Susan Griffin: The Refuge of Ignorance

In “Our Secret” by Susan Griffin, the author addresses the multi-faceted aspects of human suffering and analyzes the reasons why people inflict pain on others. Griffin supports her ideas about human suffering and why it occurs through the use of concepts and ideas such as time, space, interconnected lives, personal responsibility, and disassociation. She specifically focuses her analysis mainly on the actions of the notorious Nazi leader, Heinrich Himmler, including small details about other Nazi leaders and Holocaust survivors. She ponders about various questions related to human suffering such as what “is in the torturer’s heart?” (322). In analyzing human suffering, Griffin concludes that humans find various ways to “stand outside” themselves and bask in ignorance in order to not take personal responsibility for any harm they have caused another human being (325). She concludes that for many people, “blindness becomes a kind of refuge” and provides a safe space for people to disown responsibility for the result of their actions (325). Furthermore, Griffin also scrutinizes German child-rearing practices, that aimed to “crush the will” of the child, “establish dominance…” and “suppress everything in the child” (303). From these ideas of child-rearing, Griffin suggests that these ideas give another perspective as to why and how the Holocaust occurred and that it “adds a certain dimension” to her notions surrounding the Holocaust (306). Griffin suggests that German childrearing practices as well as German cultural ideas played a major role in the rise of the Nazi party and the creation of the Holocaust. Griffin continues the majority of the essay analyzing Heinrich Himmler’s life from childhood up to adulthood and analyzing how his childhood shaped him to become the person that he was during the Holocaust. Griffin emphasizes the idea of control having a big influence on German culture by explaining fact that Himmler was always under the control of his father and was order to “only carry out his father’s plans for him” (309). Griffin concludes that
this control provided Himmler with a sense of certainty and purpose, and that once that was over, he was left with a “void” to fill (312). This “void,” Griffin argues, was filled by the ideas of racial superiority and a secret police force, which helped fuel his love for Hitler as well as his hatred for Jews (314). From this, Griffin also introduces how German culture influenced the growth of such problematic ideals by concluding that people who have learned as children to “become strangers to themselves” are more adept to dissociating themselves from their actions or their ideals (325). Moreover, she emphasizes the fact that although one may attempt to disassociate themselves from their actions, all lives are interconnected and are affected by the actions of others.

Throughout the opening pages of the piece, Griffin utilizes unique paragraph form and structure in order to appeal to the reader through the use of ethos. In the first paragraph of the text, it states, “The nucleus of the cell derives its name from the Latin nux, meaning nut. Like the stone in a cherry, it is found in the center of the cell, and like this stone, keeps its precious kernel in a shell” (299). Throughout this description of the nucleus, Griffin utilizes various different rhetorical strategies to persuade the reader. First, the author is appealing to the ethics of the reader by establishing a form of credibility. Griffin includes various italicized portions about the nucleus throughout her essay, and these pieces of information suggest to the reader that the author may have some form of background knowledge about human development, biology, or the nature of the cell, and as science is a very concrete form of knowledge, this can be a very effective way of establishing credibility to the reader. However, these portions about the nucleus also often seem to be randomly dispersed throughout the piece, and may cause a sense of confusion in the reader as he or she attempts to grasp the metaphorical, symbolic, or literal
meaning of the text. In this way, the italicized portions could also appeal to the reader’s emotions by enabling them to search for a deeper meaning to the piece.

Furthermore, the genre of the piece also has an effect on the author’s style and use of evidence in order to persuade, and also helps to appeal to the reader’s emotions. The essay centers mainly around the events before and during the Holocaust and the infamous Nazi leader Heinrich Himmler. Throughout the piece, the author provides commentary about missiles while also explaining various aspects of the development of missiles throughout history. Sometimes this commentary seems to be relevant to the piece, such as in the middle portion of the text, when the author states, “His life is moving now. Yet in this motion one has the feeling not of a flow, as in the flow of water in a cell…but of an engine, a locomotive moving at high speed, or even a missile, traveling above the ground” (316). In this portion of the text, the author provides clarity to the italicized portions about both the missiles and the cells by suggesting that they could be interpreted as metaphors for the life of Heinrich Himmler. A missile flies at fast speeds across the earth, but it eventually must come to an end, and explode. By utilizing the missile as a metaphor for Heinrich Himmler’s life, the author seems to suggest that like a missile, although his life is moving very fast at this moment, that will soon come to end and like a missile, it will “blow up.” This is significant because in using these metaphors, Griffin forces the reader to see the significance of the italicized portions of the text through her own perspective, which could also be a way of appealing to the emotions of the reader.

In accordance with the idea of Himmler’s life as a missile, Griffin continues to provide the reader with more background information about the missile, but this time, on page 317 it is in paragraph form. Throughout this paragraph, rather than utilize more concrete and scientific facts about the missile which could have helped to establish credibility, the author utilizes more
conceptual ideas about the missile, implementing language that suggest that the author is once again utilizing the missile as a metaphor, and is trying to convey a certain idea. It appears as though the author chose these facts about the missile because they relate to Heinrich and his life, and aid in appealing to the emotions of the reader. Griffin states, “The missile may give the illusion of liberation from the earth, or even abandon…But the missile has in a sense been forced away from its own presence; the wisdom that is part of its own weight has been transgressed…careening in a space devoid of memory, always on the verge of falling…gripped by an anxiety…” This entire paragraph parallels the way Griffin described Himmler in previous parts throughout the piece, such as when she begins to interpret what is written in Himmler’s diary, “Is it any wonder then that he is so eager to rejoin the army? The army gave purpose and order to his life. He wants his uniform again. In his uniform he knows who he is. But his frailty haunts him.” (312). This seems to suggest that since like a missile, Himmler was unable to cultivate his own personality and his own self, a void was created inside of him that was continuously filled by temporary life obligations. Furthermore, the reader can visualize Himmler as having “the illusion of liberation from the earth, or even abandon…” when the author states, “As I imagine myself in his frame of mind, facing a void, cast into unknown waters, these opinions appear like rescue ships on the horizon, a promise of terra firma, the known” (313).This idea of facing a void, and the appearance of an end to that void, gives meaning to “the illusion of liberation” the author describes. As the author suggests, Himmler was unable to be himself throughout much of his childhood, and therefore, he began searching for a way to find himself and to be filled with purpose. This is significant because it provides the reader with an idea of why Himmler was able to readily accept Hitler’s teachings, and ultimately end up playing a huge role in the deaths of millions of innocent people. This persuades the reader to think more deeply
about the people and events that surrounded the Holocaust, and provides a wider perspective on the entire ordeal, thus appealing to the emotions of the reader.

Furthermore, the author attempts to appeal to *pathos*, or the values and sympathies of the reader, in various other ways. Throughout the piece, the author implements personal stories from her own childhood in order to convey certain ideals and in doing so, the author’s interpretation of Himmler’s actions and the actions of other collaborators during the Holocaust dominate the piece. Griffin recalls a time when she was able to “disown herself in some way” and place the blame for her actions on someone else. She explains that she once had a friend who she lost, and in order to repair their friendship, she had to aid her in an act of violence against another person. Griffin explicitly states, “Later I disowned my acts, as if I had no committed them. Because I was under the sway of my friend’s power, I told myself that what I did was really her doing.” In this part of the text Griffin suggests that because of the power her friend had over her, it was easy for her to “disown” herself, and not take personal responsibility for her actions. This is significant because Griffin is able to effectively portray the idea that people who have immense power over others can provide a scapegoat of sorts for those who are engaging in an evidently immoral act. Furthermore, by relating her ideals about humanity back to her own personal life stories, she is able to tap into the emotions of the reader, show that she is empathetic towards those who have committed acts of terror, and perhaps, even relate to the reader. This also appeals to the values and sympathies of the reader by making the reader empathize with Griffin, and also reflect back into their own lives to a time where they may have experienced something similar.

Lastly, the rhetorical situation of the piece affects how one may perceive the piece, and it also has an affect on the rhetorical strategies that Griffin chose to implement throughout this
piece. “Our Secret” is an excerpt taken from Susan Griffin’s *A Chorus of Stones: The Private Life of War* published by the Doubleday publishing company. Susan Griffin was born in 1943, two years before the end of World War II, in Los Angeles California. As she was born so close to the end of World War II, Griffin knew of the horrific acts that had occurred during the war from a very young age, and this had a profound impact on her writing (“Susan Griffin.”). Furthermore, she had written and published four other novels before publishing *A Chorus of Stones* (“Susan Griffin.”). Additionally, Griffin has been described as a writer and a “radical feminist philosopher” by the Poetry Foundation (“Susan Griffin.”). Therefore, one could assume that the majority of her readers would be those who are feminists or interested in feminism, as much of her work pertains to feminism and the liberation of women. Therefore, in this way, Griffin attempts to connect to the audience that she knows will most likely be reading her piece through the use of ethos and establishing credibility by including ideas about masculinity inside of her piece. She also includes the stories of multiple women who were affected by the Holocaust and the Second World War, instead of focusing mostly on men and their experiences. Additionally, feminism tends to focus on ideals that can be problematic for a society, and throughout the piece Griffin presents many ideals that could have a negative impact on a society. Furthermore, Susan Griffin is also a playwright, and this also has an effect on the rhetorical situation of the piece (Young and Ehrlich). Throughout the piece Griffin explains ideas in very abstract and complicated terms through the use of metaphors and similes. Therefore, Griffin could be doing this in order to appeal to readers who are interested in plays by using language and grammar that would be more commonly seen throughout plays.

Overall, Susan Griffin was able to effectively appeal to a myriad of different audiences through her use of various different rhetorical strategies. Griffin was able to establish credibility
throughout the piece with her knowledge of cell structures and missiles, while simultaneously evoking emotions in the reader. She also was able to appeal to the reader’s emotions through the use of metaphors while attempting to find the significance of events that occurred throughout Heinrich Himmler’s life. Additionally, Griffin was able to appeal to her target audience of primarily feminist readers by bringing awareness to the struggles of women throughout the Holocaust and by explaining the effects of masculinity and other feminist issues and how they related to the Holocaust.
Works Cited

