"Are You Okay?" A Rhetorical Analysis of Jon Stewart’s 9/11 Monologue and His Role as Leader

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Abstract

On September 20, 2001 Jon Stewart addressed his audience for the first time since 9/11. Stewart presents a story to his audience, one placing American heroes at the center with a clear message of hope. His response remained free from controversy and worked in his favor in order to secure loyalty from his audience as he promises a return to political comedy in the future. Narrative criticism allows for a closer analysis of his speech, separating characters, plot, and theme while evaluating Stewart’s message and role as rhetor.

Method

Walter Fisher presented the narrative criticism as a wide reaching paradigm.

- **Narrative form:** The crucial parts of any narrative are the characters laid out for the audience, the setting of a story, and the plot. These three parts to a narrative help a critic arrive at a theme of the story (Rowland, 2016).
- **Narrative function:** including entertainment and persuasion. The rhetorical critic then has to analyze the artifact in order to decide if the piece has narrative coherence and fidelity.

Context

Political Comedy

The 2000 Presidential Election paved the way for Stewart and the popularity of political satire. He was willing to call out politicians and journalists where he thought they were failing the American people. Comedians like Stewart and Colbert contributed to a healthy debate surrounding the media by pointing out incongruities in the news (Waisanen, 2009).

Post 9/11

People turned increasingly towards traditional news and government officials. Bush’s approval rating soared, reaching 86% by late September, the highest numbers he would receive in his eight-years as president. (Pew Research Center, 2008).

Stewart’s style of humor made his return seem almost impossible and was highly anticipated. The Daily Show’s style of blame based, truth-seeking, comedy clashed with society’s new role of comedians as distractions from reality.

Analysis

Characters

Heroes and villains of the story. “All this talk about ‘These guys are criminal masterminds.’ They’ve – they’ve gotten together and their extraordinary guile…and their wit and their skill.” It’s a lie. Any fool can blow something up. Any fool can destroy” (Stewart, 2001). His choice to downplay the role of the “villains” created a story that could continue after the tragedy.

Setting

Focused not on destruction but what remained. “The view from my apartment was the World Trade Center and now it’s gone. They attacked it. This symbol of American ingenuity and strength and labor and imagination and commerce and it is gone. But you know what the view is now? The Statue of Liberty. The view from the south of Manhattan is now the Statue of Liberty. You can’t beat that.” (Stewart, 2001).

Plot

He told a story of an America that was working towards something and the potential of the future.

Theme

Hope and bravery. “I wanted to tell you why I grieve, but why I don’t despair. And the reason I don’t despair is because this attack happened. It’s not a dream. But the aftermath of it, the recovery is a dream realized…we’re judging people by not the color of their skin but the content of their character” (Stewart, 2001).

Functional Analysis

Entertainment and Persuasion

Acts as a fellow citizen, grieving along side his audience. Strong emotional appeal broke down walls, persuading the audience to accept his narrative of events and role as rhetor.

Narrative Fidelity

Spoke directly to American ideals. American society without prejudice, without hatred, and without greed. “We feel like it’s a privilege. Just even the idea that we can sit in the back of the country and make wise cracks … This is a country that allows for open satire, and I know that sounds basic and it sounds as though it goes without saying – but that’s really what this whole situation is about” (Stewart, 2001). This “privilege” as he puts it, won’t be taken away by individuals looking to bring fear and chaos to America.

Evaluation

Sought to bring relief by addressing the tragedy then shifting focus to the future. Presented his show as a way to move past 9/11 and connected his political criticism with the foundations of democracy itself.

Stewart changed his voice and shaped the narrative of 9/11. While this rhetorical role is usually reserved for the president or other government figures during a time of tragedy, Stewart’s unprecedented leadership opened up this role for others.

References


References (Graphics)