Lizzie Velasquez Pentad Analysis

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Justification/Review of Literature

We chose to show how rhetor works through a very motivational speech by a girl named Lizzie Velasquez. Dramatism states that within every rhetorical act resides a drama and story. Each person’s symbolic action identifies and constructs within it, relationships between a Pentad of terms. Like I said before, our artifact is about a young girl named Lizzie made an appearance on the show Tedtalks to share her story and encourage others to see the beauty in themselves and not let others opinions define you as a person. Lizzie was born with a very rare syndrome that keeps her from gaining tissue, fat or any weight. She is blind in one eye and does not look the part of the average female.

One day when Lizzie was in high school she decided to get on YouTube to procrastinate from homework and listen to some music when she came across a picture of her face on one of the videos. The video was only eight seconds long and displayed only one photo of her (International Business Times, 2014). In the anonymous youtube video, bullies labeled Lizzie Velasquez the “ugliest woman in the world.” Given this hand in life, Lizzie had the choice of giving up and letting her bullies define her, or she could make the choice to create who she is through how she acts.

She goes on in the speech explaining how she first reacted to the situation and then how she overcame it. One of the best lessons that I got from this video was not hearing how she let go of the situation and never let them get to her, it was hearing her say that god made her the way she was as a blessing, not a curse. Hearing her say she knows she is beautiful and how there is beauty in everyone show how kind and
powerful one eight second clip can affect someone. One of the main reasons our group chose to do this speech was because the story she shares has such a beautiful and uplifting purpose to life. Lizzie is able to see the beauty in every “curse” (*Bullied Girl*). Lizzie has become a motivational speaker to inspire others to not let negativity shape the course of their life, but to instead take that negativity and create a ladder that will lead you to the best person you can be.

In Lizzie’s TEDx Austin Women motivational speech, she states that, “You are the person in the front seat of your car… you get to decide what defines you.” She assures the convention that no one has the right to define who you are, and does so with humor, stories, life experience, and a touch of tragedy. Her life and her struggle is the reason so many women turn to Lizzie’s books and speaking for hope that life is more that what we see in a mirror. Lizzie’s bravery and beauty shine through her outward appearance, and is significant for many reasons.

In a world so focused on outward beauty that many turn to starvation to be “supermodel beautiful”, we need the message that we have the right to move past what we look like. We have the right to create our own reality based on what we love, what we do, and who we want to be. Also, the message helps people realize the ability for everyone in society to be beautiful. If you are kind, a good person and believe that you are beautiful, then you will be beautiful.

In a story written by ABC News about Lizzie, it is explained that, “In December, Velasquez will graduate and focus all her time on helping others overcome bullying…” Velasquez looks forward to living a long and normal life surrounded by supportive family
and friends.” The significance of this TEDx talk is not just the words that Lizzie leaves with her listeners, but what she has been through to become the inspirational woman that she is today.

Some more background into the speaker can be found on Lizzie’s web page. She further explains her optimism as, “In a time when many people change their appearance in order to feel accepted, she has accepted herself with extraordinarily positive self-esteem. Her attitude, not her syndrome, is contagious.” Lizzie focuses, not on her condition, not on her struggles, but how she has overcome these obstacles and how others can do the same.

The audience is generally anyone who watches or hears her speech on Ted because this message is so wide spread, due to her internet fame, it is difficult to lump Lizzie’s audience into one general category. You have people who watch the speech for inspiration, those who watch because everyone else has, those who watch out of curiosity, the list of categories that her audience could fall in never end. One general category does apply to all members, the idea that they were hooked into watching the 13 minute video after listening to her introduction. Lizzie used her rhetorical skills to capture her audience’s attention for long enough to keep them engaged. With internet audiences, it is easy for a viewer to “walk away” or discontinue watching without fear of insulting the speaker. The fact that her performance has over 5 million viewers is astounding.

Looking more in depth, we believe that her target audience is not just anyone who watches and listens to her speak, but anyone who doesn’t consider herself or
himself to be beautiful. That is why Lizzie felt the need to share her story because she does not want anyone else out there to go through what she did. Lizzie’s main objective is to let her targeted group of people know that each and every one of them is beautiful from the inside out matter what.

The argument that Lizzie is making in her speech is that society as a whole is going to tear you down and try to cast different stereotypes, looks and judgments on you no matter what because there are always going to be people who are going to pick you apart no matter what you look like. Lizzie is making a statement by telling society that they can say whatever they want about her, but isn’t she is going to choose to be happy. She argues that we should look past what people say about you because we all know ourselves better than anyone and if you know you are a good person, then who cares what others say because you are going to be beautiful in your own way (Barness, Sarah, 2014). Also, in studying her speaking, we can learn how to inspire others and encourage acceptance based on person, rather than appearance.

Through studying, we can aim to understand how Lizzie is so effective in reaching every age, background, gender, and ethnicity with her message. Typically, with a syndrome that is only known to have effect two people, one would expect that her situation would be difficult to relate with. By understanding how Lizzie manages to create a bond with her audience and a sense of understanding, though no others have this experience, we can better learn to relate to others.

Everyone could use the information found when studying this speaker because as humans we naturally aim to create connections with others. More specifically, if
politicians, doctors, lawyers, teachers, professors, authors, journalists, etc, could better learn to communicate and relate with the general public a new level of effective communication could be achieved. No longer would miscommunication be a major worry for public speakers if they could adopt the same kind of speaking skills that Lizzie exhibits in her motivational speaking. Therefore, the purpose of this project is to analyze and understand how Lizzie was able to emotionally connect to an audience that may not directly relate to her background and story.

Method:

“Kenneth Burke identified a method for analyzing the dimensions of language through a five part “dramatism pentad” that describes our living stories. Burke found how you can understand a speech by identifying how pairs interrelate. He said that we choose words because of their dramatic potential and also that we all have a preference for particular parts of the pentad.” (Burke’s Five Elements of Dramatism) That is called the dominant ratio. To effectively analyze the effect and procedure of Lizzie’s speaking, the use of a “pentad” is most effective. Elizabeth A. Dickinson effectively summarizes the reasons behind the use of Kenneth Burke’s pentad in her article, “The Montana Meth Project: Applying Burke’s Dramatic Pentad to a Persuasive Anti-Drug Media Campaign.” In this study, she summarizes that, “To Burke, both verbal and nonverbal elements in language are persuasive in nature and instrumental in driving social functions and processes” she goes on to explain that, “Rhetorical meaning is embedded in language; dramatism offers critics a way to analyze messages to determine human
motivation behind them.” Put basically, Burke’s pentad helps those studying rhetoric to understand why, and how a symbolic action is effective.

Burke’s pentad consists of five parts. The act, agent, agency, purpose, scene, and dominant ratio all help readers understand the elements of the artifact and the most important elements to the message. Dickinson states that these five elements, “help a critic understand the drama or reality implicit in any given artifact or message.”

The “act” of a message is the “what”. To define the act you must understand what happened, both in thought and in action. The act is what took place, in thought or deed. It is a very determined and motivated action. It is an extremely important part of the meaning behind the story, although, it is not the whole meaning. The action can range from simple to complex. For example, people walking down the street vs. giving an inspirational speech. The act may consist of both the when and the where of the message. You ask yourself, “What happened that made this action important?”

The “agent” of a message is quite simply the “who”. The agent is a person, or any kind of a person, that performed the act. From here whoever is analyzing the message must decide, if the writer and the speaker/performer are different, who the most important person is. When analyzing theatre there are many roles to consider for the agent. The agent could be the actor, the writer, the director, even the costume or the lighting designer. To define the agent you must pinpoint what element is the most important and who was responsible for it. They are also the characters with the story and the people who portray the meaning of the story. The agent can also be words like hatred, love and jealousy because they are the changing forces that act. People who
bring their attention to this element tend to believe that you need strong individuals to make certain things happen.

The agency is the means by which the act was accomplished. In other words, who did it? This is a method by which the agent achieves their goals. It could be just one act or a sequence of acts incorporated with an idea or principle. People who focus more on this are likely to be realistic in life. The “agency” is the “how” the act was accomplished. Was it spoken in front of a crowd? Filmed? Photographed? Written? How was this act accomplished? How did it reach its audience?

The “purpose” is the “why” of the action. Why was this done? What is the justification of the act? Why has the agent done this? It can be both overt or it can be concealed depending on the intent of the agent. This is the reason that the agent acts and the outcome they are looking for in what they do. The purpose can sometimes be very coated and distracting.

The “scene” of the message are the elements of “where” and the “when”. The scene attempts to explain the background of the act. What happened before to make this occur? When is this act occurring? Where is this act occurring? This can be both general and specific depending on what is most meaningful behind the act itself. People who are focus here usually believe that changing a scene changes everything else (Dramatism).

Finally, the “dominant ratio” is the analysis of all five elements in an attempt to label the two most important. By understanding the two most powerful elements to a speaker’s message critics can attempt to interpret that speaker’s worldview. This also
helps critics understand what kind of strategy the speaker was using to create and disseminate their message.

In “Beyond the ‘Tyranny of the Real’: Revisiting Burke’s Pentad as Research Method for Professional Communication”, written by Catherine Fox, the versatility of Burke’s theory is discussed. Though each critic can create their own interpretation of a dominant ratio, the functionality of the pentad is not diminished. Fox states, “[Burke’s] method of dramatism is useful because it is intended to reveal the messy and complex nature of human interactions, rather than clarifying or reducing these interactions to the real.”

Analysis:

In applying Burke’s pentad to Lizzie Velasquez’s speech at the TEDx Austin Women conference we can attempt to understand how it is that Lizzie has constructed her world view.

The act that Lizzie is creating is the motivational speech. The speech is what took place so that critics could analyze this event. Also, because she wanted to be able to share and tell people how she overcame her syndrome and how she views beauty in her own eyes. The speech is the action that Lizzie took to get her words out. The motivational speech can be further justified as the act because it is the positive message that she is giving to other people. The positivity engrained in the speech is what makes the speech the focus of what Lizzie did at the TEDx Austin Women conference.
The agent of this act is Lizzie. This can be gathered through both her act of actually speaking the words, the fact that this is her personal story, or that she has written the speech that she is now performing. She is the one who has experienced and felt the hatred from others, as well as the love from her supporters. The fact that she is speaking her own prepared words, most likely on more occasions than just this talk, makes her the agent of the act. She is a motivational speaker, therefore making her written words the fuel behind who it is that is speaking. Her personally written speech makes her the agent.

The agency used by Lizzie to spread her message is TEDtalks on youtube.com. We know that youtube is the agency because with over five million views, it is the most popular means to which others can hear her story. This agency allows users to listen to the message over and over again, never changing a tone or meaning to the message. Without speaking on Ted her speech and story would have never been told. The fact that her speech was a great inspirational hit on YouTube is also the agency. Since technology has come so far in today’s media, the ability of her message and story to last longer and will always be seen since it was on the internet. It also allows for people who were not there to see Lizzie speak in person, to see her worldwide.

The purpose to Lizzie’s act is to spread her message of inner beauty and that you should be able to define yourself. Her purpose is backed by her belief that she no longer wants to be labeled as just, “the ugliest woman in the world.” Through her motivation to define herself, she created purpose behind spreading her positive message. Another purpose of Lizzie’s speech is to get the message and inspire people
to be more grateful or the things that they do have instead of grief over the things that they don’t have. She wants to encourage others to not let negative connotations define you as a person. For example, in one speech Lizzie claims that she loves her syndrome because she can eat whatever and whenever she wants. She may get sick a lot, but at least she has nice hair she says (Lizzie Velasquez).

The scene that led to this act is that Lizzie found an 8 second video of herself that labeled her “the ugliest woman in the world” and the fact that she went on to recover from those bullies. When she first saw all the hate mail that people were writing about her it put her in a very low place. Lizzie’s confidence shot down almost as low as it could have gone (Bullied Girl). She realized in that defining moment that she was going to turn the check and look at the positives characteristics that god gave her to make her the person she is today. The background to why she felt the need to become the motivational speaker and to spread her message of beauty is that she “used the negativity in that video to fuel [her] passions”. Her reaction to finding the video was to help others believe in defining themselves, therefore leading her to be the motivational speaker in the TEDx Austin Women’s talk.

The dominant ratio in the five elements of Burke’s pentad is agent: agency. As stated previously, each critic can create their personal interpretation of the dominant ratio. I believe that the agent is the pinnacle of this message because any other human being in the world could preach about embracing inner beauty and not letting others define who you are- but hearing it from the woman that was labeled “the ugliest woman in the world” creates a sense of credibility that no other speaker would have. Lizzie has
the looks, the attitude, and the intelligence of someone who has not had the easiest
time making friends and surviving everyday life.

The element of Burke's pentad that comes second to agent is the agency used to
spread Lizzie's message. Without the ability to watch her speak from a distance, both
g eo logi cally and chronologically, the message would have only reached those at the
original event. Youtube's ability to keep this message immortal created an opportunity
for audience members to not only watch, but watch repeatedly Lizzie's message.
Without youtube, the message would be lost among the few that were able to see it in
person.

Conclusion:

Overall we discovered that Lizzie is the overall reason as to why this rhetorical
message became so important us. She is one of the only people in the world that can
speak for having a disease that has labelled her something so horrific. The fact that she
is the one sending the message to everyone preaching about how she is beautiful in a
society where physical appearance is like a glass ceiling. Without her being a living
miracle today and able to share her story with millions of people, Lizzie has changed
and saved the lives of many people.

It is important because Lizzie’s speech shows the essence of what a truely
good, kind, caring, strong and independent women should be. Society had blurred the
vision of what women stand for, for quite some time now. The fact that Lizzie was able
to effectively show us why believing in yourself and not caring what others label you as gives people the will and hope to become something greater.

As a utilitarian viewpoint, I do think that the message has changed the view of some people’s definition of beauty. Society still has it’s major beauty criticism, but I feel that the audience that Lizzie target’s can see past that stagnation and view what inner beauty truly is.

Artistically, Lizzie’s motivational speech was very well formed because she build up the motivation by first sharing her story, then saying how she overcame it and finally how everyone can get overcome what she went through and see the beauty in themselves.

Scientifically Lizzie’s speech and manner of connecting with her audience could open the door to potentially creating more support for the less “photogenic” diseases. Diseases that do not distort the physical appearance like diabetes, cancer, asthma, alzheimer’s and many others receive incredible amounts of financial support. With Lizzie becoming a public figure, there is hope that diseases that affect physical appearance in a societally condemned way will start to receive more support and funding from the public. That money and support could lead to scientific developments toward understanding what exactly is happening to these bodies and how we can treat it in the future.

Through Lizzie’s speech she is showing how unethically people we treating her throughout her life because of the way she looked. Unethical behavior is common in all workforces and aspect of life. Whether you look different, talk different, or act different
Lizzie discusses that no matter what just remember who you truly are on the inside and to find your own beauty.

Lizzie, through her speaking, is able to allow others to look past her physical appearance and truly like her for her personality. Historically, the people that society looks up to are physically attractive along with intellectually and emotionally attractive. For one of the first times, Lizzie has a chance to change the physical norm for the models we adopt in our society. Lizzie has been able to make a historical impact by pushing past the idea that a specific type of physical appearance is necessary to make a difference.

Psychologically Lizzie is teaching young women to find their inner beauty. She emphasizes that young women need to understand that looks do not justify if someone is beautiful or not. Even though society plays a huge role in labeling what beauty is, Lizzie shows women how to focus on their inner beauty and bypass all of those stereotypes society labels people who are not necessarily normal.

When it comes to politics, it is easy to see that we elect men and women who are “look the part”. There is even a study that shows that we are more likely to elect taller men. What we have yet to see is a man or a woman like Lizzie in the White House. Because of the way society has described society someone with a physical disability such as Lizzie would be seen as not fit to run for a political position.

From this analysis it can be gathered that physical appearance is no longer the only thing that matters. Lizzie has successfully thrust herself into the public sphere and not only has she flourished, she has made a difference. If anything, the way that Lizzie
looks is the reason that she is such a sensation. Her appearance gives her credibility to her audience. It assures that yes, her life has not be very easy, and yes she had struggled to get where she is, but there was no way that her looks were going to stop her.

We can also learn that through the permanence of publishing her speech in an online medium, Lizzie successfully created a type of immortality for her message. Every person with access, from now until the death of the internet can look up Lizzie Velasquez and watch her inspirational message. So, to use her as a model, we can infer that in order to reach large audiences through one performance all that is necessary is a camera, some good lighting, and a message. With one viral inspirational speech, Lizzie has proven that beauty is not the key ingredient to becoming a source of hope and motivation.
Works Cited:


