

A Narrative Analysis of the Film *The Great Debaters* and its Relationship to the Urban Debate  
League Movement

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## **Introduction**

The high school and intercollegiate policy debate communities have been experiencing a revolution. Rapid fire delivery and the exclusion of marginalized voices have drawn a significant amount of attention to the contemporary, or traditional structure of policy debate. Critics of policy debate have noted for years that the actual delivery of speeches is different than the eloquent and persuasive style that the public would expect. Instead of grand oratory meant to create access for a wide audience, competitive policy debaters speak at extremely fast paces that requires specific training to understand. In addition to the fast delivery, policy debaters also speak in abbreviations and use terms that are foreign to people who are not involved in the activity (Gerber 81-83). These concerns have been present in the competitive policy debate arena for a long time, but an increase in the amount of Urban Debate Leagues in the past decade has coincided with more frequent criticism about and activism against the subject. Many individuals in the community have argued that the speed of traditional debate speech delivery and the use of debate jargon has excluded certain voices from participating in competitive policy debate. This argument has led to many debates not to focus not on the resolution, but instead on the exclusion of marginalized voices themselves. The goal of these debates has been to transform debaters from participants to empowered advocates. These arguments, which are attributed to what many call the “UDL Movement” have been outstandingly successful. In 2013, a policy debate team from Emporia University that consisted of two former UDL debaters became the first debate team ever to win both the CEDA National Tournament and the National Debate Tournament, all while advocating from their social locations and using narratives. (Emporia.edu)

While the UDL Movement was gaining significant momentum in 2007, Denzel Washington directed and acted in the award winning film *The Great Debaters*. The movie

detailed the triumphs of the Wiley College Debate team during the 1930s. Wiley College was an all-black college, and hence typically only debated against teams from black colleges. However, the film depicts one of Wiley College's most successful seasons, during which the team challenged and defeated a few white schools, most notably Harvard College. Some scholars have observed that the movie's release in 2007 was no coincidence, and that it played a part in the UDL Movement, initiating the revival of Oklahoma City University's debate program (Preston Jr.)

This essay argues that *The Great Debaters* is a text that is not simply a story about Wiley College's debate triumphs during the 1930s, but that the film shares a temporal bond to the time in which it was released in. Using a perspective developed from Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* combined with more general elements of narrative criticism, I interrogate *The Great Debaters* as a text that is presented in 2007 along-side the UDL Movement. Applying Ricoeur's assumptions about causality within narratives and the refiguration of reality that occurs because of them, I will reveal the subtle and straight forward elements of the story told by *The Great Debaters* and how they influenced and contributed to the UDL Movement's culture that promotes inclusion, empowerment and activism.

### **Method**

The practice of storytelling is part of human nature. Humans use storytelling to describe how they feel or relate to one another, and to make sense of the world around them. Stories about the past are often used to explain occurrences in the present, as narratives frequently provide timeless messages that attempt to explain why certain events happen. This project first describes *The Great Debaters* with narrative criticism methodologies that dissect plot sequencing, theme and character development.

Before discussing the more intricate details of this project's method of narrative analysis, it is important to first discuss what narrative is. Sonja Foss observes that narratives can be separated from other forms of rhetoric based on four unique characteristics. First, narratives are always comprised of two or more events. Second, narratives organize events by time order (but not necessarily chronological). Third, events within a narrative must share a causal relationship. Finally, a narrative is "about a unified subject" (Foss 308). Certainly narrative rhetoric is distinguishable by these four characteristics, but the means by which stories convey their message or assertion help make the presence of a narrative apparent. For example most narratives repeat a theme in order to highlight a lesson to be learned from the story. Characters play important roles in stories, often portraying an ideal such as "good" or "evil" in order to illustrate what the narrative defines as right or wrong actions. Narrators adopt an importance in developing the meaning of stories, as the narrative voice can be used as evidence of the specific culture to which a story belongs. As conventional criticism of rhetoric looks to use more typical means of analysis (such as using the five canons of rhetoric), narrative critics use signposts such as these to make their messages apparent.

Many rhetorical critics acknowledge the narrative perspective as a useful tool in dissecting appropriate pieces, but some consider the narrative perspective as a communication paradigm. The original critic who coined the narrative paradigm was Walter Fisher, who believed that all forms of human communication can be analyzed as narratives because he believed that humans are by nature storytellers. On human nature, Fisher notes that many root metaphors have been used to describe humans and their natural tendencies (e.g. *homo oeconomicus* and *homo politicus*) and suggests that *homo narrans* should be added to that list as an extension on Kenneth Burke's definition of humans as symbol-using animals (Fisher 295)

Keeping in mind that humans are storytelling animals, the narrative paradigm also assumes that human decision making is derived from “good reasons” and that those reasons are generated from historical and cultural stories. Humans are as rational as their awareness of narrative probability (whether a story is coherent) and narrative fidelity (whether a story is consistent with one’s own experience). The overarching assumption is that the world is a collection of stories that demonstrate good reasons, and those good reasons become human rationality and are manifested in collective human decision making. If this is true, then critics should not look to any other form of criticism before considering the narrative perspective as the basis of all rhetoric and rational [297]. Fisher continually highlights that the narrative paradigm is not incompatible with other forms of criticism in this sense, just that public and social knowledge should be viewed from the narrative paradigm in order “to give public knowledge a form of being” [305].

Critics of Fisher have pointed to the overgeneralization of rhetorical texts that occurs within the narrative paradigm. Robert Rowland argued that that narrative criticism “has little application to works that do not explicitly tell or clearly draw upon a story. In fact, use of a narrative approach may obscure the critical significance of some works” [Rowland 39]. The impact of misusing narrative criticism by a critic would be that the critic “might spend so much critical energy looking for the plot and characters in a work or applying tests of narrative fidelity or probability that he or she would miss a far simpler explanation of rhetorical effectiveness.” [39] This is often why critics are cautious when analyzing rhetoric from the narrative perspective, as most scholars believe Fisher’s paradigm is far too general of a rhetorical tool in explaining meaning. [Sillars and Gronbeck 215] This analysis will not assume that the narrative perspective should be considered a paradigm, but let Fisher’s work be a testament to how

significant and powerful narratives can be in the realm of rhetoric. This project references Fisher's work to emphasize the influence exerted by *The Great Debaters* as a narrative on the ULD Movement and to justify that narratives have an influence on the culture surrounding them. My reference to Rowland's work functions simply to reveal that not all rhetoric should be viewed as narrative and that the decision to apply narrative criticism to *The Great Debaters* is intentional because the film fits the description of narrative given by Foss.

There is little dispute about the powerful influence that narratives exert on culture. How this influence overlays and is expressed in culture becomes a focal point of research, and one important critic to make advances on this subject was Paul Ricouer. A French philosopher and anthropologist, Ricouer made his name by contributing to the field of phenomenology, the study of how an individual's understanding of reality is formed by interactions with, and perceptions of, the world or external environment (University of Chicago). His life work took a turn in the 1960s when he began to combine his work in phenomenology with hermeneutic interpretation, or the art of interpreting texts. Ricouer justified this turn in methodology by arguing that there is no projection of self or reality that is not mediated through some symbol or text (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

One of Ricouer's most significant pieces that he wrote after his hermeneutic turn was *Time and Narrative*. Though *Time and Narrative* covers a broad range of concepts related to Ricouer's anthropological roots, I focus on his discussion of mimesis, as it best relates to my criticism of *The Great Debaters*. Before his discussion of mimesis, Ricouer challenges Aristotle's conception of plot in regard to its relationship to temporality. He asserts, "Aristotle's analysis of plot owes nothing to the theory of time, which is dealt with exclusively in his *Physics*. What is more, in his *Poetics*, the 'logic' of emplotment discourages any consideration

of time, even when it implies concepts such as beginning, middle, and end, or when it becomes involved in a discourse about the magnitude or length of the plot” (Ricouer 51). Ricouer takes issue with Aristotle’s notion of emplotment arguing that he does not emphasize the causal link between events that occur as a plot develops. This causality is all important, as it is the cornerstone of Ricouer’s process of mimesis. In *Time and Narrative*, mimesis is divided into a three step process. The first step is the prenarrative structure of experience, or prefiguration. At this first level of mimesis, the focus is on the ability of individuals in a society to understand the symbol systems of their culture without effort. Acknowledging the specific cultural symbols that are shared within a text and the surrounding culture develops a link between the culture and the text. William Dowling uses the example of recognizing the wealth of a neighbor who has a new Rolls-Royce in their driveway. In the context of our culture, this is a direct representation of wealth (Dowling 3). These common understandings of symbols make up the prefiguration stage of mimesis.

The second level of mimesis is Ricouer’s direct challenge to Aristotle’s concept of emplotment. While Aristotle presents emplotment in its spatial form (beginning, middle, and end), Ricouer points out that a causal element exists that is all important to the development of a plot and the audience’s relation to the text. This causal relationship between events in a narrative creates a “double temporality” for the audience of a text. If audience members are viewing or reading a text, especially for the first time, then they are experiencing the events of the text as the characters are. In other words the audience is experiencing plot progression and events just as the characters experience them, so each occurrence is as much of a surprise to the audience as it is to the characters. The audience is also aware, however, that this text has already been written and understands that each event that occurred was inevitable. While following the events in a



story does nothing to imply that there is a conclusion to the text, the audience is aware of some *telos*, or ending, that is to come from the story. These two realizations make up the paradox of double temporality, and demonstrate a relationship between the past and present through the viewer or listener's following of the narrative (Dowling 8-9).

Ricouer refers to the final stage of mimesis as "refiguration" and consistently makes note of its complementary relationship with the first and second levels of mimesis. At this level, the symbols and emplotment of the narrative begin to manifest in the consciousness of the culture surrounding the story. Ricouer argues that when a narrative has been repeated or has become well known, a viewer or listener can grasp the piece as a whole while following plot development. In this naturalization of double temporality, the "natural" flow of time can be inverted. He argues that, "In reading the ending in the beginning and the beginning in the ending, we also learn to read time itself backwards, as the recapitulation of the initial conditions of a course of action in its terminal consequences" (Ricouer 67-68). Refiguration implies an alteration of consciousness that occurs from a discovering of a new reality that emerges from following the events and existing in a narrative. In this sense it does not matter whether one already knows the ending of a story, but what does matter is the act of following causal events in a narrative and the temporal connection that stems from that reading. An example that William Dowling uses to clarify this realization is that of an astronomer who observes the sky through the Ptolemaic perspective, and then observing the sky years later having learned of the Copernican model of space. This individual has had an alteration in knowledge and consciousness that cannot be unseen, a similar alteration to the result of narrative refiguration (Dowling 15-16).

The analysis that follows is a direct application of Ricouer's conception of mimesis to describe and interpret *The Great Debaters* in terms of its prenarrative structure, plot development

and refiguration. Such an interpretation should produce a sophisticated understanding of the film and the UDL Movement's similarities and how they influenced each other. I now describe *The Great Debaters*, its plot, character and theme development. A description of the entire plot of *The Great Debaters* is necessary because it allows any readers to experience Ricouer's double temporality through emplotment, which is important in understanding how the film is related to the UDL Movement. I follow with a description of the UDL movement, its purpose, and the arguments that are associated with it. Finally, I use Ricouer's concept of mimesis to explain the influence that the film and the Movement exert on one another.

### **The Great Debaters**

Released in 2007, Denzel Washington's *The Great Debaters* was presented to the world in order to tell the story of Wiley College's debate triumphs. While certain facts were altered for the sake of creating the film, such as the final debate being between Wiley College and Harvard rather than USC, the story of the Wiley College debate team has been a model of and for the UDL Movement.

The movie begins with a scene following Henry Lowe that is simultaneously overlaid with a speech given by Dr. James Farmer. The speech is directed at incoming students and covers topics such as maturity and discipline, preaching that "you must do what you have to do so you can do what you want to do" (4:08) Henry is attending a party at a barn where he finds himself in a fight with another man at the party. He threatens to kill the man when he pins him to the ground. At the last moment, Melvin Tolson, a professor and director of the Wiley College debate team, stops Henry from harming the man further.

Sometime after the fight, classes begin for a new year at Wiley College. Henry Lowe attends a class taught by Tolson. After they recognize each other from the fight, Tolson

recommends that Henry try out for the debate team. Tryouts are held, and four students stand out. Henry Lowe is able to recite poetry off of the top of his head, James Farmer Jr. showcases his critical thinking skills by revealing the irony in the name “Bethlehem Steel Corporation”, and Samantha Boone courageously debates against Tolson. These three students and a student named Hamilton Burgess are chosen by Tolson to represent the Wiley College debate team for the year. An excited Farmer Jr. runs home to his father in order to tell him the good news, only to have his father brush off the debate team as a possible distraction.

The next scene shows the Farmer family on a drive in the country, where Farmer Sr. accidentally runs over a pig that belongs to white farmers. The owners of the pig, confront Farmer Sr. and demand twenty-five dollars from him, which is more than the pig’s worth. The white farmers are unintelligent, evidenced by their inability to understand the word “endorse” when Dr. Farmer speaks to them. As his son watches, Farmer Sr. gives into the demands of the two white men by sacrificing an entire pay check.

After the four debaters are shown practicing their speaking in various environments, including reciting lines out on a lake, a scene depicting a school dance follows James Farmer Jr. As he fantasizes about dancing with Samantha, he finally gets his opportunity when she asks him to dance. However, Henry quickly intervenes and asks Samantha to leave the dance with him. Feeling rejected, Farmer Jr. leaves the dance and heads home. On his way back from the dance, he sees Professor Tolson sneaking into the woods in farmer-like clothing. He follows Tolson out to a barn, where he witnesses a secret meeting between poor whites and blacks discussing the formation of a share cropper’s union. Even though the meeting is perfectly legal, it is raided by local authorities. Farmer Jr. is almost trapped in the barn during the raid, but Tolson rescues him and leads him back to safety. He asks James to never speak of what he saw, which causes

trouble between James and his father when he returns home that night. Dr. Farmer screams at James to explain where he was, but James refuses to tell Tolson's secret. The fight escalates when James questions his father's cowardice during the pig incident, leading Dr. Farmer to slap him.

The debate season begins with Wiley College challenging another African-American school, Paul Quinn College. The resolution is that welfare should be ended when the Depression is over, and Wiley College argues the negative. Henry Lowe and Hamilton Burgess debate powerfully, but it is not until Henry argues by describing "the look in a mother's face when she cannot feed her children" that Wiley College appears to be victorious. After defeating Paul Quinn College, a montage ensues of the debate team going on an extensive winning streak.

As tensions rise concerning Melvin Tolson's radical politics, Hamilton Burgess quits the debate team so as to avoid being associated with a possible Communist. This allows Samantha Booke to participate in her first competitive debate. The debate is against Oklahoma City University, a white college. The resolution is that "Negros should be admitted to state universities", and Wiley College argues the affirmative. Samantha uses historical references and a passionate speaking style in order to emphasize that, "...the time for justice, the time for freedom, and the time for equality is always, is always right now!" (57:15) Wiley College's win over Oklahoma City University is regarded as an enormous triumph.

At a celebration for the Wiley College debate team Melvin Tolson and Dr. Farmer have a discussion about Farmer Jr. that escalates to an argument about professor Tolson's politics. Farmer Sr. is concerned that Tolson may be involving James in his radical politics, which would put his son at great risk.

At a debate team meeting, tensions are high as James Farmer Jr. is jealous of the romance between Samantha and Henry. He is also angry that he is the only debater that has not debated at this point in the season. An argument erupts between James and Samantha, but is quickly ended as Professor Tolson is arrested in his classroom. The debaters follow Tolson to the police station where they attempt to speak to him but are denied by the authorities. Eventually, Dr. Farmer arrives at the police station along with an angry mob. The sheriff and Dr. Farmer discuss the illegal raid that took place at the sharecropper's meeting. Dr. Farmer asserts that witnesses said that the sheriff was at the raid and that he was guilty, not Tolson. Suggesting that the mob could become unruly, Dr. Farmer states that "An unjust law is no law at all" (1:10:19) and that if Tolson is released, the mob will disperse. The sheriff gives in, releases Tolson, and the mob disperses. Dr. Farmer and his son make eye contact before leaving the scene, acknowledging the courage that Farmer Sr. displayed.

At the next debate meeting, Professor Tolson announces that he has been blacklisted because of his politics and that schools are beginning to cancel their debates with Wiley College. However, Tolson uses an example from Greek mythology to demonstrate that defeat can only make the team stronger. He expresses interest in getting the team to debate Howard University in order to gain the attention of Harvard University, the best team in the nation.

During the team's drive to the Howard University debate, they come across a lynching. A group of white males are burning a black man they have tied up. Traumatized, Tolson tries to reverse his car without being noticed. However, the lynch mob realizes that the car is occupied by African-Americans and begins to attack the car. The team narrowly escapes in the car and eventually arrive at a house for the night. Henry leaves the house to get drunk and returns with another woman, who he kisses in front of Samantha. Hurt, she closes the blinds on Henry while

James brings him to his bed. A drunk Henry becomes aggressive with James during an argument and holds him down on the bed. Henry screams about the lynching, explaining to James that he will never forget it. James questions why they would do such a thing, and Henry exclaims that the man did not have to have done anything wrong because “In Texas, they lynch negroes!” (1:21:52) James then questions the activity of debate, suggesting that “We’re just a bunch of negroes debating each other on subjects we all agree on” (1:22:02), but Henry dismisses that notion and tells James he cannot think that way. The next morning, they learn that Samantha has decided to go home early, which gives James the opportunity to debate. Wiley goes on to lose their first debate of the season against Howard University.

Upon returning from the trip, Professor Tolson is greeted by his wife. She hands him a letter that is an invitation to Wiley College to debate Harvard in Cambridge. The team meets to discuss the resolution and puts together their arguments, and then meet at the train station to depart for Boston. Here, Tolson reveals to the debaters that he cannot travel with the team due to the conditions of his release from jail. The trio of debaters then leave for Boston.

The debaters are brought to their living quarters upon arrival in Boston. They are handed a letter that alerts them that their normal canned speeches, written by Tolson, are not allowed. The resolution is changed to “Civil disobedience is a moral weapon in the fight for justice” (1:36:58) and the Wiley College debate team is burdened with writing their own arguments for the first time all season. They spend hours researching and writing, and eventually arrive at a dispute about how to start the debate. This dispute turns into a vicious argument, leading to Henry angrily leaving his partners to go drink away his frustration. Henry visits a bar where he sees an attractive girl smiling at him but instead of talking to her, he decides to go back to his

teammates and finish writing their arguments. Henry decides that he wants James to debate in his place, giving him another chance after failing against Howard University.

The next and last scene depicts the final debate against Harvard. James begins the debate by defining what the word “moral” means. He contrasts an army general upholding the law by slaughtering people in a crowd with an example of Ghandi performing an act of non-violent civil disobedience that he deemed, “a moral victory” (1:46:43). The Harvard debaters countered by stating that using violence to uphold the law can be moral if it avoids a great act of violence. Harvard makes the argument that morals are determined by the majority, and Samantha counters by asserting that what is moral is determined by individual conscious. James gets the last speech in the debate, which he begins by detailing the teams experience with the lynching. He argues that the law does not protect victims of lynch mobs, and repeats the words of St. Augustine that he learned from his father, “An unjust law is no law at all”. He ends the speech by stating that between the options of violent rebellion and civil disobedience, the latter would be the best option to maintain peace and morality. Wiley College is declared the victor at the end of the debate.

### **The UDL Movement**

Before beginning the description of the Urban Debate League Movement, I would like to establish that many of the observations and descriptions of the UDL Movement are from my personal experience in the intercollegiate policy debate community. I competed in intercollegiate policy debate for California Polytechnic State University in 2012 and 2013, which gave me the opportunity to travel and compete nationally. Through traveling to national debate tournaments, I was able to debate against and view some of the top debaters associated with the UDL Movement. At the CEDA National Debate Tournament, I witnessed Emporia University

win two of their rounds, one of which was the championship round against University of West Georgia. For this description, I will refer to sources that accurately describe the history and intentions of the UDL. However, I will draw from my own experience as an audience member and competitor to aid my description of some the UDL Movement arguments and performances.

Issues with lynch mobs and explicit segregation are not nearly as prevalent as they were in the 1930's. However, the policy debate community has recognized an issue with exclusion that is related to the activity. The majority of participants in policy debate are white males, and most observers attribute this to the norms of policy debate. It is believed that the activity's norms such as quick delivery of speech and focus on arguments from authority research have marginalized groups of students who do not have access to the materials that students who belong to economically healthy programs have (Gerber 84-85). If this is true, then it is likely that the education generated within a given policy debate round lacks the perspective of those marginalized voices.

There have long been attempts to solve these problems in the debate community, one such solution has been the emergence of urban debate leagues across the nation. These leagues are generally in large cities and seek to include minority students who would not have the opportunity to experience debate in their mainstream education system. The first emergence of urban debate leagues occurred as a series of tournaments in Atlanta around 1985, and the programs have been growing and spreading across the nation ever since. In 2007, UDLs existed in twenty-four states and include over 500 urban high schools (Preston Jr. 157, [Urbandebate.org](http://Urbandebate.org)) The growth of these leagues inherently created a more diverse participation in policy debate. As Donald Shields and Thomas Preston Jr. describe "UDLs promote debate as a component of the regular high school classroom curriculum by organizing interscholastic debate as an academic



competition so that urban youth who have for so long been denied the powerful academic benefits of debate can be offered this valuable learning tool.” (159) Argumentative education is an effective aid in increasing students grade point average and overall performance in critical thinking, suggesting that UDLs give underprivileged students an opportunity to receive a very valuable, life altering education.

UDLs have increased participation in policy debate as they have become more popular, but many participants believe there are issues with policy debate itself that cannot be solved simply by creating urban debate leagues. One problem that is consistently brought up from UDL and former UDL debaters is the rate at which policy debaters typically speak. In a policy debate round, one team can make as many arguments regarding the resolution as they would like. If the opposing team does not address an argument made in the previous speech that argument is technically conceded within the round. This concept of “dropping” arguments has given teams an incentive to read as many arguments as possible within the nine minute constructive speeches they are allotted. Thus, a dramatic increase in the speed of debater’s speech delivery has been the result. One major problem that rises from the fast pace of speech is that it discourages people who are not in the community from participating. An untrained ear can hardly understand what happens in an average policy debate round because of the speed, and even students who receive some training struggle to catch up to the pace of the more experienced debaters. Since students in some urban schools already lack access to specific sources to create evidence, the speed of delivery creates a very unwelcoming and difficult environment for a student who would like to receive an argumentative education via debate. Participation in policy debate in general, even with the growth of UDLs, is declining because so few people can keep up with these debates.

Many argue that if reform is not initiated soon, intercollegiate and high school policy debate could meet their demise. (Gerber 82-83)

UDL debaters who represent the Movement often focus their arguments around solving the problem of exclusion. They frequently argue that the norms and structure of debate exclude certain voices and perspectives, and that no education that excludes certain students is worth having. For that reason, UDL debaters justify their choice in arguments by claiming that accepting the norms and participating in the traditional policy debate structure is immoral. At the 2013 CEDA National Debate Tournament, I witnessed many of these arguments in high caliber intercollegiate debate rounds. The former UDL debaters ran arguments that were radical in nature, advocating for plan actions such as tearing down the current structure of debate or energizing the debate space. Often, when these arguments were countered by opposing teams, the UDL debaters would attack the other team for conforming to debate norms and perpetuating the oppressive structures of traditional policy debate and society. This form of argument emphasized that perpetuating the more traditional style of debate was morally wrong, while advocating for radical change or simply violating the norms was a morally correct course of action.

A notable argument that I witnessed at CEDA Nationals from a UDL Movement debater from Oklahoma University made attacked the traditional structure of policy debate by focusing on the weakness of the activity to have an impact outside of the policy debate community. The debater told a story, in the form of a rap, about his students that he taught through an Urban Debate League program. He spoke with a conviction about how people had told him that debate would save him from the violence and other harms that are associated with poverty and ghettos, but that in reality one of his students was killed even though he participated in debate. This

argument displayed one of the motivations of Urban Debate League debaters: that they believe that debate can have an effect outside the community, but only in a different form or with different norms and goals.

### Analysis

The temporal connection between *The Great Debaters* and the UDL Movement is established because of a prenarrative shared understanding of cultural signs and symbols and by an audience's following of the film's plot. This connection is why the film and the UDL Movement influenced each other, and displays an example of Ricouer's concept of mimesis in practice.

The prenarrative shared understanding of cultural structures and symbols in *The Great Debaters* and the UDL Movement is one reason why the film overlays the advancements in policy debate. The UDL Movement and *The Great Debaters* share an understanding of debate and a perception of youth. First, the understanding of debate as a structure reveals a common intention between UDL debaters and the main characters in the film. In the film, the three main debaters and most of the debate community of the 1930s value debate as an opportunity to not only obtain a quality education and personal growth, but also understand the unique structure of debate allows them to become empowered public advocates for change. This is evidenced by the way that the characters talk about debate and by the way they debate in round. When Henry and James Farmer Jr. are discussing the lynching, James questioned whether debate mattered to the rest of the world and Henry emotionally responded that he cannot think that way. This type of emotional connection to the activity reveals that the characters do believe the activity has radical implications for and impacts on the world outside of debate. In round, characters are constantly debating from their personal perspective and using narratives as arguments. For example, in the

final round against Harvard James argues using the Ghandi narrative in the beginning and then argues using his personal narrative about the lynching in the end of the round. The assumption made by the characters about what debate should be is similar to that of the UDL Movement debaters. The debaters who are part of the UDL Movement often argue through personal narratives and value the activity as an opportunity to empower individuals.

Another important symbol that has a shared meaning between the UDL Movement and *The Great Debaters* is youth. Throughout the film and the existence of the UDLs, young scholars are regarded as the beacon of hope for progression. The film begins with a speech by Dr. James Farmer in which he explicitly states the importance of educating the youth. He preaches, “we are the most privileged people in America, because we have the most important job in America: the education of our young people.” (2:50) Dr. Farmer’s direct praise as well as the large crowds that the debates draw demonstrate a significant value that is given to the young scholars in the movie. This appreciation is a representation of the debaters potential to influence future political issues. In the UDL Movement, a similar praise is given to the youth. Though large crowds rarely gather for policy debates anymore, the nature of the arguments symbolize the potential that is attached to young people. The notion of advocating for inclusion of more debaters in the policy debate community suggests that not only young debaters are assumed to be future leaders and intellectuals, but that all young people have that potential. This shared optimism and perception of young people bonds the film *The Great Debaters* and the UDL Movement, even though the film portrays a vastly different time period.

Looking at *The Great Debaters* from the second level of mimesis, two major themes become apparent through analysis of the plot of the film. Following the storyline of both Dr. Farmer and James Farmer Jr. reveals a theme of maturity. The very first lines of the movie are a

speech given by Dr. Farmer, in which he preaches “When I was a child, I speak as a child; I thought as a child; I understood as a child. But when I became a man, I put away all the childish things” (2:04). This speech frames and foreshadows the coming events in the film, as Dr. Farmer and his son prepare to go through a radical period of maturity. First, Dr. Farmer assumes himself to be a man because of his prestige as an educator and role as a father. However, his character development does not portray him to be fully mature at the beginning of the film. The pig incident is the first example of Dr. Farmer’s cowardice, as he gives up a large sum of money to the white farmers who overcharge him. The farmers were significantly less intelligent than Dr. Farmer, as suggested by their inability to understand the word “endorse”, yet he still was willing to give into their demands of twenty-five dollars for their pig. Later, when arguing with James about arriving home late from the dance, he slaps his son for ridiculing his decision to apologize to the white pig farmers. In a later scene, when attempting to learn where James was the night he slapped him, Dr. Farmer gets into an argument with Melvin Tolson about his radical politics, accusing Tolson of involving James in dangerous situations. The arguments that Dr. Farmer has with James and Tolson are both displays of his fear of radical change. A man of such academic prestige undoubtedly understands the inequality related to overpaying unintelligent, rude pig farmers simply because he is black, but his fear of addressing that inequality is what made him immature. Dr. Farmer’s moment of maturity finally comes when Tolson is jailed and he arrives to save him. Uncharacteristically, Dr. Farmer threatens the sheriff by claiming that the angry mob outside will likely use force unless Tolson was released. This occurs only a few scenes after his argument with Tolson about radical politics, which provides a clear contrast between Dr. Farmer’s former fear of addressing injustice and his final act to stand up against an unjust law.

James Farmer Jr.'s storyline follows a similar theme of maturity, but is over the course of the entire film. It is obvious that James is a child at the beginning of the film because he is only fourteen years old and attending a college with older students that made him stand out as a child. His most childlike qualities are that he is naïve and curious, and this is often represented by his actions. James was often unaware of just how intense the racial hatred for African-Americans was in Texas. He was shocked to become involved in the sharecropper raid at the farm when he followed Tolson after the dance. He could not understand why his father did not stand up to the white pig farmers, as evidenced by his verbal attacks in their argument when he came home late from the dance. James remains naïve until the team takes their trip to debate Howard College. On that trip, he witnesses the lynching and argues with Henry about it. In that argument, the fear that James exhibits as well as his questioning of debate as a productive activity reveal that he finally understands how daunting the racism in Texas really was. This argument is immediately followed by James' first debate, in which he loses. The Howard College trip was a devastating experience for James, and it was necessary for the progression of his maturity. James' moment of maturity occurred in the final debate against Harvard College. In the final speech that he delivers, James tells the story of the lynching that he witnessed in order to explain what the law has failed to prevent. Just as his father matured to confront injustice, James quotes his father and St. Augustine in saying that "An unjust law is no law at all" (1:54:56) when arguing on behalf of civil disobedience. This decision to use his own personal experience in his final speech represented James' maturation into a man, just as his father had spoken about at the beginning of the movie. The significance of the Farmer's maturation was that they both achieved maturity through a complete understanding of the injustice at hand and then found the courage to negate that injustice.

Henry Lowe's plot progression and development represents the impact that debate can have on individual students and on society. At the beginning of the film, Lowe is a drunk and a delinquent. He becomes involved in a brawl and finds himself in a position to cut his opponent with a knife. Just before he can, Tolson restrains him, physically saving him from the fate of being a murderer. In the next scene, Tolson offers Lowe a chance to try out for the debate team, creating an image of debate and education that symbolizes a way out of oppression and hardship. Lowe's development continues as he becomes a dominant debater for the team and showcases outstanding potential as an intellectual. Debate effectively saved his life in the sense that altered the direction his life was heading. Not until the lynching was Henry's progression tested, and at that point he had a sort of relapse. After the lynching, he went back out to get drunk and be with a woman who was not Samantha Boone. In his conversation with James the night of the lynching, he is emotionally shaken and devastated by the lynching. This represents the limitation of debate that Henry perceives, which is that although debate could help the individual student, the world outside of debate still consisted of racist, violent structures that would always oppress even the most intelligent African-Americans. According to Ricoeur's concept of emplotment and double temporality, acknowledging the progression of events that occur for these three characters allows the audience and surrounding culture to develop a connection to the story because they must experience the events while the characters experience them.

The final stage of mimesis dictates that the connection made between the *The Great Debaters* and the UDL Movement through shared sign systems and the concept of double temporality results in the realization of those symbols and themes from the film in the UDL Movement. The theme of maturity in *The Great Debaters* has a presence in the UDL Movement as well. In the film, Dr. Farmer and James Farmer Jr. both mature when they fully understand

the injustice that exists in society and when they gain the courage to confront that injustice. In the UDL Movement, this confrontation takes the form of the arguments that the debaters make. The most common arguments made by the former UDL debaters at the collegiate level revolve around confronting the elitist and exclusionary qualities of policy debate. These arguments are typically composed of narratives and some evidence, and delivered in a passionate style of speech. This is the form of debate argument that is present in every debate round portrayed in *The Great Debaters*, suggesting a mutual influence on speech between the film and the UDL Movement. By not playing by the conventional norms of policy debate and emulating the style of the speeches given in the movie, the debaters associated with the UDL Movement mature as people in the same way that the Farmers from *The Great Debaters* matured as people. This concept of maturity reinforces that more UDL and former UDL debaters should reject traditional debate in order to confront injustice and to grow as debaters, which could explain the continual growth of the UDL Movement and the 2013 championships won by the Emporia University debaters.

Henry Lowe's story as portrayed in *The Great Debaters* seems to have been influenced by the original principles of the UDL Movement and to have influenced the progression of the movement as well. Henry was an example of an at-risk young person who was helped by debate. Like many of the debaters who participate in the UDL Movement, he originally lacked access to the type of education that debate could provide for him, but when he did get that access he flourished. This type of inclusion is the founding premise for UDLs, as they seek to give at-risk young people the opportunity to receive a quality education. However, Henry also had his experience with the lynching. This led to him recognizing that even though he was better off, that the world outside of debate was still plagued with racism. Much like Henry, many UDL



Movement debaters reference this issue in their arguments. The argument I witnessed that was made by the Oklahoma University debater appeared to be a manifestation of Henry's realization. Henry watched a lynching that reminded him of the racist structures that exist outside of debate, while the Oklahoma debater lost his student to a violent act. The Oklahoma debater used this act of violence as evidence that the current structure of debate had no influence on disadvantaged individuals in urban communities outside of the activity. The movement is not in place simply to include more people, but also to reform the entire structure of debate in general. While debaters who come out of UDLs could adapt to the rapid fire delivery and unique jargon that exists in the policy debate community, they instead recognize that more students could access policy debate if the rate of speech is slower and less jargon existed. They believe that reformation is necessary because policy debate, in its current form, will always exclude groups of students. As momentum increases for the UDL Movement and these type of arguments for reformation become more frequent, the story of the Wiley College debate team appears to be a parallel model to the movement.

### **Conclusion**

As human beings, we perceive time as we relate to it. The time that we exist in is the only time that we can directly experience, which makes it impossible to authentically experience events that happened in the past. This project should serve as an example of a storytelling that attempted to bridge a series of events from the past to a series of events in the present. While the characters in *The Great Debaters* can never experience the UDL Movement and the UDL Movement Debaters will never have to live in the Jim Crow South, the two had a significant influence on each other. If it were not for the UDL Movement before 2007, *The Great Debaters* would not have been created in the form that it was presented in. The characters likely would have presented their arguments differently in the film without the UDL Movement, because the

only template for policy debate style would be evidence heavy arguments at quicker speeds. The UDL Movement was likely inspiration for the film, as it was already gaining momentum prior to 2007 when the film was created. The film was a manifestation of the UDL Movement itself to some degree.

However, this project demonstrates that the UDL Movement could not influence *The Great Debaters* without also being influenced by the film. The narrative presented in *The Great Debaters* re-emerges in the UDL Movement in the form of arguments, a concept of maturity related to confronting injustice, the valuation of debate and the surge in momentum for the UDL Movement that culminated with Emporia State University's championship wins. As Ricouer's model of mimesis suggests, the telling of the events in *The Great Debaters* aids the UDL Movement debaters actually experience the events and themes, as audiences to the film become connected to the characters and time period. The viewing of the film and multiple retellings of the narrative result in the themes and characteristics of the story coming alive in the UDL Movement, as suggested by Ricouer's concept of refiguration. The UDL Movement growing at a faster rate than ever, winning a championship and adopting the arguments that were common to the arguments in *The Great Debaters* all are evidence that narratives do function within culture according to Ricouer's mimesis.

This project has implications for the policy debate community and future rhetorical criticisms. For the policy debate community, this project explains the phenomenal growth of the Urban Debate League Movement over the course of a decade. The UDL Movement appears to grow larger and faster as time progresses, and this research implies that this is a result of the movement influencing the telling of certain narratives that then re-emerge in the UDL Movement and aid its growth. For rhetorical critics, this project implies that culture cannot be separated

from its narratives. This is because narratives have a temporal characteristic that demonstrates causality in plot development, and audiences to these narratives always develop a connection through viewing and experiencing that causality. Future research should explore Ricoeur's concept of mimesis in other cultures and their narratives, as to develop more conclusive evidence of the connection between cultures and their repeated stories.

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