

Kelly Clark

Professor Henry

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Rhetorical Analysis of Samuelson's "Shop 'till We Drop?"

Robert J. Samuelson's "Shop 'til We Drop" is an essay that describes how Americans find pleasure in spending money and being the consumers of the world. Also, Samuelson informs readers of why Americans feel compelled to buy products and what forces them to have a "buy now" mentality. Samuelson is a journalist and has contributed to *Newsweek* and *The Washington Post* as a columnist. His main writing focus deals with economics and business. His articles have made it into other influential newspapers across the country. Samuelson is the type of author who takes journalism seriously and does not participate by voting in elections, because he feels it could interfere with his reputation as a journalist. He has written three books about economics and business. In my opinion, he seems well-qualified to write an essay on how America is a consuming nation.

The very first line of the essay grabs the reader's attention by using the ornament of intertext. "We shop, therefore we are" comes from the philosopher, Descartes, who originally teaches, "I think, therefore I am" (Samuelson 89). By using this method of intertext or allusion, Samuelson automatically intrigues his more intelligent audience members by changing the phrase to fit his title. He then explains that shopping is becoming an American pastime. Samuelson attracts his audience further by targeting those who are going through parenting in the second sentence when he states, "infants and toddlers quickly absorb the consumer spirit through television and trips to the supermarket ("I want that" is a common refrain)," because when a parent is reading this, they can relate to the "I want that" phrase or they do not want their child to ever reach that stage (Samuelson 89). Most parents do not want to fill their children's minds with an appetite for consuming. Samuelson describes what will happen if a

child is exposed to consumption at an early age and uses Pathos to create that image. “As we age, consumption becomes an engine of envy, because in America the idea is that everyone should have everything—which means that hardly anyone ever has enough” quoted by Samuelson to touch the emotional side of the reader (Samuelson 89). By saying “as we age” he is getting into the parents heads to inform them that as their children grow up, they could become “engines of envy”. No parent wants a greedy child.

On the second and third pages of the essay, Samuelson uses logos, utilizing statistics and facts to depict how bad the spending in America really is. Readers live in the United States and are interested in facts and statistics to back up what the author is saying. Samuelson compares the United States by listing other nations who have spent less in consumer spending of their national income or gross domestic product. He makes America seem like a selfish nation, because all we do is consume. He changes that emotional appeal or pathos-based appeal quickly in the next paragraph by saying that “without [our spending spree], the U.S. and world economics would recently have fared much worse” (Samuelson 90). The author keeps readers interested by using pathos to show fairness by presenting all sides of his argument. He describes how America contributes to the world economy and who it also hurts it as well. He uses a list by naming some of the things Americans consume regularly: “Automobiles, and food... shoes, toys, clothes, and electronic gadgets” are examples of the things America imports and consumes (Samuelson 90).

The fourth paragraph did not make sense, probably not to Samuelson either. He uses logos or the logical appeal when he states, “the buying binge sustained the U.S. economy despite an onslaught of bad news that, by all logic, should have been devastating: the popping of the stock market “bubble” of the 1990s; rising unemployment (as dot-com firms went bankrupt and business investments—led by telecommunications spending—declined); 9/11; and a string of corporate scandals (e.g. Enron, WorldCom, Tyco).”

Logically, it makes sense that Americans would be scared to spend their money or invest it because of what was going on in America at that time. But Samuelson later goes on to say that “American consumers barely paused” and kept up their “buying binge”. The author supports this idea with the fact that Americans will always have new wants and needs to be satisfied. The United States will always have a problem in the economy if people keep borrowing more money.

Another intertextual or alluding ornament is the phrase, “Americans always feel the need to outdo the Joneses—or at least to stay even with them” (Samuelson 91). The Joneses are a common household name spoken amongst American families. A lot of economic journalist use that phrase to put consumerism in the heads of these American families. He portrays a level of competition in his article and points it out in the next sentence by stating, “No level of consumption ever suffices, because the social competition is constant” (Samuelson 91).

Samuelson uses alliteration in the eleventh paragraph by classifying Americans by “success” and status”. Everyone wants a new luxury car and most people cannot afford them but decided to buy them anyway. Further, He list the types of luxury brands that Americans consumed in the past decade including Lexus, Infiniti, Acura, Hummer, BMW, and Mercedes (Samuelson 91-92). Even though American cannot afford what they want, they most likely will end up buying it just to keep up with the “Joneses”.

Samuelson uses pathos emotionally to catch the readers' attention. He explains how the United States is such a consuming nation that workers are striving to maximize their incomes but at the same time jeopardizing time with friends and family (Samuelson 92). This part of his essay was emotionally appealing because instead of working many people would rather spend time with friends and family. For many workers who read this article, it would put into perspective how they actually feel about being a part of this “buying binge”.

Samuelson uses alliteration in the fourteenth paragraph when he states the three major threats Americans face, “debt, demographics, and the dollar” (Samuelson 92). While describing

each of the three “D’s” he also states acts such as the Fair Housing Act of 1968 and the Equal Credit Opportunity Act of 1974 which prohibited discriminatory lending. Then he lists the government created companies that buy mortgages, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, which help Americans who cannot pay off their mortgages.

The best part of Samuelson’s essay is the last paragraph, “We’ll spend a little less of our incomes and save a little more. We’ll import a little less and export a little more. These modest changes shouldn’t hurt, but they might. The U.S and world economies have grown so accustomed to being stimulated by the ravenous appetite of ordinary Americans that you can’t help but wonder what will happen if that appetite disappears?” Here, Samuelson leaves the reader with a rhetorical question and leaves them to ponder that thought. Overall, the author does a fantastic job of leaving the reader wanting more by warning them what could happen in the future. In a sense, he activates the same types of appetites that he describes.

Works Cited

Samuelson, Robert. "Shop 'til We Drop?" *The Contemporary Reader*. 9th Edition. Ed. Gary Goshgarian. New York: Longman. 89-93. Print.