Winfrey Show* remains the highest-rated daytime talk show and a platform in which people of all ages, genders, and ethnicities can find common ground (History). Over the years, Winfrey has successfully developed a maternal persona for people across the United States due to her daytime show that serves as an educational platform, offering advice and giving others a voice. Because she projects this maternal persona rather than that of an untouchable celebrity, her audience at the Golden Globe Awards likely found it easier to trust and empathize with her. It is exceptionally important for speakers to develop ethos to gain the trust and respect of their audience, and Winfrey's situated ethos allowed her to effectively establish herself as a credible source and speaker.

Situated ethos specifically refers to the esteem in which the person is held and how he or she establishes him or herself within a community. Crowley and Hawhee state that "Because rhetoric is embedded in social relations, the relative social standing of participants in a rhetorical situation can

affect a rhetor's persuasiveness" (162). Rhetors, such as Winfrey, use their situated power to influence the ideology of participants in a rhetorical situation. In this way, Winfrey's situated ethos also helps contribute to her speech's success, allowing her to divulge relevant ideas crucial to her speech. Her situated ethos is magnified largely through the self-effacing way in which she speaks minimally about her own career, instead focusing on the success of those around her. As she looks across the room at her audience, she asserts that "each of us in this room is celebrated because of the stories that we tell, and this year we became that story." Winfrey chooses to take the spotlight off of herself and shine it on every individual in the room—and across America—who has helped by sharing their story. Dr. Mary E. Stuckey, Professor of Communication at Pennsylvania State University and an author of many books focusing on rhetoric used in politics, explains that "one of the most pronounced aspects of Winfrey's speech was her tone of 'gracious humility'" (Ettachfini). Winfrey's humility allows viewers to see her less as a celebrity and more relatable, ultimately making it easier for them to subscribe to the message of her speech. Before Winfrey steps on stage to begin her speech, it is evident she has already won her audience's respect, allowing her to focus her efforts on the deep, more personal cause. Not only does Winfrey exemplify strong, situated ethos; more importantly, according to Dr. Stuckey, she chooses to use it to "praise the common person." Although Winfrey is viewed as someone with great wisdom, knowledge and poise, her focus, in this speech and in her myriad other public appearances, is not on being perceived this way but rather on inclusivity and celebrating community values. With this approach,

Winfrey makes use of epideictic rhetoric as a means of strengthening her ethos.

Aristotle defines epideictic rhetoric through his classifications of oratory for persuasive speech. As Jonathan Barnes explains in his introduction to Aristotle's rhetoric:

Aristotle's tripartite division of kinds of oratory provides a continually useful system for classifying discourse. Basically, Aristotle distinguished three types of persuasive speech—forensic, deliberative, and epideictic—according to purpose, audience, situation, and the time domain concerned.... And epideictic oratory concerns a current, here-and-now judgment over whether something deserves praise or blame; funerals and awards ceremonies are the natural settings for epideictic discourse *that ultimately aims at solidifying the values of its audience*. (Aristotle 2159, 2161, emphasis added)

Aristotle describes how epideictic rhetoric seeks to emphasize a point that is relevant to the time in which the rhetor is speaking.

Epideictic rhetoric is further explained as a means of establishing ethos by Dale Sullivan, who describes the rhetor's role, theorizing the importance of ethos for epideictic rhetoric. He describes how "[although] the rhetor is considered someone extraordinary, someone uncommonly gifted with insight and wisdom, he or she is considered a common member of society, a spokesperson who embodies commonly held values" (128). He emphasizes his point by describing how epideictic rhetoric can be defined as the experience of the members of the audience who can relate and empathize with the rhetor's message or speech. The audience

finds that they are "caught in a celebration of their vision of reality" (128).

Through Sullivan's view, it becomes apparent that Winfrey's speech largely focuses on reaffirming the value of inclusivity held by many Americans. This reaffirmation is particularly powerful when set against the backdrop of a recent presidential campaign that many Americans perceived as a rejection of values such as inclusivity, diversity, and gender equality. Winfrey's speech does not appeal to logos, backed with statistics and data. Rather, it presents aspects and issues relevant in today's culture through the lens of a woman who has persevered to have her voice heard. Winfrey exemplifies Aristotle's description of epideictic rhetoric as she "[solidifies] the values of [her] audience" throughout her speech. By appealing to ethos, rather than logos, she aligns herself with each individual in the audience, drawing on her own personal experiences and then calling for immediate action. Winfrey presents herself as a woman for women, a friend and supporter who will stand by her truth and encourage others to speak theirs.

### **Enargia: The Art of Storytelling**

While Winfrey's larger message celebrates an inclusive vision of America, this message is constructed through a series of rhetorical techniques. Effective storytelling proves to be one of the most powerful rhetorical techniques Winfrey chooses to use, significantly contributing to her invented ethos, or the ethos she obtains from linguistically ingratiating herself with the audience (Hall). Winfrey opens her speech with a descriptive flashback to 1964. She is "sitting on linoleum floor of [her] mother's house in Milwaukee watching Anne Bancroft present the Oscar for best actor at the 36th

Academy Awards” and Sidney Poitier, “the most elegant man [she] had ever seen,” walk on stage to receive it. With a descriptive personal reflection that Winfrey presents to her audience, she immediately elevates herself by effectively pulling her audience back to a shared memory, as many in the audience quickly remember the momentous occasion. This is a beautiful example of the way Winfrey uses *enargia*, a powerful rhetorical technique that aims to create a vivid, lively description (Burton). The shared memory she discusses connects her with her primary audience. She reaches them on a personal level and activates their emotions as they recall their experience or imagine the moment, thereby building her *ethos*.

Winfrey goes on to express her admiration for Sidney Poitier, the first African American man to receive this award, and the effect this moment continues to have on her. She expresses how she “tried many, many times to explain what a moment like that means to a little girl, a kid watching from the cheap seats as [her] mom came through the door bone tired from cleaning other people’s houses.” Winfrey uses the art of storytelling to paint her experience in vivid detail, creating a strong visual for the audience, as well as a strong sense of identification from audience members who share her working-class roots or who have experienced a parent’s hard labors for them. She effectively cuts across races, cultures, and even classes, bringing together women who deserve to share the same celebration. She extends past her anecdote to explain how she is “proud and inspired by all the women who have felt strong enough and empowered enough to speak up and share their personal stories.” As Winfrey continues to speak, it becomes clear that she does not

view the Cecil B. DeMille award as one bestowed upon her as an individual, but rather, one bestowed upon every woman who can empathize with her words. For Winfrey, the award is not one that celebrates herself but rather celebrates every woman in the room and across America who has “shared [her] personal story.” By utilizing powerful rhetoric and storytelling that highlights inclusivity of all the women in the room and across America, Winfrey establishes invented *ethos*, allowing her to connect with the audience and foster a relationship built on empathy and trust.

### **Winfrey’s Stylistic Rhetoric**

To build effectively on her use of *enargia*, Winfrey uses a range of rhetorical devices that emphasizes some of her strongest points and leaves a memorable impact on her audience. For example, she brings to light the idea that the award she received is not just one that affects the entertainment industry but rather “one that transcends any culture, geography, race, religion, or workplace.” By widening the scope of the impact of the award and its meaning, Winfrey elevates herself as a woman passionate about other women and their role in society, strongly asserting both situated and invented *ethos*. Additionally, this section of her speech acknowledges the diversity of women’s experiences and embraces the idea of intersectionality. Feminism has been criticized for being overly focused on the experiences of white women. Winfrey models the type of inclusivity many feminists look to embrace to create a vibrant, sustainable movement. Embedded in this elevation is the subtle yet impactful use of both anaphora and polysyndeton as rhetorical strategies for emphasizing her message

about women’s leadership and the need to take a stand, not for what is easy, but for what is right.

### ***Anaphora: The Power of Repetition***

Winfrey emphasizes the need for women’s leadership and recognition through her use of anaphora, describing how the women who have received this award with her are the ones whose names we’ll never know. She says:

They’re the domestic workers and farm workers.

They are working in factories and they work in restaurants, and

they’re in academia, engineering, medicine, and science.

They’re part of the world of tech and politics and business.

They’re our athletes in the Olympics and they’re our soldiers in the military.

Winfrey effectively highlights women’s diverse career paths and achievements in order to lift the veil of invisibility that often shields others from recognizing such achievements. Her repetition of “they’re” as she speaks about the millions of women whose work may never have been noticed or recognized, carefully hands the power back to them through the focus it creates and emphasizes. Many pivotal speeches throughout history utilize anaphora, the repetition of words and phrases at the beginning of successive clauses as a rhetorical technique (Burton). In Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, the use of anaphora is prevalent and serves as a rhetorical device that allows him to emphasize the most important aspects of his speech. Throughout his speech, “I have a dream” is repeated

eight times as he discusses freedom and justice for the African American community. The emphasis of this repetition throughout makes the phrase, and by extension King’s speech more memorable (Dlugan). Similarly, Winfrey’s use of anaphora throughout her speech allows her to strongly emphasize her point that women’s leadership is essential to the backbone of America, and the ability to share each and every woman’s story is important for societal acceptance.

### ***Polysyndeton: The Power of Emphasis***

Another important rhetorical device Winfrey uses is polysyndeton, or the emphasis of conjunctions such as “and,” “or,” “for” and “but,” which serve to add power to other words (Zimmer). When Winfrey recognizes the press’s desire to uncover the truth and ensure that people refrain from turning a blind eye to injustice such as the “tyrants and victims, and secrets, and lies,” she uses polysyndeton. This powerful rhetorical device allows her to slow down the pace of her sentence, strictly highlighting the list of societal corruptions she asserts can no longer be ignored. Her rhetorical implementation conjures the feeling that the ideas are building up, ultimately contributing to the climax of her speech. Additionally, her use of polysyndeton contributes to the overall cadence and rhythm of the speech. With her voice fluctuating and building emphasis with each following word, she effectively captivates her audience while simultaneously communicating the impactful message: As a society, we collectively can no longer refrain from participating and taking action to combat the injustice we see. Winfrey’s rhetorical devices play a crucial role in creating a compelling speech and contributing to clearly emphasizing her

overarching message. Her use of rhetorical devices is especially powerful because she does not merely pepper in a few stylistic devices but rather builds her speech *through* her style.

### ***Kairos*: A Sense of Time, Place, and Action**

Classic rhetors chased *kairos*: they trained for it. In ancient Greek, the term *kairos* means “a sense of time” (Harker 81). In essence, *kairos* represents the most opportune time for a decision or action. Winfrey’s thoughtful timing is one of the main reasons her speech conveys such power. Rhetorician Sheri Helsley writes that depth of *kairos* is “far richer and more complex than ‘saying the right thing at the right time’” (qtd. in Harker 78). Similarly, Winfrey’s speech focused on relevant societal issues such as sexual assault, inclusivity, and African American women’s leadership. At the time of her speech, a number of sexual assault allegations had come to light with a corresponding push for both men and women to take a stand against them. In the midst of a controversial presidency, Winfrey effectively united women in Hollywood and asserted herself with the sisterhood of women who have suffered and spoken out against harassment across a number of industries. Most importantly, she drew on the current time period of much political polarization to address the issues that have affected women across the globe, ultimately giving them a voice. In her speech, Winfrey eloquently spoke to the #MeToo movement, a campaign dedicated to demonstrating the prevalence of sexual assault and harassment, especially for women in the workforce, and the importance of ending it (Stillman). She also effectively tied in the growing need for women’s leadership and public speaking in

hope that “nobody ever has to say ‘Me Too’ again.” Her references to Rosa Parks and Recy Taylor reminded her audience that African American women were part, and have always been part, of this protest (Davis). The right timing of appropriate material shared directly relates to the rhetorical importance of time, place, and audience, allowing for reinforced credibility and situated ethos of the speaker. In her speech, Winfrey asks all of the women in the room to maintain hope for a “brighter morning,” inviting them to speak their truth, even if they are unable to see the impact of doing so. Both Winfrey’s primary and secondary audience responded positively to her speech and its message, as well as the personal reflections she shared.

The power of speaking the “right” words and presenting the more relevant ideas at the most opportune time is something that is still privileged, especially in contemporary presidential debates (McGarrity). Across the country, millions of viewers watched in awe, absorbing Winfrey’s speech and finding it resonated with them in some way. Winfrey was not only speaking to the women in that room or the young girls sitting in front of the television screen that evening—her inclusivity stretched further. Winfrey chose to recognize both women and the “pretty phenomenal men” who choose to stand for change and a call to action. This recognition of the men involved in the movement consequently enabled Winfrey to build her ethos as a gender-inclusive rhetorician, furthering her ability to relate to her audience. The most effective use of *kairos* appeared at the end as she lifted the microphone and extended her hands, saying “When that new day finally dawns, it will be because of a lot of magnificent women ... and some pretty

phenomenal men, fighting hard to make sure they become the leaders who take us to the time when nobody ever has to say ‘Me Too’ again” (qtd. in Davis). Winfrey seized the moment, tying in the recent events involving sexual assault, ultimately retiring the “Me Too” hashtag and spurring a new one: “Times Up,” to recognize the need for stronger women’s empowerment and support.

## Conclusion

To fully appreciate the impact of Winfrey’s speech, it is imperative to consider the audience for whom it was intended. Although Winfrey shared her speech with a room filled with elite and distinguished members of Hollywood, her message was not mostly directed toward these individuals but rather to the millions watching at home across the globe. Because of the relevance of her speech in a time of much political polarization, increasing tension, and movements such as #MeToo taking root across the country and around the world, her speech serves as a public artifact available for public commentary. Although the majority of the feedback she received was positive about her speech and supported its message, it also acknowledged some of the speech’s limitations.

Winfrey is recognized as working incredibly hard not only to create a television talk show that sheds light on taboo topics and offer guidance, but also to distinguish herself as a proactive woman seeking to create change in communities that need it most. However, despite her ability to create such humble ethos as she emerged from a working class background and lower socioeconomic status, her success inevitably caused her to drift from this environment into the rarified circles of the elite. While her speech remains inspiring, especially for young girls watching

from their television screens at home, just as she once did, it is important to recognize that few young girls will have a story of success like Winfrey’s. For some, her speech could be interpreted as disingenuous and invented because the narrative she describes is no longer hers. Her success is a story of much work and dedication, but like all success, it was also enabled by a bit of luck.

Although this critique does sharpen the lens for the relevancy and application of the message of her speech, for most viewers it does not take away the meaning or truth of her story. Rather, it resonates with the experiences of women across the globe. In fact, Winfrey’s ability to continue to effectively empathize with her audience, despite being now far removed from the life she once lived, only further builds and contributes to her humility and influence. Although her wealth, power and prestige undoubtedly enabled her to avoid instances of sexual harassment and violence, she used her voice to speak for others, leveraging the spotlight as a means of advocating for women who do not share the same fortune she does.

When Oprah Winfrey received the Cecil B. DeMille award at the 2018 Golden Globe Awards ceremony, she brought tremendous power to the stage. Not only did she strike an effective balance between raw emotion and composed rhetoric; more importantly, she delivered an influential message focusing on women’s leadership and growing women’s involvement in public speaking. By strengthening both her situated and invented ethos through various rhetorical techniques, she effectively reached women and men across the globe. With epideictic rhetoric, the values of the community are supported and celebrated, helping build and rebuild that community.

While seemingly just a simple ceremonial moment, Winfrey's epideictic rhetoric during her Golden Globes speech achieved something meaningful and powerful, reinforcing a view of the American community and fulfilling the need for a vision of America felt by millions of people across the country and world. With this powerfully woven speech, Oprah Winfrey managed to leave millions of people captivated and inspired, ready to find their own voice and create meaningful action toward fulfilling the destiny upon which the American experiment began.

### Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge and thank Dr. Gwendolynne Reid, who provided me with the opportunity to challenge myself to conduct this research. Her invaluable revisions, guidance, and mentorship were instrumental in bringing this piece to print as well as to my growth as a writer. I would also like to thank my parents, Ron and Rié Collett, for their endless encouragement, support, and inspiration.

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