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Geeks, Gleeks, and the Jocks: Defined in Rhetorical Techniques

In the first episode of the Fox TV series, *Glee,* the wannabe-star Rachel says, “Being a part of something special *makes* you special, right?” (“Pilot”). In 21st century American culture, the purpose of a community is to encourage feeling and fellowship between others; this often results in new relationships, a sense of fulfillment, and the creation of an identity. One forum for analyzing the importance of community is high school peer culture because of its emphasis on discernable social groups. Modern genres, such as literary and film, use this forum in combination with stock rhetorical techniques in order to express the importance of community in society. For example, *Glee, Fox*’s prime-time television show, and research essays evaluating social hierarchy, like the article “Why We Harass Nerds and Freaks,” both explore the arts/intellectual community of high school students. In analyzing of *Fox’*s *Glee,* as well as in examining academic research papers about high school peer culture, it is possible to discern assumptions about the artistic and intellectual communities in high schools through rhetorical techniques. Although methods of expression may vary, both genres frequently utilize the rhetorical techniques of juxtaposition, stereotyping, and logos/ethos to reach audiences.

The assumption that high school artistic/intellectual groups are inferior to the athletic group is conveyed through juxtaposition. In the literary genre, juxtaposition, a rhetorical technique that places two concepts side by side to reveal a certain perspective, is accomplished via connotative language and imagery. The research article, “Why We Harass Nerds and Freaks,” utilizes connotative words such as “prestigious,” “powerful,” and “high-status” to describe the athletic crowd and words like “disrespected,” “diseased,” and “low-status” to apply to the intellectual and artistic crowd (Bishop et. al) in order to reflect and promote general opinions about the two groups. Imagery in phrases such as “downward mobility is easy for them to recognize… upward mobility is harder to accomplish” evokes a visual representation of social hierarchy similar to a steep incline (Bishop et. al). Similarly, colloquial terms such as “Jocks,” “Preppies,” and “Populars” verses “Nerds,” Freaks,” and “Losers” evoke specific positive and negative images and opinions from popular culture (Bishop et. al). This connotative diction and imagery is employed to juxtapose the general opinions associated with the two groups.

Film genres express juxtaposition through connotative language in dialogue, visual symbolism, and perspectives. *Glee* employs comparative connotative language in most of the dialogue between Glee instructor Will Schuester and cheerleader coach Sue Sylvester, as when Sylvester warns Schuester, “high school is a cast system… jocks and popular kids [lare] up in the penthouse…and the Glee kids? Subbasement” (Episode 1: “Pilot”). *Glee* also employs visual symbolism, such as consistently filming the athletic crowd in groups while showing the artistic/intellectual students alone and isolated. Perspective, or focus on a character's view of the situation in a story, is used to compare specific members of the two communities; Quinn Fabray, captain of the Cheerios and acknowledged queen bee, is contrasted with Rachel Berry, talented Glee club star and frequently bullied, in their romance with Finn Hudson, star quarterback and male lead in Glee club. When Rachel attempts to stand up to Quinn, she immediately gets a slushy thrown in her face, representing the overall power of the athletic group. These juxtapositions enhance the assumption that high school athletic communities are superior to artistic/intellectual communities.

The assumption that the individuals in each group share specific, stock traits is conveyed through stereotyping. The literary genre expresses stereotypes, or simplified conceptions based on prior assumptions, through definitions and perspectives. To demonstrate that crowds contain different ‘identity prototypes’” that result in stock personality traits, the article defines specific, stereotypical people that make up both groups (Bishop et. al). Some athletic group stereotypes include the bullies, or those “playing… the dominance game…[to] gain respect and prestige,” the role models, or the “exemplars of cool,” and the attractive students that date to gain an “edge in the competition for attention” (Bishop et. al). Similarly, the article defines stereotypes in the artistic/intellectual community, including submissive outcasts, “generally smaller and weaker…unviolent” students, the different-looking students, and the wannabes, those “actively trying to join the [popular] crowd” (Bishop et. al). The article also expands on the stereotypical assumption that these students “hope to eventually join a high-status crowd” (Bishop et. al). These definitions provide a fact-based, logical tone that organizes assumed audience opinions and prejudices. Perspective is then conveyed through direct quotations from high school students in order reinforce these definitions. Thus, definition and perspective techniques function to convey the stereotypes involved with high school communities.

Film genres express stereotypes via exaggeration and visual symbolism. Every character in *Glee* represents an exaggerated version of the stereotypes defined in the article, discernable through physical appearance, wardrobe, and reactions to events in the plot. The “Cheerios” represent the high school athletic community with exaggerated, stereotypical characters like Puck as the bully, Quinn as the role model, and Santana as the attractive student. Similarly, the “Gleeks” symbolize the artistic/intellectual community and include exaggerated, stereotypical characters like Kurt as the submissive outcast, Mercedes and Tina as different-looking students, and Rachel as the wannabe. Rachel’s melodramatic attempts to become “thinner, prettier like that Quinn girl” (Episode 2: “Showmance”) further represent exaggerations of the stereotypical assumption that students in the artistic/intellectual community aspire to join the popular crowd. Similar to the definitions in the article, these exaggerated stereotypes are meant to reflect the opinions of general audiences. *Glee* also utilizes visual symbolism in wardrobe to reinforce the stereotypes associated with these high school groups, as the Cheerios always wear their cheerleading/football uniforms while the Glee kids dress in largely unfashionable and unique clothing. Thus, stereotyping via exaggeration and visual symbolism conveys the assumption that the individuals in high school athletic and arts/intellectual groups share specific traits.

Literary and film genres utilize two basic forms of persuasion, Logos and Pathos, in order to support their assumptions about the artistic/intellectual high school community. Logos, or the means of persuasion by reasoning, is utilized in literary genres via factual and statistical evidence organized, in this case, by scientific format. The article includes percentages and statistics drawn from scientific surveys in order to provide evidence for assumptions about high school communities. The article also outlines definitions and rules about interaction in the social hierarchy of high school; these “facts” are supported by direct quotes from students in both communities. The article is then organized in scientific essay format, with the introductory/hypothesis in the introduction paragraphs, the methods in the “Background” section, the results spread over the middle headings, and the discussion/conclusion in the “Setting Norms” section. The scientific format fits into the expected rhetoric of scientific essays and further emphasizes the logos behind each argument. Thus, the logos conveyed in factual and statistical evidence is organized in scientific format to validate assumptions about high school communities.

In contrast, the film genre utilizes Pathos in order to convince audiences that these assumptions about high school communities are valid and to encourage sympathy for the artistic/intellectual students. Pathos, or the means of persuasion by appealing to the audience’s emotions, is conveyed via perspective and genre expectations. *Glee* employs perspective in order to appeal to the audience’s sympathies and imagination. The vivid images and emotional language in scenes about Kurt, such as when he is repeatedly thrown into dumpsters or lies to his father about his sexuality, encourage audiences to empathize with this character’s perspective on high school communities. Encouragement to support the artistic/intellectual high school community is more evident in every instance that a member of the Cheerios leaves the structured, high-status athletic community to join the individualism and freedom of Glee club. The overall happy endings, romance, and achievement for the underdog Gleeks exploit genre expectations based in American cultural ideals, which further emphasizes the writer’s point of view and persuades audiences to support the artistic/intellectual misfits of the high school community. Thus, though logos and pathos embody different vehicles of persuasion, these rhetorical techniques work similarly to validate assumptions about community.

Literary and film genres, such as *Fox’*s *Glee* and academic research articles about high school peer culture, espouse assumptions about the artistic and intellectual communities in high schools via critical rhetorical techniques. Although methods of expression may vary, both genres frequently utilize the same rhetorical techniques to reach their audiences. Because the 21st century American definition of community has expanded to include the creation of an identity, it is significant to observe its increased prevalence and relevance in modern culture. Indeed, most discussions about community support Rachel’s plea, discernable through significant rhetorical techniques.

Works Cited

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