The Employment of Rhetorical Strategies in Writing Literary Criticism: An Introduction for College Freshman

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As a field of study, literary criticism is open to the constant review and reinterpretation of accepted literary works. Although new interpretations are welcome, the audience must be convinced of the value and validity of these ideas. As an introduction for college freshman, this article explores the formation of arguments in the field of literary criticism through the use of rhetoric. By understanding the commonplaces of the academic literary community, using the stasis of conjecture, and providing evidence, a rhetor is able to effectively construct a literary argument.

As a field of study, literary criticism is open to the constant review and reinterpretation of accepted literary works. Once a specific understanding regarding a work has been established, a writer in this field must employ certain rhetorical strategies in order to persuade the academic literary community of new interpretations. Rhetoric is "the power of finding the available arguments suited to a given situation" (Crowley and Hawhee 1). It is a process through which one can create an effective argument in order to persuade an audience. To be effective, the rhetor in this field must employ certain rhetorical strategies including *kairos*, conjecture, and evidence. These strategies create a framework for a literary argument and lend ethos, or credibility, to the rhetor. They also assist the rhetor through the process of finding, forming, and supporting the argument in order to effectively write it. This process is essential in literary argument and is evident in the article "'Slipping into the Ha-Ha': Bawdy Humor and Body Politics in Jane Austen's Novels" by Jill Heydt-Stevenson.

In order to craft an effective literary argument, a rhetor must first be aware of the context of the field of literary criticism by understanding the values of the academic literary community. Rhetorically, these shared values are known as commonplaces which are beliefs that are "commonly believed by members of a community" (Crowley and Hawhee 26). In writing for the academic literary community, these commonplaces take the form of assumptions about the audience. Not a lot of time is spent summarizing a work or giving extensive background information, because the assumption is that the audience has "read pretty much the same texts

and recognizes what texts, authors, and approaches are worth talking about" ("Stases" 66). These shared values are evident in Heydt-Stevenson's thesis statement. She claims:

> [Al]though critics have written on the subject of Austen and sexuality, the kind of sexually risqué humor on display in these examples has not been fully acknowledged, and then only hesitantly – or coyly – so. (Heydt-Stevenson 310)

Here, Heydt-Stevenson is not arguing the literary merit of Austen's work or for her inclusion/exclusion from the literary canon, which has already been established. She is simply providing an alternate interpretation of Austen's language. Thus, she is working with the commonplaces of her audience in mind.

By defining and working within the ideals of the audience, a rhetor moves closer to identifying *kairos*, which is an opportunity or a "'window' of time in which action is most advantageous" (Crowley and Hawhee 37). In literary criticism, *kairos* is manifested in the openness for reexamination of existing works; therefore, there is always an opening. The challenge for the rhetor is to establish the need for reevaluation of established works, or the exact opening. Heydt-Stevenson's primary argument focuses on the issue of interpretation of sexual humor in Jane Austen's novels. In her thesis, she acknowledges previous interpretations and presents the need for reconsideration as the risqué humor has not been "fully acknowledged" (310).

In order to find the argument, or show the need for reevaluation, a rhetor in literary criticism will employ the stasis of conjecture. Conjecture is a part of stasis theory which states that "all argument begins in agreement" ("Stases" 66). It has already been established that the academic community in literary criticism shares a set of values. This is the point of stasis from which all literary arguments, including Heydt-Stevenson's, are made. Stasis theory is also a "systematic way of asking questions about rhetorical situations" which helps determine "where it is that the disagreement between themselves and their audience begins" (Crowley and Hawhee 37). The four questions, or stases, of stasis theory that can be used to find available arguments are conjecture, definition, quality, and policy (Crowley and Hawhee 67). Because the stasis of conjecture serves to determine whether or not a subject, or argument, exists it is the ideal stasis in which to begin forming a literary argument ("Rhetoric" 78). In literary criticism, conjecture serves as a prewriting tool that will help a rhetor find and begin to form his or her argument.

A rhetor in literary criticism endeavors to find hidden meanings or new interpretations of existing works. This notion informs the type of questions of conjecture a rhetor would ask in the field of literary criticism. Some questions of conjecture stasis that a rhetor may ask to determine *kairos* are these: Are there other ways the text can be viewed or interpreted? Are there deeper meanings that can be teased out? Are other critics correct in their interpretations of the work given the evidence found? Is there new evidence that suggests a different meaning? In prewriting, Heydt-Stevenson would have likely asked questions such as these: Could ribald humor have been purposefully used by Austen in her novels? Has this point been argued before,

and if so, were the interpretations accurate or thorough enough? Has the supposedly erotic language been examined etymologically, or are previous critics working from assumptions regarding late eighteenth and early nineteenth century female authors? By evaluating questions of conjecture, it is easier to imagine how Heydt-Stevenson was able to establish her subject and the need for it. Her conclusion from conjecture is that previous criticisms are inadequate and that Austen's use of bawdy humor was intentional, and this questions the notion of the sexually ignorant female during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Heydt-Stevenson 310).

Once the subject or argument is established, a rhetor will move towards supporting their argument. In literary criticism, this is achieved through the building of logos, or a logical argument, in the form of evidence to support the conclusions reached in conjecture. Supporting evidence, in the field of literary criticism, is found in close textual analysis along with primary and secondary sources. In close textual analysis, a rhetor must look for literary mechanics at work within the text. Examples include imagery, symbolism, metonymy, and synecdoche. Again, since the audience is assumed to be familiar with these terms, they are not defined within the argument itself. This type of close reading can be found in Heydt-Stevenson's opening lines:

> In *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) Caroline tries to engage Darcy with a powerful metonymy of phallic power: "I am afraid you do not like your pen. Let me mend it for you. I mend pens remarkably well." (309)

Note how Heydt-Stevenson declines to define the term metonymy and also does not give the reader any background information on the novel or the characters whose dialogue she is analyzing. By recognizing the commonplaces held by her audience, she is freed to simply look for meaning within the text itself.

Primary sources are materials "from the time period involved [that] have not been filtered through interpretation or evaluation" ("Primary, Secondary and Tertiary Sources"). In this case, Austen's novels can be considered a primary source. Additional supporting evidence can come from other primary sources such as such as court records, photographs, letters, books, and other writings of the time. This type of evidence provides additional commentary on the social and historical context in which the original work was written, in this case Austen's novels. Heydt-Stevenson uses documents such as Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman,* written in 1791, to support her point and establish the social context of the time period (316). Again, Heydt-Stevenson does not summarize or give background information on the document, but moves directly into close textual analysis. She writes, "Mary Wollstonecraft . . . complains of 'the jokes and [hidden] tricks, which knots of young women indulge themselves in . . . They are almost on a par with the double meanings, which shake the convivial table when the glass has circulated freely'" (Heydt-Stevenson 316). The fact that women were indulging in sexual riddles and double entendres during this time period is thus reinforced by one of Austen's contemporaries. This begins to establish a social context in which the academic literary audience can begin to accept that Austen's bawdy humor may have been intentional. Another primary

source Heydt-Stevenson includes is the full text of the poem "A Riddle," written in 1785 by David Garrick (317). The poem is about "the plight of a man . . . who has been infected with venereal disease," a stanza of which appears in Austen's *Emma* (Heydt-Stevenson 318). Heydt-Stevenson explicates the poem and shows examples where Austen "interweaves into the novel issues that the riddle introduces, such as prostitution, venereal disease, and the double standard; and she incorporates the same images – a matrix of heat and cold and figures of cupids and chimneys – that we find in the riddle" (318-319). When viewed through the social context of primary sources and close textual analysis, her argument seems not only plausible, but logical.

To further strengthen a literary argument, a rhetor should bring in secondary sources, which are not direct evidence, "but rather commentary on and discussion of evidence" ("Primary, Secondary and Tertiary Sources"). Examples of secondary sources are commentaries, histories, and dictionaries which may also be considered a tertiary source ("Primary, Secondary and Tertiary Sources"). Returning to Heydt-Stevenson's explication of Garrick's poem, she provides the audience with multiple secondary sources that serve to confirm her interpretations. In her extended analysis, she links Mr. Woodhouse of *Emma* with the narrator of the poem given that Mr. Woodhouse's favorite meal was a thin gruel. This appears to be an intentional authorial reference as "one of the reputed cures for venereal disease was a light diet, mostly consisting of a thin gruel" (Heydt-Stevenson 320). In the footnote, Heydt-Stevenson states that these sorts of "cures" were "well known to the general population;" therefore, Austen would have been aware of them. She provides a secondary source in the form of a history by Lawrence Stone called *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800,* where the reader can go to confirm this information (Heydt-Stevenson 320).

As seen, literary criticism becomes a complicated layering of evidence. Heydt-Stevenson explicates the poem but must provide additional evidence to support her explication before she can apply it to Austen's work. She does not always directly quote these sources, but extensive notations regarding them are provided in the footnotes. It is important to observe that these sources should be properly acknowledged, as she has done, and should not be used to replace or to overpower a rhetor's argument.

Literary criticism is, in itself, a secondary source, and therefore, it is equally open to reevaluation. In proposing new understanding of already examined works, a rhetor must recognize and acknowledge previous interpretations. These previous interpretations can be used to support the rhetor's claims or disproved through rhetorical strategies. For instance, in analyzing "A Riddle," Heydt-Stevenson acknowledges and then dismisses the critical responses of Nicola J. Watson, Alistair M. Duckworth, and Alice Chandler. Chandler claims that "precisely what kind of game Jane Austen is playing with Mr. Woodhouse and her readers is hard to tell" (qtd. in Heydt-Stevenson 318). Heydt-Stevenson calls this a "coy" observation and states that through analysis, it is clear "what sort of game Austen is playing" (318). This statement is confirmed by additional layers of primary and secondary evidence. By building evidence in this way, a rhetor is able to not only support his or her argument, but to give it form.

In studying the field of literary criticism, it becomes clear that it is a complex study of literature that requires the use of many rhetorical strategies in order to locate and to support arguments. The field can be seen as a constant negotiation, or a building of knowledge, with constant openings for new and interesting ways to interpret works (Lanham 164). In this way, literary criticism can also be classified as epideictic, meaning that it is concerned with judgments of praise, or worth, and "celebration and reinforcement of values already shared by readers" (Lanham 164). The readers, in this case, are the academic literary community at large. The shared values include the commonplaces previously discussed, which "dictate [their] own set of phrases, examples, and conclusions" (Bartholomae 212). In writing literary criticism, the phrases are the terminology for different types of literary mechanics, which do not need to be defined for the reader. Examples come from close textual analysis, primary sources, and secondary sources that are interwoven. The conclusions come from the evaluation of text and other sources in light of historical and social context. It is evident that crafting effective literary criticism hinges on the logical building of an argument, or logos, through establishing the need for reinterpretation and supporting it with close reading and evidence.

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