

A Military Tradition Institutionalized: Rhetorical Personification and Anthropomorphism in “The Rifleman’s Creed”



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There are few more iconic pieces of American literary military history than the Marine Corps’ “The Rifleman’s Creed.” Classifying this statement as poetry would not be stretching the term; at the very least, it is certainly poetic:

This is my rifle. There are many like it, but this one is mine.
My rifle is my best friend. It is my life. I must master it as I
must master my life.

My rifle, without me, is useless. Without my rifle, I am useless.
I must fire my rifle true. I must shoot straighter than my
enemy who is trying to kill me. I must shoot him before he
shoots me. I will...

My rifle and myself know that what counts in this war is not
the rounds we fire, the noise of our burst, nor the smoke we
make. We know that it is the hits that count. We will hit....

My rifle is human, even as I, because it is my life. Thus, I will
learn it as a brother. I will learn its weaknesses, its strength, its

parts, its accessories, its sights and its barrel. I will ever guard it against the ravages of weather and damage as I will ever guard my legs, my arms, my eyes and my heart against damage. I will keep my rifle clean and ready. We will become part of each other. We will ...

Before God, I swear this creed. My rifle and myself are the defenders of my country. We are the masters of our enemy. We are the saviors of my life.

So be it, until victory is America's and there is no enemy, but peace!

This carefully constructed rhetorical text has served as a guiding principle of weapons training and interacting for seven decades of Marines. The general public has become aware of this masterpiece of militaria (though not always in a positive light) through films such as Stanley Kubrick's 1987 *Full Metal Jacket* and Sam Mendes's 2005 *Jarhead*. Typically, Hollywood portrays young Marines reciting the lines of "The Rifleman's Creed" in a mindless cadence, emphasizing the so-called mental "whitewashing" of the impressionable recruits rather than the critical lessons regarding weapons operation, maintenance, and interactions that this cleverly constructed recitation reinforces. The focus in these films is not on the valuable education "The Rifleman's Creed" inspires, but on the reformation of the individual into a Marine; it is portrayed as nothing more than a weapon in the drill instructor's arsenal of tools to chisel the individual into a Xeroxed Marine.

Perhaps the most significant literary-rhetorical device in “The Rifleman’s Creed,” one that is repeated throughout the text, is the use of anthropomorphism. Anthropomorphism, though an ancient literary device, is one that has just recently begun to receive serious investigation from a psychological perspective; that is, how does anthropomorphism alter the mental processes of the person observing/reading the anthropomorphic device and, thus, alter his or her behavior towards the object being anthropomorphized? Nicholas Epley, Adam Waytz, and John T. Cacioppo are at the forefront of this relatively young line of research, specifically analyzing the effects of anthropomorphic devices in advertising. In “On Seeing Human: A Three-Factor Theory of Anthropomorphism,” Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo define anthropomorphism as “imbuing the imagined or real behavior of nonhuman agents with humanlike characteristics, motivations, intentions, and emotions . . . These nonhuman agents may include anything that acts with apparent independence, including nonhuman animals, natural forces, religious deities, and mechanical or electronic devices” (864-65). In “The Rifleman’s Creed,” the rifle is constantly placed within this category of nonhuman agents possessing human traits and relations, thereby continuing a long history of anthropomorphizing armaments.

Almost all military subcultures traditionally have anthropomorphized their weaponry. One of the best known examples of this type of anthropomorphism within American military history comes from perhaps our most notorious military mission: the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The bombs that devastated the two cities were known as Fatman and Little Boy, while the plane that

dropped the bomb on Nagasaki was named the *Enola Gay* after the mother of pilot and mission commander, Paul Tibbets (a fact which practically begs for further investigation, but lies beyond the scope of this article). Literary practice in the English language reflects this military tradition; in the earliest extant English language texts, warriors make this rhetorical move. In *Beowulf*, for example, weapons are often referred to in terms of sentient entities. One notable instance occurs when Beowulf returns Unferth's sword, Hrunting, to him after he attempts to slay Grendel's mother with this borrowed weapon. As Beowulf returns the sword to Unferth, he:

bade then the hard one Hrunting to bear,
The Ecglaſ's son bade to take him his sword, the iron well-
lov'd; gave him thanks for the lending,
Quoth he that the war-friend for worthy he told, full of craft in
the war; nor with word he aught
The edge of the sword. Hah! The high-hearted warrior.
(location 746)

There are a couple of key points of anthropomorphism in this passage. The most obvious, of course, is the reference to the sword as a "war-friend," a comrade in much the same way a fellow warrior would be. This symbiotic relationship between warrior and weapon emphasizes the reciprocity in the relationship between human and object; without the success of the weapon, the warrior would fail. A mutual emotional bond is pre-supposed in this term, with each party protecting the other as a result of the bond.

Hrunting's "failure" in battle, however, calls the integrity of Hrunting's anthropomorphic identity into question; it is a "loaner" sword from a man who (at least earlier in the epic) bore ill-will towards Beowulf. The anonymous author specifically points out that, despite the potential for split-allegiances by Hrunting (to himself and to its prior owner), Beowulf does not blame the sword for its failure in battle; in fact, the author praises his "high-heartedness" for overlooking Hrunting's breakdown. In doing so, he grants the sword agency in its own failure. The terminology is reminiscent of a commander showing understanding for a soldier freezing in combat and gracefully overlooking the fact to his sergeant; the easy move would be for the ranking officer (Beowulf) to blame the lowest-ranking member of the unit (the sword, Hrunting) for failure in his (its) portion of the mission. Instead, he builds up his subordinate (Hrunting) in front of his immediate superior (Unferth, Hrunting's previous owner). The scholarly debate over this scene usually revolves around whether or not Unferth lent Hrunting to Beowulf knowing that the sword would fail him; however, my point is that within the context of the text the possibility of the sword having culpability in its own failure exists only because of the warriors' intense anthropomorphic view of the sword's agency.

A later example of this type of literary anthropomorphism of weaponry appears in David Jones's epic poem, *In Parenthesis*, published in 1937. For Jones, this work served as a recollection of his service during World War I, which "he began writing . . . because nothing he had read about the war had conveyed the experience of it as he remembered it" (iv). This allusive poem ends with the soldier

dying under an oak tree, but as he draws his final, pained breaths his last thoughts are not of his girl back home or his family, but of his rifle. He repeatedly gives it human characteristics, suggesting the he “let it lie bruised for a monument.” The suggestion that the wood and iron of the rifle could be bruised implies that, like the soldier himself, the weapon can feel pain and, like him, will remain as a damaged monument under the oak.

In his dying moments, the soldier’s mind wanders back to training with his rifle during boot camp. He recalls his drill instructor lecturing:

It’s the soldier’s best friend if you care for the working parts and let us be ’aving those springs released smartly in Company billets on wet forenoons and clickerty-click and one up the spout and you men must really cultivate the habit of treating this-weapon with the very greatest care and there should be a healthy rivalry among you—it should be a matter of very proper pride. (Jones 183)

As in *Beowulf*, the speaker refers to his weapon as a friend. Note the historical power and endurance of this particular anthropomorphic device; it occurs in *Beowulf*, *In Parenthesis*, and “The Rifleman’s Creed.” However, the friendship between warrior and weapon is, in all instances, clearly predicated upon the proper cultivation of the relationship by the warrior. In this case, that cultivation is represented by the daily maintenance of the weapon—breaking it down, cleaning the barrel, ensuring the firing pin is properly placed, and all the other countless and, to many, mind-numbing bits of minutia that allow the

weapon to perform when the tactical situation suddenly becomes significantly less boring. Much like any friendship, the relationship requires maintenance in order to perform when outside forces threaten it.

In the next line, Jones is instructed to “Marry it man! Marry it” (183), switching from a masculine anthropomorphic device (“friend”) to a feminine one (a spouse). This statement refers to the level and type of intimacy required between infantrymen and their weapons. Frequently in military circles, this type of statement may be followed by a reference to an actual girlfriend such as “Suzy Rottencrotch” (a derogatory term for an unfaithful partner) who, unlike the weapon, will not be as loyal to you as you are to her. Relationships in the military are notoriously difficult, as the warrior’s obligations to country must always surpass those between partners. Military spouses and partners often learn this fact the hard way and leave the relationship; however, since the weapon is already part of the military, it understands the requirements placed upon the warrior and, rather than fight these requirements, it supports them. Jones’s anthropomorphic comment implies a degree of intimacy and trust which supersedes that of a typical romantic relationship.

He follows up his nuptial prodding by instructing the soldier to “Cherish her, she’s your very own” (183). Here Jones distinguishes a particular rifle from all others, making it a singular subject among many; it is not merely a woman, but it is one which is uniquely his, distinguishable from others and, thus, more precious for its individuality. Note that this technique is also repeated in the very first line of “The Rifleman’s Creed”: “This is my rifle. There are many like

it, but this one is mine.” Personal identification with an individual weapon is an important factor of this type of anthropomorphism. Just as people have unique personalities, warriors are encouraged to think of their weapons in the same manner; regarding it as a piece of mass-produced technology doesn’t encourage loyalty toward the object being anthropomorphized. However, if it is a unique object with its own individual characteristics, then it becomes more valuable because it is so rare, as well as being a warrior’s personal possession. The language here is one not only of individuality, but of intimacy; the rifle is described as a lover and, as such, bears the same priorities of care and concern.

Jones’s speaker next encourages to “Coax it man coax it” (183). Here Jones implies that through persuasive techniques that the weapon will perform better. This brief phrase grants the rifle the possibility of agency. It can respond to the soldier’s logic or emotional pleas to improve its execution; the rifle is not simply a piece of machinery, but a thinking being that can be persuaded to react differently if the argument presented is credible enough.

As the soldier is fading, his anthropomorphic views of his weapon become more intense:

Fondle it like a granny—talk to it—consider it as you would a friend—and when you ground these arms she’s not a rooky’s gas-pipe for greenhorns to tarnish.

You’ve known her hot and cold.

You could choose her from among many.

You know her by her bias, and by her exact error at 300, and
by the deep scar at the small, by the fair flaw in the grain,
above the lower sling-swivel—
But leave it under the oak. (Jones 184)

This intense sequence of anthropomorphism, followed by the soldier's desperate, pained crawl toward the oak (a traditional symbol of British military power) while still maintaining the integrity of his weapon shows how much he has absorbed the lessons of his drill instructor; the weapon must be treasured and maintained at all costs because the soldier is incomplete without it. The soldier's incredibly detailed knowledge of the weapon and obvious reluctance to be parted from it portrays clearly the strength of the familiarity between the two in this heart-rending sequence, clearly displaying how much the soldier values his weapon even as he drags his broken body across the battlefield. Perhaps Jones chose to use primarily (though not exclusively) feminine anthropomorphic devices in this sequence as opposed to masculine ones in order to convey a sense of parting of lovers and deep intimacy, as well as to evoke the traditional protective sense men, particularly warriors, tend to feel toward women.

Through these passages there is not just a single anthropomorphic image, but several quickly layered on top of each other, each one suggesting different emotional responses. It is not the individual images to which the reader responds, but the unique overlap of multiple images brought together in a concise space; the sum of the images, in this case, is greater than the parts. This structure is described by T.S. Eliot in *The Sacred Wood* as the objective

correlative, that is, “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked” (100, Eliot’s emphasis). Through this set of anthropomorphic images, the reader of *In Parenthesis* may come to understand and feel (or at least approximate) what the soldier feels toward his rifle rather than attempting to do so from a single image; the multiplicity of images provides a specific latticework of complex emotions which offer context for the reader to appreciate this scene. For example, though there are certainly several parts of the sequence which suggest lovers, he also uses the term “granny” to describe the rifle, implying a sense of fragility in a way no term referring to a younger woman could possibly call to mind.

Like *In Parenthesis*, the Marine Corps’ “The Rifleman’s Creed” utilizes multiple anthropomorphic images to create a specific emotional framework; however, the rhetorical context of the aforementioned works differs dramatically from that surrounding “The Rifleman’s Creed.” *Beowulf* and *In Parenthesis* are literary works, fictional accounts designed to be read for enjoyment or reflection by their respective audiences. The audiences for these works would likely be, primarily, civilians attempting to *understand* the military sub-culture rather than ones actually considering *joining* that sub-culture. The anthropomorphism in these texts, therefore, is designed not to inspire a particular action in their audiences, but rather to reflect to those audiences the attitudes of the soldiers

carrying the weapons. They are representations of the rhetorical moves made within the military, not the rhetorical moves themselves.

Conversely, “The Rifleman’s Creed” was created with a specific mission in mind. Shortly after Pearl Harbor, Brigadier General William H. Rupertus, Commanding General, Marine Corps Base, San Diego, met with the public relations officer of his base. As a winner of the Distinguished Marksmanship Badge, General Rupertus was concerned that his men understand that “the only weapon which stands between them and Death is the rifle...they must understand that their rifle is their life...it must become a creed with them.” By the next day, General Rupertus had written the core of what would shortly become “The Rifleman’s Creed.” Whereas *Beowulf* and *In Parenthesis* only reflected common military practice, General Rupertus’s text was created specifically to inspire a system of institutionalized conventions, attitudes, and behavior toward the weapon regarding weapon maintenance, interactions, and priorities; by drawing on the anthropomorphic tradition he hoped to introduce a formal tradition of rifle conduct to a new generation of Marines who may well have lacked any proper exposure to weaponry.

Anthropologist Stewart Guthrie’s research focuses on anthropomorphic devices in religion; his signature work, *Faces in the Clouds*, identifies three different types of anthropomorphism (92-96), one of which is highly relevant to understanding the rhetorical situation in General Rupertus’s text. *Literal* anthropomorphism occurs when a non-human entity is misconstrued as actually being human, such as believing in poor lighting that a mannequin is a well-dressed shopper. *Accidental* anthropomorphism transpires when

human characteristics are observed in a non-human animal or object, but the resemblance is considered circumstantial. Guthrie's third type of anthropomorphism, *partial*, is the one in *Beowulf*, *In Parenthesis*, and "The Rifleman's Creed." In this form, objects or animals are regarded as possessing significant human characteristics, yet the one viewing the non-human entity does not consider it to be human in its entirety.

As Pankaj Aggarwal and Ann L. McGill, researchers in the effects of anthropomorphism in consumer behavior, note in "When Brands Seem Human, Do Humans Act Like Brands? Automatic Behavior Priming Effects of Brand Anthropomorphism," those who view objects through this lens use mental schema normally associated with humans when they deal with the anthropomorphized object, though they don't go so far as to consider the object as human in its entirety (469). By anthropomorphizing the rifle in "The Rifleman's Creed," General Rupertus triggered parts of his recruits' brains normally reserved for dealing with other humans rather than those which deal with objects. In Jean Piaget's terms, they are accommodating the new object (the rifle) into existing patterns of behavior (specific images of types of people). This insertion of the rifle into pre-existing schemata encourages a different behavior pattern toward the weapon than simply another "thing" to be dealt with. An example of this psychological alteration would be when the new Marine would care for the weapon in the field. The rifle was to be kept away from mud, water, and other elemental conditions that could harm it; just like a civilian would not ask a friend to sit in mud, the Marine was expected to keep the rifle out of mud. Through anthropomorphism, recruits

would grow to view rifle maintenance as an investment in a relationship, one beneficial to both parties, rather than a mere object to be carried around and adding additional weight to the Marine's load while on a mission.

Key to General Rupertus's rhetorical construction is his move beyond mere personification. Marjorie Delbaere, Edward F. McQuarrie, and Barbara J. Phillips, in their research on the effects of anthropomorphic metaphors and personification on consumer behavior, note that

personification is a *message* characteristic—an option that can be added to a message, while anthropomorphism is an inherent *audience* characteristic—one that allows this particular message option to be effective. However, rhetorical personification goes beyond tapping into anthropomorphism because it also invokes metaphorical processing. The comparison of an object to a human being constructs a metaphor, that is, the object is compared to a person in order to transfer some personal attribute or human quality to the object. (121-22)

On the very surface of “The Rifleman’s Creed,” then, the motivation of this rhetorical metaphor is fairly obvious. There are numerous relations being evoked: best friend in line two; self and brother in line five; defenders, masters, and saviors in line six. Each of these creates a metaphor through which the Marine may then activate new schemata regarding his treatment of the rifle. As in *In Parenthesis*, the objective correlative appears in anthropomorphic fashion, a series of human

images designed to evoke specific emotional responses. However, in “The Rifleman’s Creed” these images are not created simply to inspire emotion, but action. These various metaphors, all of them indicative of the most powerful human relationships that the young Marine had likely experienced up to that point, serve to create a powerful bonding experience with the weapon on numerous levels. “Brother” will bring familial bonds to mind with all of its associated metaphors, such as loyalty and enduring relationships, and perhaps even additional associated metaphors, such as “Blood is thicker than water.”

While one can’t select family, the “best friend” anthropomorphic metaphor triggers intense emotions from selected relationships, implying that the relationship with the rifle is one of the Marine’s own choosing, and that it will in turn reciprocate the emotion given to it; the “friend” metaphor is an enduring one which has carried through all three texts, revealing how engrained this particular metaphor is in military sub-cultures. Both “Defenders” and “Masters” are metaphors of power and are used after the rifle is fully personified as human in line five. Together, these two metaphors imply the capacity to either defend or attack, depending upon the circumstances; they are not limited to one type of warfare. Finally, Rupertus suggests his most powerful metaphor yet: that of savior. In a country largely considered Christian at the time, this metaphor elicits numerous cognates associated with power, redemption, and righteousness, which the Marine could have internalized going into combat, justifying within himself the potentially difficult actions he may commit in conjunction with his rifle.

As powerful as each of these metaphors is on its own, the combination of these various anthropomorphic devices serves to make “The Rifleman’s Creed” such a powerful rhetorical tool—the objective correlative once again impacting the reader, or perhaps more accurately, the speaker, as Marines are required to recite “The Rifleman’s Creed.” For example, the rifle is not just a brother, but a friend; this combination precludes the possibility of either a brother who is distant or even hostile or a friend who is simply a casual acquaintance. The combination of “savior” and “master” eliminates the more passive versions of messianic imagery as well as the more brutal connotations of master. The Venn diagram created by the various anthropomorphic metaphors in “The Riflemen’s Creed” leaves only a very specific overlap, eliminating numerous possibilities of meaning until only a much narrower range of interpretation (though still, obviously, multiple meanings are still available) is possible. Through this intricate weaving of specific anthropomorphic devices, Rupertus creates a relatively cohesive concept of how a new Marine should regard the rifle.

While all of these anthropomorphic metaphors are powerful, and are even more so in their totality, they form only the surface of the complex rhetorical situation into which General Rupertus launched “The Rifleman’s Creed.” Networking these metaphors provides a set of representations to which the newly-formed Marine can relate; “The Rifleman’s Creed” forms as a unique, complex, objective correlative which brings together multiple anthropomorphic images. However, the bigger question is – why use anthropomorphic metaphors at all? That is, with all the potential rhetorical devices at his disposal, why is

the anthropomorphism in “The Rifleman’s Creed” so enduringly effective as a rhetorical tool over several generations, making this text an enduring part of the Marine Corps culture seventy years after its inception?

Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo propose a tri-part formula that examines the usefulness of psychological determinants when people initially access anthropomorphic metaphors, and they discuss the situations when people find it useful to use such metaphors. These are Sociality, Effectance, and Elicited Agent Knowledge (SEEK) (866). “The Rifleman’s Creed” addresses all three of these areas within the context of both training and battlefield operations. I believe that it is these factors which have led to the continued use of “The Rifleman’s Creed” both as a successful rhetorical device in initially training young Marines and its continued useful rhetorical service even after recruits graduate from boot camp and become full-fledged Marines.

The first of the three I will examine is Elicited Agent Knowledge. Humans have an intimate knowledge of themselves as individuals and, to a lesser degree, a broader understanding of human behavior in general. We understand our own behavior patterns, at least to a certain extent, based on our own past decisions and their consequences. Additionally, people tend to have certain cultural expectations (whether accurate or not) based on prior experience as to how people in specific relationship “roles” are expected to behave in given circumstances (though, certainly, there are variations; I do not mean to imply homogeneity of behavior). Brothers are supposed to help you in times of need, mothers should be comforting, best friends should listen to you, etc. However, we tend to possess a lesser

understanding of the behaviors of non-human agents; thus, in order to find a useful schema with which to begin relating to a given non-human agent, we will anthropomorphize it so we may begin to process that agent's behavior patterns.

The anthropomorphic metaphor thus provides a way to start accessing knowledge about the unfamiliar agent until, as more knowledge about the agent is acquired, this schema is corrected from the metaphoric human behavior pattern to the literal behavior pattern of the non-human agent (Waytz et al 411-12). As such, Elicited Agent Knowledge would be a specific anthropomorphic construct of Piaget's concept of assimilation (the integration of a new concept into an existing schema) and accommodation (the modification of an existing schema to permit the inclusion of the new concept) (Block 282). The Marines, seeking a way to the function of the rifle, assimilate it under these known categories of specific human behavior, accommodating it within these schemata. "The Rifleman's Creed" begins this process of Elicited Agent Knowledge by providing new recruits with a specific way of acquiring knowledge about the rifle. The clearest example of this determinant occurs in line five, which states, "Thus, I will learn it as a brother. I will learn its weaknesses, its strength, its parts, its accessories, its sights and its barrel." By describing the method of knowing the rifle as the process of knowing a brother, General Rupertus metaphorically informs the recruits that this is a procedure that, like knowing one's sibling, will take time. It will require intimacy with all aspects of the rifle, not merely with the exterior, but with the interior components as well.

Though this degree of knowledge is considered commonplace within military subcultures, General Rupertus was largely dealing with a new group of raw recruits, many of whom had minimal experience with weaponry. Those who grew up with a military parent or in a household with weapons would already understand such things as weaponry maintenance, the importance of knowing how to assemble the weapon, or valuing the weapon as an equal on the battlefield. However, with this uninitiated force such a background was far from a given factor. By providing these anthropomorphic images, General Rupertus constructs a framework for his young Marines to begin instituting a new knowledge base, one in which the rifle would be considered a partner and comrade on the battlefield and without which the new Marine would be unable to function.

The rifle is situated within a series of metaphors which allow recruits to draw on their existing knowledge of specific mental patterns to begin to acquire knowledge of the rifle. This set of anthropomorphic metaphors draws on a tendency already inherent in humans from their childhood, which Piaget describes as “animism.” In *The Developmental Psychology of Piaget*, which attempts to bring Piaget’s concepts of childhood development into a fairly brief yet cohesive single volume, John H. Flavell describes animism as the “tendency to endow physical objects and events with the attributes of biological-psychological entities, e.g., to endow them with life, consciousness, will, etc.” (281). As such, the metaphors in “The Rifleman’s Creed” are simply taking advantage of a psychological tendency present in children and, thus, still available to adults. In this particular case, the adults are in the process of almost completely

reconfiguring the way in which they view and respond to the world as they transfer from civilian to military life. I would argue that this personality overhaul would make them more susceptible to learning tactics traditionally considered more appropriate for children.

While this particular application of anthropomorphism is initially useful, as the new Marines acquire knowledge of the weapon itself anthropomorphizing the rifle becomes both less useful and, quite possibly, even problematic. As Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo point out, “As knowledge about nonhuman agents is acquired, however, knowledge about humans or the self should be less likely to be used as a basis for induction simply because of the coactivation (and perhaps eventual substitute activation) of alternate knowledge structures at the time of judgment” (866). So, as Marines gain more specific firsthand knowledge about the weapon through personal experience and daily use, the metaphors become less useful as a way of gaining knowledge about it; eventually, direct experience with the weapon should replace the metaphorical relationship created by the anthropomorphic devices in “The Rifleman’s Creed.” As such, one of the primary purposes of using anthropomorphism—convincing the Marines to know their weapon intimately—ironically ends up negated by the Marines fulfilling that very purpose.

Despite this particular functional negation, “The Rifleman’s Creed” continues to operate as an integral part of Marine culture even after recruits leave boot camp. As such, the text must have cultural purpose for Marines beyond simply initiating the morphology of their relationship with the weapon. A second, more enduring motivation of

the anthropomorphic metaphors in “The Rifleman’s Creed” is sociality. Sociality is described as:

the need and desire to establish social connections with other humans. Anthropomorphism enables satisfaction of this need by enabling a perceived humanlike connection with nonhuman agents. In the absence of social connection to other humans . . . people create human agents out of nonhumans through anthropomorphism to satisfy their motivation for social connection. (Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo 866)

Thus, the anthropomorphic metaphors do more than just provide a mental schema for processing information about an unfamiliar non-human agent, a purpose which, once fulfilled, would render them less than useless. They also provide a way of dealing with situations in which an individual can feel isolated or detached from normal human contact. Combat environments certainly qualify as an abnormal social situation, which in turn can lead to feelings of seclusion in combatants (Burgess et al. 59). By anthropomorphizing the rifle, “The Rifleman’s Creed” provides an outlet for sociality through the evocation of specific familiar relationships in an environment where the participants may be feeling particularly isolated.

Many of the troops during World War II, as well as subsequent wars, were removed from “normal” social circumstances with their accompanying communal support systems and placed into a highly stressful situation with unfamiliar comrades who they may or may not get along with or even trust. In relation to the Vietnam War, Daniel Burgess, Nicole Stockey, and Kara Coen examine the effects of combat

trauma and suggest that “Young men were flown into battle and asked to fight alongside fellow soldiers and under commanding officers whom they had never before met” (59). Though they were speaking directly about Vietnam, this comment could equally apply to any modern military conflict. As such, the anthropomorphic metaphors not only provide a social outlet for combat participants, but the nature of those relationships is familiar and comforting at a time when the relationships to which they are accustomed are both missing and most needed. Metaphors such as this will evoke specific emotions that run counter to the intensely stressful and negative conditions brought about by war and will provide a social proxy for those relationships at a time when the support of the “brother” and the “best friend” is most needed.

In addition to providing a social outlet, anthropomorphism also increases Effectance. Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo provide this definition:

Effectance involves the motivation to interact effectively with nonhuman agents . . . and operates in the service of enhancing one’s ability to explain complex stimuli in the present and to predict the behavior of these stimuli in the future. Attributing human characteristics and motivations to nonhuman agents increases the ability to make sense of an agent’s actions, reduces the uncertainty associated with an agent, and increases confidence in predictions of this agent in the future. (866)

This factor provides a predictive model upon which Marines can base their weapon's behavior. War is always an uncertain proposition with the highest possible stakes: the life and death of themselves and their comrades-at-arms. Through anthropomorphism the predictive model allows Marines a way to interpret the behavior patterns of the weapon in a way that will ensure it will be there for them in a specific manner; "brothers" and "best friends" will reasonably be expected to attempt to protect and assist them when in times of crisis, and by anthropomorphizing the rifle in this manner the Marine will thereby expect the weapon to behave in the same way. In this manner, the anthropomorphic metaphor helps allay the fears typically associated with the behavior of a new technology. Many new Marines may have never used a rifle, especially a military-issued weapon. As such, they would have no engrained predictive mental schema to attach to the rifle. By providing accessible and comforting schemas through which the new Marines could comprehend the rifle's actions, General Rupertus eased concerns over its performance in battle.

While this basic form of anthropomorphism—the simple imbuing of human traits via a recited poetic creed—may seem a fairly mild associative method, this simplistic approach doesn't mean that it doesn't possess a high degree of efficacy. Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo argue that even "weak versions of anthropomorphism in which inferences may appear to be simple metaphorical reasoning may matter more than intuition would suggest. Metaphors that might represent a very weak form of anthropomorphism can still have a powerful impact on behavior, with people behaving toward agents in ways that are consistent with these metaphors" (867). Thus, simply

putting these metaphors into “The Rifleman’s Creed” should evoke behavior patterns toward the rifle consistent with the human metaphor which the text is describing; the anthropomorphism depicted does not have to be overly complex or intricate.

Therefore, through the anthropomorphic metaphors in “The Rifleman’s Creed,” General Rupertus provided not only a schema for new Marines to relate to their weapon, but he also institutionalized those traditional metaphors into Marine Corps culture. Even after they graduated from boot camp and took to the battlefield, Marines would draw continuing benefits from those metaphors. The anthropomorphism engrained by constant repetition of “The Rifleman’s Creed” meant that the rifle would provide Marines with a relatable and (mentally, at least) reliable companion in times of crisis. Also, by regarding their weapons as human companions, Marines would understand that they must invest time and effort into their relationships with their rifles, much as they would do with a human companion, to ensure that it/they functioned smoothly.

While the tradition of anthropomorphizing weapons is likely as old as war itself, General Rupertus’s move of institutionalizing that tradition brought new Marines into military weaponry culture much more quickly than if they had been left to their own means. Memorization and repetition of the anthropomorphic metaphors saved valuable time in teaching raw recruits proper conduct towards their weapon, as well as saving time in forming the “friendship” and “brother” bonds with their weapon. Still an integral part of today’s Marine Corps culture, “The Rifleman’s Creed” continues to provide guidance to Marines, both veterans and recruits.

This rhetorical perspective differs from the representation of “The Rifleman’s Creed” as shown in *Full Metal Jacket* or *Jarhead*. The primarily civilian audiences of these types of films do not seek to learn how to treat a rifle for themselves, nor do they have reasonable cause to do so. They merely wish to see an image of how Marines conduct themselves with the weapon. Because of this distinction of audience, the subtleties of the actions which “The Rifleman’s Creed” inspires in Marines are lost on civilians in theaters or at home on their couches, and appear to be simply mindless repetition of a chant with little purpose other than converting young people into military drones. This powerful text should be recognized as a rhetorical masterpiece, not derided as an overly simplistic hypnotic mnemonic.

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