

The Effect of Aly Raisman's Victim Impact Statement

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In 2016, Mr. Larry Nassar was accused of molesting over 125 females and having possession of child pornography during his employment for the USA Gymnastics national team and Michigan State University (Dyer, 2017). USA Gymnastics serves as nation-wide governing body for gymnastics creating rules and regulations to keep the athletes of the sport safe (USA Gymnastics). Nassar was a doctor who was contracted by both USA Gymnastics and Michigan State University (Dyer, 2017). He was also on boards and committees of USA Gymnastics which helped create rules and regulations that would allow athletes to avoid harm, injuries, and abuse (MusicFanatic11, 2018, 6:10). Being such a decorated physician, complaints against Nassar sexually abusing the athletes had been ignored by USA Gymnastics and Michigan State University since before some of those athletes were born, 1997 (Dyer, 2017). Nassar only, “admitted to digitally penetrating seven girls while pretending to treat their injuries,” (Dyer, 2017).

Throughout the month of January in 2018, Nassar was on trial and many survivors came forward to present a victim impact statement (Cacciola & Mather, 2018). Aly Raisman was one of those survivors who is an Olympic gymnast (Cacciola & Hauser, 2018). Raisman competed in the 2012 and 2016 Olympic Games winning a variety of medals and becoming the “most decorated American gymnast at the 2012 Games, winning 3 medals,” (Aly Raisman, n.d.). While training for the Olympic Games throughout her life time, Raisman and other competitive gymnasts were under the supervision of USA Gymnastics, which in turn led to their contact with Larry Nassar. Aly Raisman presents a victim impact statement at Larry Nassar's trial in order to provide insight of the effects of the abuse. Raisman addresses many audiences during her victim impact statement including the judge, Mr. Nassar, USA Gymnastics, and others who have been through similar trauma.

This paper will discuss how Aly Raisman uses multiple rhetorical techniques in order to present a persuasive argument to her multiple audiences. Raisman uses the three appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos, to captivate her audience and bring them to her side.

Method

The purpose of rhetorical techniques is to better communicate with the audience(s) and create a relationship in which they identify the speaker. It is important to use these techniques in order to gain support from the audience(s). Using an Aristotelian framework, there are three major "tools of persuasion" that are used in order to make the best argument to one's audience (Heinrichs, 2017; *The Forest of Rhetoric*, n.d.). According to Aristotle, the best arguments are made by character, emotion, and logic; These terms are also often referred to as ethos, pathos, and logos (Heinrichs, 2017). Ethos appeals to one's credibility, character, and reputation (Heinrichs, 2017; *The Forest*, n.d.). Using this argument tool allows the audience to trust the persuader, making them more likely to believe the person's argument (Heinrichs, 2017). Pathos is also important when presenting an argument. Pathos is an argumentative tool that allows the arguer to use emotional appeals to have the audience sympathize with them (Heinrichs, 2017; *The Forest*, n.d.). This is what moves the audience so that they will take action regarding the issue (Heinrichs, 2017; *The Forest*, n.d.). Finally, logos is using logic in order to provide facts and evidence that support the argument and further persuade the audience in favor of the arguer (Heinrichs, 2017; *The Forest*, n.d.).

In the case of this artifact, Aly Raisman uses all of these techniques, however, she begins her argument establishing her character so that her audience trusts and respects her. This is her most dominant appeal of her argument. Proceeding the establishment of credibility, Raisman makes statements that evoke emotion so that her audience may act against the issue and problem of sexual abuse/assault. Raisman concludes her argument with logical statements of the steps that

could/should have been taken in order to avoid the sexual abuse from continuing. Arguments are often concluded with emotional statements in order to evoke a sense of urgency to act on the issue. However, Raisman likely concluded with logical facts in order to leave her audience with thoughts and questions regarding the true intentions of USA Gymnastics.

Analysis:

To begin, Aly Raisman establishes her credibility, showing the audience that she is dependable and honest. Raisman begins her statement by addressing the judge "Your Honor," which is an automatic appeal to her ethos (MusicFanatical, 2018, 0:23). This provides a natural level of respect between Raisman and her "opponent/audience" the judge. The judge can be viewed as both an opponent and audience because this is whom Raisman is directly speaking to. However, the judge is also the authoritative power that determines the amount of time in prison that Mr. Nassar will receive for the crimes he has committed. Proceeding addressing the judge, Raisman thanks the judge for the opportunity and time that she has allotted herself and the other survivors to speak (MusicFanatical, 2018). This demonstrates to all of the audiences involved that Raisman is relating to them in that their time is valuable. It is important to show this recognition because Raisman is more likely to gain the trust of the audience because she is showing that she respects them.

Although Raisman makes a point to show her credibility and gain the trust of her audience, it is almost unnecessary. There is a built-in ethos for Raisman because credibility of her well-known status. She is a two-time Olympic gymnast who has received multiple medals, including golds (USA Gymnastics). She is often in the spotlight of the media and is very knowledgeable about the sport. Raisman has been involved in gymnastics since she was two years old (USA Gymnastics). Raisman provides insight that she has been working with USA Gymnastics for a number of years and that she is well informed of their tactics and habits. Her

ethos is effective because she is so well known and respected which also provides a large audience to listen to the issue at hand: sexual assault.

Aly Raisman was sexually assaulted by Larry Nassar when she was 15 years old (Niemi, 2018). Raisman directly addresses her abuser, Larry Nassar, stating "You think this is hard for you? Imagine how all of us feel" (MusicFanatical, 2018, 2:47). This is an example of the art of decorum. **Decorum** is fitting in and connecting with the audience. Of course, Raisman is not doing this with Nassar, but she is connecting with the larger audience at hand, the survivors. The trauma that they had to endure was awful but has allowed Raisman to connect with them in a way that others are unable to.

On multiple occasions, Raisman uses **rhetorical virtue** in order to continue showing the audience her genuine character and that she feels connected to them. More importantly, her beliefs and values are shared with her audience of survivors and the judge. "Treatments with you were mandatory, you took advantage of that" (MusicFanatical, 2018, 3:08). This statement, claiming that Nassar used his power in his advantage, is a belief shared among the survivors. Later, Raisman then turns the power over to the survivors stating that they will be sure he answers to his actions (MusicFanatical, 2018, 4:24). The audience and Raisman value the power that they have to stand up against Nassar and to provide experiential evidence of the trauma so that he is punished and unable to harm other young girls. The virtue among the survivors of these events remains strong through the various statements that were provided.

Practical wisdom becomes another rhetorical tool that Aly Raisman uses in order to appeal to ethos as a persuasive strategy. **Practical wisdom** means to show the audience that you always do the right thing. It is providing quick logic to the group and presenting how things should be (Heinrichs, 2017). The notion refers to doing the right thing for the benefit of the group rather than for one's self. At the end of her statement, Raisman states "My dream is that

one day, everyone will know what the words 'me too' signify, but they will be educated and able to protect themselves from predators like Larry. So that they will never ever ever have to say the words 'me too'" (MusicFanatical, 2018, 12:46). It may benefit Raisman to make this statement in order to have an effect on Larry Nassar's sentencing. However, this statement specifically states her end goal that others will not have to experience the same trauma her and others endured while under the medical supervision of Larry Nassar. Making the statement may also have been therapeutic for Raisman, but her overall goal is to prevent this from happening to others which shows her practical wisdom.

Another ethos technique that Raisman uses is a **virtuous pose**. Raisman speaks about the USA Gymnastics president and CEO, Kerry Perry, coming to listen to the impact statements of the survivors (MusicFanatical, 2018, 7:20). Kerry Perry claimed that those statements would impact her future decisions as President and CEO of USA Gymnastics, however, Raisman continues her speech by stating that she had left half way through the statements and has not communicated with anyone after leaving (MusicFanatical, 2018, 7:30). Virtuous pose is gaining support from the audience by showing that you are better than your opponent. It is often used to deal with a bully that challenges one's ethos. In this case, there are two major bullies: Larry Nassar and USA Gymnastics. Nassar is the obvious bully, as he is on trial for sexually abusing more than 125 athletes (Dyer, 2017). USA Gymnastics is also a bully because they had been made aware of the assaults but did not take action. Although USA Gymnastics CEO and President, Kerry Perry, is one of the various audiences Raisman is addressing, she wins over the larger audience of the judge, the other survivors, and other young women who have endured similar situations. The bully in Raisman's situation is Larry Nassar and USA Gymnastics. Larry Nassar is the bully because he sexually abused Rasiman and USA Gymnastics was aware of the situation because Raisman and other girls had reported the abuse. Raisman calmly deals with

both of them by addressing them in her statement and providing factual evidence against them (MusicFanatical, 2018, 5:40). If one were to view this statement from the audience perspective of Kerry Perry, this was not an effective technique to use. Ms. Perry will likely feel attacked by Raisman and may not want to act in the way that is necessary for the purpose and benefit of future athletes, and more specifically, gymnasts.

Using ethos tools is one of Ms. Raisman's most effective strategies in her argument. Raisman uses her larger audience to her advantage with these techniques. The small audiences of USA Gymnastics and Larry Nassar are also important, however, Raisman gains strength and power in her argument by using the larger audience. The larger audience views her as credible and has strong relations with her and support her argument. There is a limited amount of persuasion that is necessary in order for Raisman to prove to her audience that she is credible, however, she still works hard to prove this to them. This action alone shows the audience that she is credible and that she cares about them.

As previously mentioned, Raisman uses pathos throughout her argument in order to gain emotional support from her audiences. With this appeal, she is attempting to gain the most support from the judge so that Nassar will receive a harsh punishment for his actions. According to Heinrichs, "Emotion comes from experience and expectation," (2017). Raisman paints a picture for her audiences, asking them to "imagine how it feels to be an innocent teenager in a foreign country," (MusicFanatical, 2018, 2:54). This experience would be difficult to begin with. However, Raisman continues on expressing that Larry Nassar was also there and she did not want him there (MusicFanatical, 2018, 3:00). This insinuates that the difficult experiences of being alone and in a country where she felt uncomfortable were worsened by having Nassar there assaulting her. Having her audiences imagine her experiences allows them to sympathize

with her and the traumatic abuse she had to struggle with. Sympathy changes the emotions of the audience so that they are able to relate to the speaker (Heinrichs, 2017).

Pathos, and gaining sympathy from the audience, is important in this argument because the subject matter alone is an emotional one. Raisman builds on the nature of the subject matter in order to instill and evoke emotions in her audiences, especially by emphasizing the impact of her ordeal. Raisman includes her own strengths in her argument and that she has overcome what Nassar has done. She states that Nassar has “not taken gymnastics away from me” (MusicFanatical, 2018, 4:36). This statement allows the audience to feel proud of Raisman. Other survivors may feel empowered to push through their own struggles and continue to conquer the future as Raisman did. These feelings of empowerment and proudness strengthen the support from her audience. The judge later makes a statement stating, “You were never the problem, but you are so much the solution” (MusicFanatical, 2018, 14:20). With this statement, the judge makes it clear that she is both proud and empowered by Raisman. These emotions that she invoked in the judge will have an impact on the sentencing that Nassar will receive because they aided in persuading the judge.

To further explain her trauma, Raisman uses the **belittlement charge**. By explaining all the things Nassar has done and how he has made the survivors feel, Nassar's credibility is automatically compromised. Raisman states that he made her feel guilty for what was happening to her because Nassar was in a position of power, compared to herself, being the athlete needing medical attention (MusicFanatical, 2018, 3:40). The larger audience at hand see that Nassar has little care for their desires and necessities. Raisman is belittling him so that she is able to gain support from the audience which could create Nassar to receive a harsher sentence than if she were not to provide her impact statement.

Another technique that Raisman uses to gain emotional support is **commonplace words**. Commonplace words allow a speaker to reach the largest audience because the word or phrase being used is understood by the entire group (Heinrichs, 2017). This is presented by Raisman when she states that she was living a nightmare (MusicFanatical, 2018, 6:51). The audience knows that this was not a literal nightmare that she endured while sleeping, but in fact a rhetorical commonplace word that many people use when describing a horrific event that was experienced. Another commonplace phrase that Raisman uses is, "Talk is cheap," (MusicFanatical, 2018, 7:40). When Raisman says this, her audience understands that she is referring to Kerry Perry's input being meaningless, and her words are not supported by her actions.

Aly Raisman has strong feelings regarding the subject matter and has strong expectations for those in power to take control of the situation to punish people that have allowed it to progress. As previously stated, the situation itself carries a natural emotional appeal. Of course, the large audience of survivors and young women find themselves agreeing with Raisman when making statements regarding Larry Nassar's punishment of being sent to prison. This should also create an emotional persuasion to Nassar, causing him to feel shame for his actions. Nassar is not entitled to comment during these statements, so it is unknown if Raisman was successful in persuading Nassar as one of her audience members. However, Raisman mentioned that Nassar had provided a letter searching for sympathy from his audiences. This can be used as proof that the multiple survivors' statements did impact to feel shameful. Overall, Raisman's use of pathos was greatly effective to more than her large audience.

To further persuade the audience, it is important that Raisman apply facts to her argument. Raisman uses logic to gain support from her audience and to leave them with thoughts of how the criminal acts could have been prevented (Heinrichs, 2017). Her presentation of

factual information also provides her audience with reasoning and understanding of how the events were able to occur in the manner that they did. Raisman states that the first report of a person being abused by Nassar was 30 years ago (MusicFanatical, 2018, 5:03). Stating this fact leads to another, that the abuse could have been occurring beforehand (MusicFanatical, 2018, 5:08). She then concludes by stating that if one person had listened and reported the abuse to authorities then many other survivors would not have endured the abuse (MusicFanatical, 2018, 5:10). This is a **sylogism**, presenting one fact after another and then circling to a conclusion (Heinrichs, 2017). She continues with another syllogism by stating that Nassar was on “advisory boards and committees,” another fact (MusicFanatical, 2018, 6:08). The purpose of those boards and committees was to provide safety and care to the athletes (MusicFanatical, 2018, 6:15). Her conclusion is that Nassar had such a significant influence on these boards that he was able to continue abusing the girls and not being accountable for his actions.

Raisman's logos appeals are her weakest rhetoric techniques in her argument. This is likely due to the emotion that has been evoked in her because of the personal experience she endured with one of her audience members. It is difficult to provide factual evidence in an argument when one's anger takes over. However, the few facts that Raisman points out are recognized by the judge. For example, Raisman presents a fact that USA Gymnastics was closing one of their facilities where a number of victims had been abused (MusicFanatical, 2018, 8:20). The judge later notes that she was unaware of that and seems grateful to have received that information. Although these facts were effective to one audience, they were not effective to all audiences. USA Gymnastics may have felt betrayed by Raisman providing that information, in which case, they would not be persuaded to support her argument.

Conclusion:

Overall, Raisman uses multiple rhetoric techniques that allow her to persuade and communicate with her audience. These tools and techniques provide that she is credible and cares for her audience. She invokes emotion in her audience in order to provide a view of the situation from her perspective and what she has had to endure. Raisman also uses logos tools to provide facts to her audiences. Although her logos techniques were less effective, she still communicates the facts to her audience to make them aware of the situation. Aly Raisman uses a variety of rhetoric techniques in order to effectively persuade her audience to her side of the argument.

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