Neo-Aristotelian Criticism

Reese Witherspoon Woman of the Year Speech

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Rhetorical Criticism

For the last 28 years Glamour Magazine has been hosting a Women of the Year Summit and awards ceremony. (Glamour, 2018) While there have been a plethora of recipients, Reese Witherspoon’s 2015 acceptance speech became a source for female empowerment which has gone viral multiple since it’s delivery. Witherspoon provided and eloquent yet powerful speech asking all women to take charge and empower themselves. Witherspoon’s speech most notably had been compared to Emma Watson’s speech at the United Nations only a year before. Throughout this critique I will demonstrate that Witherspoon’s 2015 speech had the desired effect on the intended audience to empower themselves.

**Selection and Justification of Artifact**

The artifact that will be studied in this neo-Aristotelian analysis is Reese Witherspoon’s women of the year speech. The speech was delivered as Witherspoon’s acceptance speech for title of Women of the Year, which she used in order to call women to action against gender-based inequality Witherspoon delivered this speech at Glamour’s Women of the Year Summit in 2015. While the event was overall a formal occasion, like many other awards ceremonies, the atmosphere was comfortable. Women from various walks of life were in attendance with the likeminded support to support empowered women.

While the event was only open to honorees and those who purchased tickets, the speech was made available through live recording that could be viewed on Glamour’s website. Witherspoon’s speech was not only available to those in attendance or live streaming it, but quickly went viral and continuously gained likes and shares on various social media platforms, until present day which is roughly four years after the event. The speech was intended to be an acceptance address after being recognized for her accomplishments. However, rather than just giving a traditional acceptance, Witherspoon used it as a means to encourage female empowerment and feminism. Specifically, Witherspoon verbally challenged everything from sexism to ageism, with a goal of invoking the audience to face sexism head on and emancipate themselves from the male-dominated societal standards. The speech was used as a direct tool encourage women to empower themselves rather than waiting for the rest of society to catch up. Witherspoon’s intended primary audience was all of womankind. While the most immediate audience were those in attendance of the summit, Witherspoon was not just addressing them. The speech called for a fundamental societal shift which would require any and all women to take a stand. It is intended for women, because they are the ones directly impacted by sexism and Witherspoon is specifically asking them to be the change. The secondary audience which Witherspoon indirectly addresses is men. While she does not ask them for action, she sends the message that women will not be deterred in the fight for equality. She also asserts that women will not continue playing a supporting role to men in life. While the speech is directed to women, Witherspoon presents a subtle underlying message to men that women will not be pushed aside any longer. The research question is, did Witherspoon effectively use the available means of persuasion to gain the intended response from her audience?

This text demands scholarly attention because as of the last couple of years, celebrities have become more prevalent in social activism. By looking at the persuasive means they use in order to get support on their respective causes it allows for a better understanding of if they are using rhetorical means effectively or if they gain support solely based on their celebrity status.

**Historical Context**

To truly understand the importance and driving force behind Witherspoon’s woman of the year speech, a fundamental understanding of the inequality in the film industry. Film industry history has not been an easy one for women. According to an article from Econlife, one of the largest issues lending to the gap is “expectation bias.” When people think of big blockbuster movies, they see a male director, which is plays a large part in a under paid and under-represented reality for women in Hollywood. (Schwartz) The “simple” solution to fix the bias in the film industry would be to hire more women. As actors, producers, and directors. The more women behind the camera the better representation women get.

The gender inequality and sexism in Hollywood has also developed due to a “cultural status-quo,” the film industry has perpetuated the idea that women should be the supporting role-either in traditional gender roles, support for the male lead, and being an object of desire for the male lead and the audience. (Milana,10) Compared to their male counterparts, women have been grossly underpaid in the film industry. This much is evident in the salaries of Scarlett Johansson and George Clooney in 2018. Each the highest paid actor of their respective genders, Johansson made $198.5 less than Clooney. (Ahlgrim, 2019)

According to the National Women’s Law Center, women make 80 cents to each dollar a man makes. The entertainment industry alone has been a large hurdle for the gender equality movement. On average woman are paid much less and are often put into a very specific type of role. The Bechtel Test, in three parts analyses whether a movie is showing truly equal character representation within each movie. Which in 2014, proved to be terrible representation. Researchers Hannah Anderson and Matt Daniels underwent a huge script analyses of 2,005 scripts and out of all those scripts only 22% scripts had a woman in one lead role, and only 18% of scripts had 2-3 woman in a leading speaking role. (National Women’s Center of Law)

Witherspoon’s speech, which was part of a Woman of the Year award ceremony after a three-day women’s summit, was a calling to the woman in her industry and all over the globe to stand up and fight for those lead roles in their industry. She reminds the audience of the value women have and what they can accomplish without the help of men, despite the clear underrepresentation in Hollywood.

**Neo-Aristotelian Method**

The definition of rhetoric has an expanding amount of interpretations since being developed by the Greeks. Aristotle formally established the groundwork to understand and teach rhetoric. Aristotle’s original definition of rhetoric states that it is, “the power of discovering the means of persuasion in any given situation” (King & Kuypers, pg. 2) While Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric built the foundation for modern rhetoric, the most widely recognized definition, which will be used for the purposes of this criticism is Kuypers and King’s which defines rhetoric as, “The strategic use of communication, oral or written, to achieve a specific goal.” (King & Kuypers, 4) This definition has an emphasis on achieving a goal, which is important as this criticism in analyzing the effectiveness of rhetorical strategy when trying to meet a goal.

The purpose of the neo-Aristotelian method is to determine the success of a speaker’s use of rhetorical tools and skills. Neo-Aristotelian criticism is concerned with the effectiveness of a specific text itself and the elements used to deliver the message. The analysis of the rhetorical devices utilized within a text allows an explanation for the persuasive effect it has on an intended audience.

The advantage of neo-Aristotelian criticisms is accurately identifying the effectiveness of strategic and intentional rhetorical justification. The main disadvantage of a neo-Aristotelian analysis is that it can’t accurately analyze visual and discourse rhetoric.

Neo-Aristotelian critics study their artifact in four steps. First, they select an artifact, the second step is analyzing, followed by formulating a research question, and finally writing a paper about it. While analyzing the text there are three steps to follow, (1) reestablish the context of the rhetorical and historical situation, by looking at, the rhetorical opportunity, who the speaker and auditors are, and the exigence. (2) Critics then apply Aristotle and Cicero’s five canons of rhetoric, studying the invention, arrangement, language, memory, and delivery of the artifact, which serve as units of the analysis. (3) Finally, they assess the effects, as a neo-Aristotelian critic they judge the effect of the rhetoric used.

Neo-Aristotelian critics study the invention of an artifact, identifying the inartistic (material evidence) and artistic proofs (logos, ethos, and pathos). As well as arrangement and analyzing the organizational effects on logos, ethos, and pathos. Critics also look at the stylistic aspects of an artifact. Finally, critics look at delivery and how linguistic expression, means, and implementation affect reception.

Kevin Nguyen’s analysis of Emma Watson’s keynote speech at the United Nations Headquarters in 2014 is an excellent example of the use of a neo-Aristotelian analysis. Nguyen first sets the rhetorical and historical context under a section entitled, “Description of Artifact,” (Nguyen, 3) which identifies the who, what, where, when, and why of the speech. He then defines and applies the five canons of rhetoric to Watson’s speech. After, justifying and explaining the speech, he concludes that Watson was extremely successful in reaching her audience, and that “UN-Women could not have picked a more appropriate ambassador.” (Nguyen, 9)

**Source analysis**

Not only did Witherspoon develop this speech, but she also wrote it, delivering her own tale of experience of what it is like to be a woman in Hollywood (and America). Witherspoon uses repetition provide an example of the unequal representations of female leads who look to the male lead with batting eyelashes while asking panicked “what do we do now.” Witherspoon speaks about the common trope that the women always is helpless while the man saves the day, hence, “what do we do now.” At the end of her speech she repeated the line one more time in a serious tone, this time directed at the audience and asking, “what do we do now.” (Zuckerman) Wrapping up a powerful moment.

Witherspoon’s is the perfect person to give this speech with all the “hats” she wears. She runs an all-female production company simply because she thought it was a shame there wasn’t more female actors around, and Vogue writer Meghan Daum the deeply southern Witherspoon doesn’t see anything black and white. While she throws around phrases like y’all she also throws around phrases like intersectionality. And, she’s also always thinking about others. According to Daum during the interview Witherspoon got lost in a thought thinking about a possible idea for idea for a charity auction she was doing (Daum).

Due to this good-hearted nature over the years, Witherspoon has gained a lot of Goodwill in Hollywood. The audience’s overall perception of Witherspoon would be that she would most likely be a champion of their rights and someone that would fight for their cause. Witherspoon also has a few likability tactics on her side that went over successfully. The two most prominent being beauty and similarity. To begin with, she is beautiful, but not inhumanly beautiful but rather she’s attainably beautiful, almost in a motherly way. Next, she brings up her daughter, bringing up similarities with any mothers in the audience (Cialdini). With one glace Witherspoon may not look like the perfect person to deliver the speech, but once she speaks she captures the whole crowd. While she is a beautiful actress, college dropout, it is clear the Witherspoon has done the work to be qualified to make this type of speech.

**Ethos**

The text’s audience is first and fore foremost the crowd the *Glamour* Magazine Woman of the Year Awards. It is not clear how many people are able to go, but it is a source of revenue for the magazine so the award is closed, but filmed and make public so others are able to see it. (Fernandez)

In Witherspoon’s case, it was not a harm that one must buy tickets to the award show because her speech had such an impact virally it had the intended affect anyway. According to Facebook, the full *Glamour* speech got over 642 thousand shares and various viral clips with hashtags like #girl power have various hundreds of thousands of shares and posts.

This audience is a female centric audience it is mainly women in their twenties and thirties. Just analyzing what was drawn from all the Facebook content shared the people who had shared content had been women who had seemed to be for lack of a better phrase “just finding a political voice.” They want to empower themselves and they see this prominent woman doing it for them, so it was an easy share.

Reese Witherspoon was the perfect person to make this speech for her audience. She had quoted in her speech, “Like Elle Wood, I do not like to be underestimated.” (Witherspoon) Rather than harming her due to Elle Woods harming her for being a dumb character it does the opposite, Elle shines through for the reason all women want to, she is strong in a world where men are quite all the time harassing her. Witherspoon herself has gained a very public reputation as named by Vogue this January in a cover story, “Activist, Advocate, Hollywood’s Moral Compass.” (Daum) Witherspoon has gained a reputation of being overall kind, hardworking and most importantly champion for female rights which is reflected in many of her movies which is reflected in many of her movies which her sits well with her audience.

Throughout Witherspoon’s Speech she makes several appeals to her character. The first appeal that she makes happens at the very beginning of her speech, she thanks *Glamour* Magazine for having her and then uses a liking tactic by complementing her fellow nominees. Witherspoon boosts the other women saying, “these incredible, inspiring women are doing so many things to change how we perceive women,” (Witherspoon) and then points out how inspiring fellow nominee Amy Schumer is.

Witherspoon also makes appeals to her good sense. She brings in facts from studies done at institutions like Georgetown University, as well as specific numbers and statistics. She brings up how *Hunger Games, Trainwreck, Spy, Pitch Perfect 2,* and *Cinderella,* five female driven films grossed $2.2 billion worldwide, and then states that, “Under 5 percent of CEOs of fortune 500 companies are women. Only 19 percent of Congress is women.” (Witherspoon) This shows that if she was not already a credible source before, she is now. Through her speech, she skillfully intertwines her own experiences with hard facts, showing her expertise and intelligence.

Witherspoon also makes multiple appeals to her goodness through by telling the audience personal anecdotes. An example of this is when she says she enjoys being the underdog, when someone tells her she can’t do something because they’re boxing her into a stereotype she likes to change expectations. Showing that she is driven and not someone to be pushed to the sides. She also shows her goodness when she talks about starting her own production company. While this also shows her good sense due to expertise, the way she presents it adds to her goodness. Witherspoon says, “So, I started my own production company, Pacific Standard Films, with the mission to tell stories about women. And I was nervous, y'all… but like Elle Woods I don’t like to be underestimated.” (Witherspoon) This reflected her goodness because she presents herself as a go-getter and reflected that she wasn’t going to let the fact that Hollywood is male driven stop her from making female driven stories come to life.

Finally, Witherspoon makes an appeal of goodwill. She talks about how the underrepresentation of women is not only going to affect her but everyone in the audience as well. While she doesn’t explicitly state it, Witherspoon is there making the speech because she’s not just there on her own behalf, she is there for all women. She wants a change, not for her, but for all of women.

**Logos:**

Throughout Witherspoon’s speech, she uses logical argumentation in order to make her point about the need for empowered women. Witherspoon uses a first order enthymeme in her argumentation when speaking about female driven box office success. Witherspoon said, “This year alone, *Trainwreck* with Amy Schumer, Melissa McCarthy's *Spy*, *Pitch Perfect 2*, *Cinderella*, the *Hunger Games* franchise, those made over $2.2 billion worldwide. Films with women at the center are not a public service project, they are a big-time, bottom-line-enhancing, money-making commodity.” (Witherspoon) The unstated major premise is that big box office sales mean a movie is successful. The minor premise is that women centric films made a lot in the box office. Making the conclusion, women centric movies are successful. This was a good enthymeme was well put together, because it gives monetary proof of success which proves that there is no reason to not have more women centric films.

Another example of an enthymeme Witherspoon uses is when she talks about under representation of women in powerful job position. Witherspoon say, “In every industry,  
women are underrepresented and underpaid in leadership positions. Under 5 percent of CEOs of fortune 500 companies are women. Only 19 percent of Congress is women. How can we expect legislation or our needs to be served if we don't have equal representation?” (Witherspoon)

The unstated but implied premise would be that equal representation of women in powerful positions leads to gender quality. The minor premise would be that Under 5 percent of CEOs of fortune 500 companies are women. Only 19 percent of Congress is women. Which means the conclusion is that we don’t have gender equality. Witherspoon again backed her enthymemes with facts makings listening to her as a viable source who is knowledgeable in the topic she’s addressing for the audience.

**Pathos**

Throughout her speech, Witherspoon appeals to the audience’s emotion through the use of strategic placement of pathos. The emotion that she displayed the most often was anger. While she was clearly angry about the circumstances of the lack of female representation in the film industry she skillfully was able to bring it up by the means of humor. While humor is often seemingly the furthest thing from anger it was clear by her jokes and laced sarcasm that she was coming from a place of anger and frustration. By adding humor to the situation, she made her opinions clear, but maintain a comfortable relationship with her audience. If she were to use the cognitive appraisal cues for anger, such as a slower more daunting tone, or a furrowed face I believe that she would have lost the crowd as the occasion itself was lighthearted. A good demonstration of this was when she was congratulating fellow award winners and commented on the unfair age restrictions for women in Hollywood. “Although Amy, I'll have to play your grandmother in the movie (by Hollywood standards), and you'll probably have to play your own mother.” (Witherspoon) She uses this humor to mask anger appeal quite often which I believe was a strength for her.

Witherspoon, while clearly disheartened by the situation in Hollywood kept her light friendly demeanor on stage, but spoke in a wise and worried voice. While she used humor as a means of emotion to get anger, she also did a good job showing that it was from a place of frustration. Her use of pathos was successful in my opinion. The audience were other women and nominees who understood the situation that women in entertainment face. By making it often humorous, she was able to add a level on connection with lose who feel the struggle of being a woman in Hollywood and frankly the rest of the United States.

Witherspoon also made an appeal of guilt which came in the form of disappointment for her daughter. She lost the lighthearted ring to her voice as she brought up her daughter, who she said helped review her speech, and got very “matter of fact,” saying “Where was our Sally Field in *Norma Rae* or Sigourney Weaver in *Alien* or Goldie Hawn in, you name it, *any* Goldie Hawn movie: *Overboard, Wildcats, Private Benjamin*? These women shaped my idea of what it meant to be a woman of strength and character and humor in this world. And my beautiful, intelligent daughter, who is 16 years old now, would not grow up idolizing that same group of women.  
Instead, she'd be forced to watch a chorus of talented, accomplished women Saran wrapped into tight leather pants, tottering along on very cute, but completely impractical, shoes.” (Witherspoon, 2015) I believe this served as an appraisal cue, as she was written to sound very innocent to the impracticality of the film industry, and by bringing up how her, and for that matter any other young ladies who are growing up in this age don’t get the luxury of strong role models, but rather somebody unattainable and impractical.

**Conclusion**

Overall having used the neo-Aristotelian criticism approach to measure the effectiveness of Witherspoon’s (2015) speech, this analysis concluded that Witherspoon was effectively able to communicate her call to action to stand up for gender equality and be the source of their own empowerment. Witherspoon’s speech had been thoroughly research and allowed for her to masterfully communicate facts and statistics about the sexism in Hollywood, while maintaining a relationship and entertaining the audience by sharing personal stories. In conclusion, Witherspoon was the best person to have deliver this speech at the summit as her charismatic personality allowed her to connect with her audience while approaching a serious topic.

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