Rhetorical Analysis of “What it’s like to win the lottery as a woman”

Ms. Hamilton

Porter Creek Secondary School

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The #MeToo Movement that began in 2006 and made headlines around the world in 2017 marks a pivotal point in the history of sexual violence against women in North America (Me Too Movement, 2019). Thousands of women have shared their personal stories via social media thus creating a network of support and resulting in the prosecution of a number of sexual offenders, often men in positions of power. The article entitled “What it’s like to win the lottery as a woman” written by Samantha Ettus and published in *The Washington Post* in 2017 is one such example of a woman adding her voice to the #MeToo Movement. The purpose of the article is to spread awareness about sexual violence against women and Ettus argues that sexual violence against women is pervasive – more prevalent in society than most would think due to the fact that many women keep these traumatizing experiences to themselves…until now. Ettus uses a combination of persuasive appeals, appropriate language and tone, a variety of rhetorical devices as well as enough background information and detail to great success. The result is an article that is highly effective in conveying her message to the audience.

In order to effectively persuade readers of *The Washington Post*, a widely read newspaper in the United States, Ettus uses a balance of appeals including: logos, pathos and ethos. She appeals to the readers’ sense of logic when she discusses her response to her tennis coach sending her a “friendship package” (para 3) after she fired him because he gave her an “icky feeling…inside” (para 1). She tells her parents, “I am 13. I don’t need a 45-year-old friend” (para 3). Her point is valid, and she uses logos further when she explains how a few years later this same coach “was exposed as a violent sexual predator” (para 4). She continues to persuade using logical appeal by relating several anecdotes of interactions with people who she later finds out have raped women. These examples illustrate the prevalence of sexual predation and violence against women in society. Ettus also employs emotional appeal to great effect in the article. For example, she claims she cannot remember her tennis coach touching her; however, “[She] keeps hoping that [she] has passed the statute of limitations on memory suppression” (para 6). Essentially, she is worried that maybe her coach did assault her, but she cannot remember it, and there is the implied fear that at some point in her life she might recall such an experience. The audience is compelled to empathize with her in this instance. Furthermore, when she describes a violent sexual experience that she had in college where she “woke up covered in bruises [but] didn’t tell a soul”, the reader feels disturbed by the event but also by her isolation (para 7). Finally, she lends credibility and trustworthiness to the piece by sharing personal, often first-hand, accounts of sexual violence and predation starting at age seventeen with her 45-year-old tennis coach through to her experiences in college.

Ettus’ choice of language and tone also add to the effectiveness of the piece. The newspaper in which the article was published is read by 18-65-year-olds (Statista, 2021) with various levels of education, so by writing in a clear and straight-forward way, Ettus easily connects with all members of her audience. For example, she opens the piece with “For years as a child, I struggled to make my parents hear me when I told them my tennis coach was crazy” and this level of language and vocabulary continues consistently throughout the piece (para 1).

The serious tone she employs is also effective given the topic. For example, when reflecting on an abusive sexual experience in college that she did not tell anyone about at the time, she states, “We all have our secret stories, the ones that populate our timelines against our will and stay etched in our memories” (para 7). Her tone is also sometimes sarcastic, mocking a society where violence against women is systemic: “I am a lottery winner” (para 8).

Similarly, the use of rhetorical devices such as simile, repetition, and metaphor also contribute to the effectiveness of the article. Ettus uses the powerful simile: “It was as though a dam broke and was never repaired” to illustrate the prevalence of young women who are raped in college and society’s lack of action against this form of abuse towards women (para 10). Additionally, she repeats the sentence “I am a lottery winner” at the end of a series of paragraphs to great effect (p. 2). These five words resonate and remind the reader that sexual violence is widespread in society. “I am a lottery winner” is also an effective metaphor because she is implying that for a woman to go through life without experiencing sexual violence is extremely rare. Some readers may think she is exaggerating, but the truth of the matter is difficult to ascertain as historically women have often kept these experiences to themselves.

Ettus also makes the right choices in terms of assumptions and prior knowledge, and the article has many strengths with no gaps or weaknesses. She assumes the reader has some knowledge of sexual violence against women; however, she provides enough examples and background information for those who may be ignorant of the topic. The strengths include an indirect thesis which compels the audience to keep reading to find out more and the compelling way Ettus structures the article. She writes a series of anecdotes in concise paragraphs that illustrate her point and, when combined, have a powerful effect. The reader is effectively encouraged and inspired to “speak out against injustice whenever they see it or experience it” (para 14).

Overall, Ettus’ article “What it’s like to win the lottery as a woman” does what she intended: it spreads awareness about sexual violence against women and it illustrates the importance and power of people speaking up against violence and injustice in order to provoke societal change. The choices Ettus makes in terms of persuasive appeals, language and tone, rhetorical devices, and background information and detail result in an overwhelmingly convincing argument.

References

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