

Rhetorical Criticism Assignment (20%)

Background: We began our work in this course by learning about marginalized and dominant histories of rhetoric. For the past few weeks, we have learned more about how those histories of rhetoric have provided a foundation for the practice of Rhetorical Criticism. According to Foss (2018), rhetorical criticism is, “a qualitative research method that is designed for the systematic investigation and explanation of symbolic acts and artifacts for the purpose of understanding rhetorical processes” (pg. 6). In this assignment, you are invited to produce an essay of rhetorical criticism on an artifact of your choice.

Assignment Details: You will use your notes, weekly course modules, course readings, and the additional resources provided to produce a rhetorical criticism essay. Your essay should be between 1,000 – 1,500 words. The chapters that you read from *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice* by Sonja K. Foss will be especially critical to your process for completing this essay. As discussed in the modules, chapter 2 provides a guide for selecting an artifact and writing the essay. Chapters 3 – 11 provide directions for how to complete your analysis based on your chosen critical approach. You will only read one of these chapters in detail. Finally, **this assignment does not require a literature review**. However, you want to be sure to cite any necessary quotes or artifacts using MLA format. Here’s how we will complete this assignment:

1. **Select an Artifact:** After engaging with week 5 course lecture content, you should have enough information to select an artifact. For this assignment, you should choose a contemporary artifact that was produced within the last 3 – 4 years. Remember, your artifact can be a song, poem, hashtag, work of art, commercial, award show speech, or any other “instance of symbol use that is of interest to you and seems capable of generating insights about rhetorical processes” (Foss, p. 9). In very rare cases, you may need to select a series of artifacts. For example, you may want to produce a rhetorical criticism essay on 3 outfits worn at the Met Gala. Or perhaps, you’d like to analyze a series of award show acceptance speeches by Dan Levy or Viola Davis. If this is the case, then you’ll want to provide justification for working with more than one artifact. This essay has a maximum limit, which is more than enough room to complete a robust analysis of one artifact, so please only select more than one artifact if necessary (like if the items are in a series or if you are thinking beyond the course). **You’ll want to select an artifact and request approval (verbal or written) from your tutorial instructor by 5pm on Friday October 8th.**

2. **Week 6:** During reading week, you will not have any additional lecture content or meet for tutorials. In relation to this assignment, a great use of time for this week would be to read the chapter associated with your selected critical approach and conduct your initial analysis. You'll read one of the following chapters:
 - Chapter 3 – Neo Aristotelian Criticism
 - Chapter 4 – Cluster Criticism
 - Chapter 5 – Fantasy-Theme Criticism
 - Chapter 6 – Feminist Criticism
 - Chapter 7 – Generic Criticism
 - Chapter 8 – Ideological Criticism
 - Chapter 9 – Metaphoric Criticism
 - Chapter 10 – Narrative Criticism
 - Chapter 11 – Pentadic Criticism

These critical approaches are introduced in week 5 lecture material and content. Use the brief introductions and the additional links provided to decide which approach will be best for your chosen artifact. There is no specific due date for this portion of the assignment, but you should have all of this done before we meet for tutorial in week 7.

3. **Week 7:** During tutorials, we will peer-review and workshop your research questions. In order to arrive at your research question, you will need to have completed your analysis. You should submit your research questions the morning of your tutorial by the submission method preferred by your tutorial instructor. The lecture for this week will cover integrating your research questions and will be posted earlier than usual to allow you some time to prepare your question.
4. **Week 8:** This is the week your essay is due.

Assignment Submission Details and Format: Your final essay should be uploaded to eClass by 11:59 pm on October 31st, 2021. You should use MLA format for your assignment. This means that your essay should have the following formatting elements:

- Heading
- Title
- Double-Spaced
- Works Cited Page

Additional Writing Resources: In addition to office hours, The Writing Centre is available for all your writing needs! You can make an appointment at the Writing Centre at any stage in your process. I'd recommend a visit to The Writing Centre at least once during this process (especially if you think this essay could be a portfolio piece).

Notes on Assessment: In Chapter 2, Foss provides a heuristic that will be used to assess your work for this assignment. As always, assessment will be based on whether these areas are substantially developed, somewhat developed, or scant. Here's a brief overview of each area:

- **Justification:** This area of assessment will focus on your claims, evidence, and reasoning. In other words, your argument should be fully supported by each of these three elements. It is good practice to use these terms in your essay if you need to see where you are clearly making these moves, or if you'd like the reader to see where you are clearly making these moves. For example, you might signpost with a sentence like, "We see evidence of ___(claim)___ through___."
- **Reasonable Inference:** You must show how you arrived at your claim from the data of your artifact. The beauty in an essay of rhetorical criticism is that the reader doesn't have to agree with your claims, but they should be able to see how you reasonable arrived at your claims based on how you connect them to your artifact.
- **Coherence:** Foss states that, "You must order, arrange, and present your findings so that they form a unified whole, created through clear and logical links among ideas and structure" (p. 26). In other words, you want to make sure the order of your essay makes sense. Again, it's always good to sign post for the reader to make your arrangement clearer ("First, we see....").

An addition to the elements discussed by Foss, there are a few other areas you should tend to in completing your essay:

- **State Your Critical Approach/Method:** This may seem obvious, but it is an easy one to forget. You do not need to describe your approach in full detail, but you should be sure the reader knows that you are analyzing your artifact using ___(insert critical approach/method here)___.
- **State Your Research Question/Thesis Statement**
- **Application in Activism:** In Chapter 2 (specifically page 22-24), Foss offers instructions for how to apply your analysis in activism. While this is not required for this essay, it is highly suggested. We do not cover activism in depth in this course, but any effort to apply your analysis in activism will be extremely beneficial.

Thoughts Beyond the Course:

As the course director, I am committed to ensuring that your assignments find life beyond the course. For that reason, I'd like to encourage you to select an artifact that will serve that purpose. This may mean that you'd like to seek special permission to work outside of the boundaries of the assignment requirement. For example, perhaps an artifact that is relevant for an industry you'd like to work in was produced 5 years ago (beyond the 3–4-year requirement). If you find yourself in this situation or similar, please do reach out to your tutorial instructor to discuss options for doing the work that best suits your goals. You should not work outside of the boundaries of the assignment requirements without permission.

Feminist Rhetoric Displayed in Little Women (2019)

Women in film has been a term that has been present within the film industry for over thirty years now. Film has always been a heavily white male-dominated world and only recently opening itself up to more storytelling where the stories this time come from women—mainly white women, but that is a separate discussion entirely. Women in film is slowly altering itself within the film industry. Feminist filmmakers have begun to make a name for themselves along with an inspiring impact for future female filmmakers to admire within the industry. These types of filmmakers are constructing ways of being within their stories that are independent of accepted and conventional norms (Foss, 154). The overused damsel in distress is no longer in distress and in need of male assistance, she's got it handled. The girl no longer lusts after the boy, and in an attempt to secure his love for her she alters her appearance (by altering, we mean straightening her hair and calling it a makeover). Feminist criticism's goal is to disrupt these hegemonic structures that are present within film. Foss mentions how feminist criticism "has its roots in feminism, a social and political movement initiated to improve the lives of women" (Foss, 1). For decades the rhetoric presented to women was consistently the homely wife and obeying daughter who needed assistance from a man for every decision they made in their life. The rhetorical element of feminist film intends to disrupt every inch of the hegemonic structure. What this essay aims to showcase, using the 2019 Little Women film adaption trailer, is how feminist filmmakers construct ways of being that are independent of these overused, accepted, and conventional norms specifically through the use of behaviour and dialogue (Foss, 154).

The story of Meg, Amy, Beth, and Jo has been retold countless times before. For this specific analysis using the feminist approach, the 2019 Little Women trailer will be used for this purpose. We're introduced to four sisters living through the colonial era, an era historically

known for its rampant misogyny and racism (not much difference from today). For this context, we will be specifically targeting the misogyny, and how feminist filmmakers challenge and respond to these types of views. A way in which feminist filmmakers challenge these hegemonic ways is through a term Foss classifies as resourcement. Resourcement, according to Foss “offers a way for rhetors to disrupt an established frame” (Foss, 150). There are two areas of resourcement. “The first process of resourcement is disengagement, walking away from the conflict. The second process involves formulating a response within a new frame or developing a creative response to the message being offered” (Foss, 150). Resourcement is found within the 2019 *Little Women* trailer where we overhear Jo March’s editor, an old white man, say in regard to her novel, “if your main character is a girl, make sure she’s married by the end.” This would be classified as the first process of resourcement, disengagement, as we don’t witness Jo’s immediate response to the editor. Instead, we witness the second step of resourcement through a creative and comical response made by Jo indirectly towards the editor by punching Laurie in the arm out front of a theatre as her ‘response’ when in reality the two scenes shown have nothing to do with one another. The act of punching Laurie shows how Jo would have liked to respond to her editor if she could. The response to the editor’s misogyny was done so using physical violence that normatively isn’t expected of women towards men. The conventionality of women needing to be proper and married was dismissed once Jo laid her first punch on Laurie’s arm as her response to the requirement made by her editor.

However, the disruption of these conventional norms of being married and seen as ‘proper’ is not dismissed in a way that reveals this kind of being as a negative for *all* women. With the use of generating multiple perspectives on a subject, according to Foss, is by “deliberately seeking out perspectives that are different from theirs” (Foss, 148). We see Meg

comforting Jo on her wedding day after being asked to run away with her saying, “just because my dreams are different than yours, it doesn’t make them unimportant.” The audience is left to ask questions and articulate their own problems and solutions as mentioned by Foss (Foss, 148). We are not told that wanting to be married and have a family (this is the context of the quote) is wrong, rather we are presented with the idea that it’s okay to make choices for yourself that either follow or do not follow conventional ways of being so long as it is what you want.

The idea of generating multiple perspectives can similarly be used within the feministic approach of cultivating ambiguity or imaginative possibility. Cultivating ambiguity “deliberately constructs messages that are unclear, unexact and open to more than one interpretation” (Foss, 149). Imaginative possibility synonymously contains an invitation to openness (Foss, 149). We’re witnesses to this type of rhetoric when Aunt March informs Jo that she’ll “need to marry well”. In response, Jo states how Aunt March is not married herself, therefore why does she need to be upheld to this standard, to which Aunt March responds the reasoning simply being that she’s rich. We aren’t provided a conventional or hegemonic reason as to why Aunt March is rich. The message is ambiguous and open for the audience to interpret the reason behind Aunt March being wealthy for themselves. Imagination is encouraged. The normative way of being to suggest the reason behind her wealth is because she married into it. However, we were provided the context of Aunt March being both unmarried and rich. This allows the audience through imaginative possibility to create their own reasoning behind Aunt March’s wealth that doesn’t conform to hegemonic or normative ways.

Even though we’re presented with ways of being that are independent of accepted and conventional norms, Foss mentions how feminist rhetoric may not always work with audiences and characters. Foss writes, “you may also discover that some strategies of disruption used by a

rhetor do not have the intended effect of producing new meanings and an alternative world” (Foss, 154). It’s almost as if feminist rhetoric is expected to be a miss. It’s even exemplified at the end of the *Little Women* trailer. Where, after all the ways feminist rhetoric and feminism as a whole is presented and conventional norms are challenged and relayed to the audience/listener, (listener being the editor of Jo), the editor of Jo asks of the main character, “so, who does she marry?” This is a perfect depiction of just how feminism rhetoric but also *feminism* can be misinterpreted or even ignored entirely by audiences.

Just because however, feministic rhetoric is not understood by all, does not mean we should stop challenging the conventional norms and hegemonic ways of being that are depicted within filmmaking and life. As Foss mentioned as one of the ways in which feminist rhetoric may be used, enacting, which involves “embodying the point they are making about the new reality they desire,” (Foss, 152), can certainly be used as an audience member within our own reality, not just used explicitly within filmmaking. As audience members, we enact whether it be a positive enacting or a negative one. Children exit the theatre after witnessing a new Marvel superhero movie and suddenly they have superpowers as well. Trump supporters watch the last hour of the movie *The Patriot* and suddenly they’re storming the Capitol believing they’re true patriots. We all go through enacting when we watch films, we’re influenced by what is provided to us, we desire a certain change to our own world. However, with feminist rhetoric specifically, it seems to be much more difficult to work into the minds of audiences as we are still challenging the patriarchy and its hold on women even today. But just as women in film was considered an impossible and an outlandish term, doesn’t mean feminist filmmaking can’t make a similar impact within the industry and with its audiences. So long as we continue with the challenging of hegemonic ways of being and construct ways that are independent of accepted and conventional

norms, perhaps we can create a normative approach to filmmaking that doesn't require the strategic rhetoric when presenting feminism. Until that day, it is up to the women in film to create a pathway that continuously challenges the normative ways that people, but specifically women, are upheld too today.

Work Cited

Foss, Sonja K. *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*. 5th ed., Waveland Press, 2018.

Sony Pictures, director. *Little Women (2019)*. *YouTube*, YouTube, 13 Aug. 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AST2-4db4ic>. Accessed 30 Oct. 2021.

