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Sly Clarence

James Burke
University of Iowa
Mermaids and Medical Aid

By: Paige Mitchell

Rhetorical Analysis

Walter H. Fox wrote this letter with the words *on board ship* at the top right hand corner of the envelope. Imagine the impact of that statement to a young child. The romantic and idealistic views of ship life must have appeared in the mind of the young Helen Fox, Walter H. Fox's daughter. Her father was on a giant ship in the middle of the ocean. Recall stories of adventures that took place on the deck of giant pirate ships, the incredible chase scenes depicted by streamlined cruisers riding against wind, and the boat like apparatus of Tom Sawyer and his companion as they traveled downstream. In American life, the media has perpetuated boats as romantic, a little bit dangerous and a lot adventurous. However, the journey her father was embarking on was taking place without the young Helen Fox. In fact, the situation for her father may not be fantastical like in the stories, but rather promised hardship and suffering. Helen was most likely worried about the conditions her father faced. However, through rhetorical savvy, Walter H. Fox seems to alleviate all of Helen's fears by drawing on her child-like curiosity and sense of imagination.

*Image 1: A Picture Taken of Walter H. Fox and a Companion*
He opens his letter by addressing directly that child-like curiosity. He tells her that he is aboard a ship that's in the middle of the ocean. He's heading away from home and he's not exactly sure just how far his journey has taken him. Walter surely opens with a big question. But he doesn't expect Helen to be able to answer it. Instead, he diverts slightly from his previous statement and assures her that he is "headed in the right direction." By choosing to omit precisely where he is, where he is going, and how far out in sea he is, he can keep Helen from worrying too much about the specifics. She doesn't need to how far away the two of them are, only that he is in fact going to where he needs to be, and for now that just happens to be away from home. But she already knows that he's heading in the correct direction, right? She's been studying that in school.

Topic diversion. Walter H. Fox has just successfully turned the conversation to his advantage, demonstrating his true rhetorical savvy. The most worrisome part is over, and Helen has been provided with a complete and seemingly satisfactory answer as to her father's whereabouts.
But what of his conditions? How can Helen be assured that boat life is safe and good to her dear father? Insert the rhetorical wit of Walter H. Fox. Instead of recalling the tedious details of his everyday routine on the ship and of his work, he turns towards the fantastical. He relies on Helen's imagination to create an image of his journey as anything but war-like and dangerous. There are flying fishes! he exclaims. He paints the picture for Helen and she fills in the romantic details for herself. You ought to see the "fire that shows in the water at night" he rhetorically whispers through his writing. He states that the men say phosphorous causes this phenomenon- sound enough logos right? Wrong. Walter H. Fox twists the logos of this statement to appear more child-like and imaginative. By This results in very pathos-laden statement.

"I don't believe it," he claims. This so called phosphorus must just be "some bright things in the mermaids' hair".

By appealing to Helen's child-like curiosity and sense of imagination, he rhetorically puts at ease her nerves of the war and his expedition but also weaves a story that is understandable to Helen, so that she can be assured that there is still a little magic left in the world, even during time of war and devastation.

**Historical Context**

Determined to aid in the war effort, Dr. Walter H. Fox volunteered his services and time as a physician to the French in World War I and later to the Italian Red Cross. His wife followed his footsteps and eventually went on to serve for the Red Cross during World War II. The couple had one child in 1911, a daughter named Helen. They raised their family in Waucoma, Iowa.

Walter H. Fox was originally from West Union, Iowa but moved to Iowa City in 1901, where he entered medical school at the State
University of Iowa. He went on to become a lecturer and professor at the State University after his graduation in 1905. He enlisted in the army in 1917 and was called to active duty in April of 1918. Unfortunately, a mass world-wide phenomena had shaken the very nations that were already wrought with battle—the flu.

Image 3: A Picture Taken by Walter H. Fox of the Recovery Wards During World War I

While there are accounts in Walter's letters of him working in infirmary wards and volunteering at a ward for soldiers who had lost limbs, it is undeniable that a large chunk of his time was spent trying to fight this massive pandemic along with other physicians. The world found itself hopelessly lost as it tried to fight back with medicinal treatments. However, the drugs and vaccines of the time were just not effective enough to combat the spreading virus. New and more serious strands of the virus kept appearing, and by the end of the year victims' skins were turning blue and their lungs filling with fluid, causing suffocation. As the flu spread first throughout Europe and then to the rest of the world, other illnesses took advantage and began to appear in massive quantities. Two such resulting diseases were typhus and pneumonia.
Image 4: A picture taken by Walter H. Fox of the ambulances when he was stationed at France

To put this in context to Walter’s time of active service, the letter that he wrote to his daughter Helen was written in 1918 after he had departed for France, a main host for the flu epidemic. By the time he arrived in France during the autumn of 1918, the flu was at full force. In America alone, the average life expectancy had dropped by nearly a dozen years.

After serving his time there, Walter was eventually transferred to Serbia, an area suffering from a current outbreak of typhus. This would be Captain Walter’s last mission as he unfortunately suffered from phenomena. He died on February 22, 1919 just as World War I came to a close with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles early that year.

https://rhetoricgilchrist2014.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/mermaids-and-m...
References


Links to the Original Letters and Transcriptions

http://diyhistory.lib.uiowa.edu/transcribe/scripto/transcribe/3390/85678

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