

The Use of Quantity/Numbers as a Rhetorical Technique in “Scrubbing in Maine”

Every author has a goal. In a work of fiction, this goal may be mere entertainment. In other forms of writing the goal may be to inspire, to inform, to persuade and so on. In the case of the investigative work Nickel and Dimed, author Barbara Ehrenreich’s goal is very specific. She aims to clearly demonstrate the situation of the working poor. She hopes to educate the privileged members of middle-class America about the impossibility of surviving well in a minimum- or near-minimum-wage job. She is trying to attack the apathy of the middle class toward those who are economically less fortunate. Ehrenreich’s main style is anecdotal; she seeks to create empathy in the reader through her descriptive stories of her experiences, and the people she meets. However, as she also wishes this book to be seen a work of fact, presenting information that should encourage the reader to rethink their attitudes, she borrows a technique more often seen in scientific writing: the use of numerical facts and figures to support the thesis described. This essay will explore Ehrenreich’s exploitation of scientific writing styles in the chapter “Scrubbing in Maine.”

Ehrenreich uses numbers in a variety of ways in this chapter. At the start of “Scrubbing in Maine,” she is searching for a somewhat affordable place to live while she’s working. Here Ehrenreich uses numbers as examples of the high rents available to someone who is poor. In order to live in town, one must pay at least one thousand dollars per month¹. This is almost double the amount Ehrenreich pays by living thirty minutes’

¹ Ehrenreich, Barbara: Nickel and Dimed. (Owl Books; 2001); 54.

drive from her workplace—in a less desirable location (55). These numbers show the somewhat drastic lengths a low-wage worker must go to in order to live and work in a society dominated by the middle class—by the people who can afford the thousand dollars per month to live in town.

Another use of numbers is in Ehrenreich's inclusion of wages. She describes each of her many job interviews and informs the reader of the wage she would be given at each job. All of these jobs are considered low-waged, unskilled labor. The least amount she is offered is five dollars per hour while the most is around seven dollars and fifty cents (61). By describing the difficulty of the work expected at each job, Ehrenreich hopes the reader will develop an understanding of the injustice of these wages. Every single job is highly physical and requires at least some level of mental involvement. The emphasis on the wages offered helps Ehrenreich to underline the reality of these jobs. Ehrenreich is not just telling a story; the reader can go and check these facts for themselves. Perhaps Ehrenreich hopes that the reader, who is probably middle class, and perhaps not someone familiar with low wage work, really will go and check these figures, and so get firsthand experience of the world she describes.

Barbara Ehrenreich's most direct use of numbers as a rhetorical technique is in her use of footnotes. Her entire book has the anecdotal quality of a biography or memoir, but she breaks this style up distinctly with her biting critical footnotes, which have the tone of a scientific or economic text. She describes everything from the hike in housing prices during tourist season (55) to the sizes of newly-built houses for the wealthy (81) to the

terrible understaffing of nursing homes and its risk to patient health/safety (105). In these footnotes Ehrenreich nearly always includes a statistic of some kind. These statistics are intended to display not only the deplorable conditions with which the working poor must suffer but also the apathy felt by the middle- and upper-classes toward these conditions. In these footnotes the reader comes to understand Ehrenreich's true feelings about the situation of the working poor and, if Ehrenreich's writing is accomplishing her initial goal, beginning to develop his or her own opinions.

As an anecdotal author, Ehrenreich is very skilled. Her story is both informative and engaging. However, it is obvious that this is not the purpose of her writing. Ehrenreich does not directly aim to entertain or amuse her readers. Nickel and Dimed is much more probing and thought-provoking than a piece written merely for the sake of entertainment. Barbara Ehrenreich wants her readers to think seriously about the situation of the working poor and, perhaps, do something to change it, and so she borrows a feature of the scientific or economic text book, by using numbers as supporting evidence for her anecdotes. The use of numbers as a persuasive technique is one tool she utilizes very skillfully for this purpose. By borrowing from scientific writing in this way, Ehrenrich reinforces her message to readers, giving her anecdotal style of writing a solid inner core of fact.