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Language in Postmodern Horror: Shifting Away from Stereotype to Heroine

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to rhetorically analyze a recent American horror film, Crimson Peak *(2015), using a feminist rhetorical criticism to argue that the postmodern horror film genre is moving away from traditional, stereotypical, and patriarchal roles of female characters in order to adopt new identities as heroines and villains. Although* Crimson Peak *contains some traditional forms of patriarchal ideology, it transcends the constricting bounds of socially constructed ideals of gender by challenging the expected behavior of women in situations of disempowerment. Drawing upon a feminist critique of linguistic practices constructed by rhetorician and sociolinguistic scholar Cheris Kramarae, the analysis of the film suggests that a shift is emerging in the postmodern film industry, a shift that represents females as both liberators and foes rather than the traditional role of women as damsels in distress.*

The universe of the contemporary American horror film is an uncertain one, in which good and evil, normality and abnormality, reality and illusion become indistinguishable (Williams). Contemporary horror films produced since 1968 are labeled as postmodern and have revolutionized film from early classical to represent a flux of change. "Postmodern" has many definitions; it can be defined as both a historical condition and creative style. Literary scholar Andreas Huyssen defines modernism as "a part of a slowly emerging cultural transformation in Western societies, a change of sensibility" (181). Cultural theorist Todd Gitlin refers to postmodernism as "an erosion of universal categories, the collapse of faith in the inevitability of progress, and the breakdown of moral clarities" (353). Art historian Craig Owens's definition of postmodernism as "a crisis of cultural authority" (57) best reflects the focus of this study.

Before 1968, during the classical era of horror cinema, the roles females played compartmentalized their gender and restricted them to stereotypes. Typical female roles, such as the *damsel in distress,* objectified the female character and belittled her capabilities to reflect fragile and helpless victims. Such disempowered examples can be observed in films like *Psycho* (1960)*, Bride of*

Frankenstein (1935), and *King Kong* (1933). Traditionally, female film characters were restricted to timid displays of fearfulness, dependence, and vulnerability as opposed to the typically male killers, who possessed strong, cunning, and dangerous characteristics. As film studies scholar Linda Williams writes in her work, *Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess*, "while male victims in horror films may shudder and scream as well, it has long been a dictum of the genre that women make the best victims; "Torture the women!" was the famous advice given by Alfred Hitchcock (13). However, in postmodern horror films, women play a more prominent role, as the hero—yet, they are still victimized (20). The constraints placed upon the female body are less restrictive in postmodern horror films and highlight feminist capabilities that help to bring equality amongst the sexes. Williams notes that in the postmodern world boundaries are blurred, institutions are called into question, traditional categories are broken down, and the master status of the universal subject as *male, Caucasian, and heterosexual* has deteriorated (17-18).

The film text *Crimson Peak* (2015), directed by Guillermo del Toro and released in October of 2015 by Legendary Pictures, exemplifies postmodernist ideals by challenging traditional gender ideology and patriarchy in horror cinema. Although *Crimson Peak* contains some traditional forms of patriarchal ideology, it transcends the imprisoning bounds of socially constructed ideals of gender by challenging the expected behavior of women in situations of disempowerment. Fear, violence, and the unknown characterize the horror genre and viewing characters in this context reveals the limitations of the human body. Fear can render the body powerless and vulnerable, yet it can also create heroes and villains out of characters that have been restricted and (mis)represented since the dawn of technology. In horror, the *damsels in distress* are no longer in need of saving; instead, they are increasingly called upon to rescue men in desperate situations.

I argue that *Crimson Peak* challenges patriarchal constructions of gender and can be read as a feminist text. Through the fictional characters presented in the film, as both the antagonist and the protagonist, a close examination of each character's use of language is decoded to uncover if this film text challenges traditional narratives of women in horror films. The film presents a rare opportunity to witness a non-patriarchal story through the presentation of empowering female-centric narrative and character roles.

Although *Crimson Peak* is embedded within an entertainment industry that is predominantly male governed, the film possesses significant undertones of feminism that can be persuasive to its viewers. I have chosen *Crimson Peak* in

order to analyze its use of language concerning gender and to critique the rhetorical value of communicating gender in a feminist light. I am particularly interested in the rhetorical construction of gender of two female characters, one as the heroine and the other as the antagonist, in this critique. My aim is to uncover the ways in which these female representations influence how women are understood in lived reality. The audience of this essay can be anyone who is interested in gender construction, film, or both, including horror buffs. However, I also wish to address feminists, rhetoricians, and Communication scholars who are interested in how language choice can shape a dominant ideology, or work against it. Horror cinema today presents a rare rhetorical opportunity to represent a feminist perspective that is positive and inspiring. This perspective is not new, but it can help contribute to the works of cultural feminists in rhetorical theory and demystify patriarchy by examining the power that language and cultural texts can hold.

Linguistically, stereotypical notions of gender, (mis)representations of gender, and patriarchal belief systems are perpetuated through our societal symbol system, which influence cultural expectations, standards, and mores. In the United States, the gender wage gap exemplifies an oppressive cultural norm and an unequal distribution of social, economic, and political power that relegates females to earn less than a man simply because of her sex. This hegemonic ideal of domination between the oppressed and oppressor requires a feminist touch. Thus, it is the work of feminist rhetoricians to examine mediated texts such as films in order to read the messages that produce ideas about gender on a mainstream level. Performance studies scholar Donna Marie Nudd claims that these communicative receptions influence how widely a text can be interpreted by an audience. Extending Nudd's idea, a film as a visual text has the power to influence millions simultaneously and mold individuals' perceptions of gender in both a positive and negative light. Therefore, *Crimson Peak* can reflect how gender construction is being produced on a mainstream level, and this recent film conveys how societal members perceive females today.

Having introduced the topic, the next section includes the story of *Crimson Peak* and the characters involved. After this brief introduction, an explanation of ideology and the cultural and social constructions of gender lay the foundation of this rhetorical critique. Following the literature review, the theoretical framework includes an explanation of rhetorical criticism, the feminist perspective, and introduce the ideas of rhetorical and sociolinguistic theorist Cheris Kramarae. The subsequent section includes the context of gender in horror films. Kramarae's rhetorical option of critique of linguistic practices is then used to analyze *Crimson*

Peak. A discussion of the findings concludes the essay. I argue that *Crimson Peak* has rhetorical value as a feminist text to communicate a message of change in the climate of gender ideology and patriarchy. Furthermore, *Crimson Peak* represents the beginning of a shift away from heteronormative traditions found within classical horror films and can help inspire future scholars of communication studies, rhetoric, and film theory to advance feminist beliefs and bring equality to all genders.

Crimson Peak

I begin by providing a brief background of the story of *Crimson Peak*. From the imagination of director Guillermo del Toro, this gothic romance stars Mia Wasikowska as Edith Cushing and Jessica Chastain as Lucille Sharpe, the two leading ladies of the story. This American story is a period piece set in 1901 and encompasses undertones resembling a gothic novel, such as the costuming and darkness of the ghostly characters.

Young Edith Cushing (Wasikowska) is an aspiring author with an ambition to become the next Mary Shelley. She lives with her father in Buffalo, New York during the early twentieth century and is consumed by her passion for writing. After the loss of her mother at an early age, Edith is haunted by spirits, including her mother's, and is able to communicate with them. From the beginning of the film, we witness her first ghostly encounter as Edith receives a warning from beyond the grave: "Beware of Crimson Peak."

Literature Review

The following literature review will include the foundational parts of this essay, including a thorough discussion of ideology and the social and cultural constructions of gender.

Ideology

Prominent literary theorist and rhetorician, Kenneth Burke, views literature as a form of symbolic action, claiming that "as mediated communication systems, which function via television, films, and the Internet, surround us at every intersection of Western society…individuals come into an 'unending conversation'" (*Philosophy* 110-11). In Burke's work *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, he explained the idea of a conversation, as something that began long before any of us were born and will continue long after we die. Burke's metaphor explains how an individual is born and socialized into the world—taught or shown how to act, what is appropriate, and what is

expected. A person learns how and who to be by following the rules, which were in play long before she/he arrives (*Philosophy*). With experience, an individual can break or play with this set of rules, but this process first requires *knowledge* of who that person can be. This knowledge situates the individual and helps him or her construct their understanding of themselves within a preexisting reality or conversation.

Ideologies provide a lens through which societal members view knowledge and create social constructions. In turn, a powerful discourse arises that influences a society's behaviors. Rhetorical theorist William R. Brown defines ideology as a system of complex symbolic constructions of the world in which human beings "can comprehensively order their experiences" (124). Cultural theorist Stuart Hall explains that ideologies "originate from 'mental frameworks' that are based on languages, concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and systems of representation—which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out, and render intelligible the way society works" (29). The "frameworks" described by Hall are the lenses that social members use to view reality and understand the world around them. The primary means by which ideological frameworks are disseminated is culture, and it is the direct means by which individuals (and groups) are influenced. Society has access to different media by which to spread culture and ideological frameworks, but for the sake of this essay, the medium of film will be analyzed for its ability to influence social members, extend the dominant discourse, and proliferate ideological frameworks.

Since the dawn of film, an industry has formed around it, and this industry is responsible for pushing an ideological agenda. The *culture industry* is a term used to describe the system of different media that function together to transmit cultural ideologies, which have become economic industries whose ultimate goal is to make a profit, under the guise of culture. It is important to note that film is a significant component of the culture industry. In many genres of cinema, misogynic and sexist notions of women have been embedded and compartmentalized through roles played by characters, especially when casted as damsels in distress. Film, as a mass transmitter of culture, is responsible for displaying female characters as dependent, vulnerable, and unable to fend for themselves. This represents the views of patriarchal culture. Some may question why such a role was chosen for the actress to play. However, the majority of viewers will not, because it is a part of the dominant framework that is embedded by the film portion of the culture industry to view women as secondary or subordinate. It is not out of the norm for women to be perceived as anything but

a *damsel in distress*, because film has deeply embedded in our society the belief that women must depend upon a man to save them.

Signs and symbols are *polysemic*, which means that they are highly interpretive. However, when their meaning and usage are molded by a dominant framework, that framework dictates who does what. Through this knowledge acquisition and sense of empowerment, individuals can explain what symbols mean and detail what is expected of them and others. For example, the saying, "man up" is used interchangeably for men and women to suggest female dismissal. Using symbols through language systems helps connect cultural members to the world, build relationships through interaction, and construct reality.

It is important to note that an ideology does not exist in isolation. The structure of a society's knowledge base is built upon and entangled within a web of ideologies that work together to function in the power of numbers; in this way, they are more influential. Hall claims that chains of association link these interconnected ideologies together. He states:

> Ideologies do not operate through single ideas; they operate in discursive chains, in clusters, in semantic fields, in discursive formations. As you enter an ideological field and pick out any one representation or idea, you immediately trigger a whole chain of connotative associations. Ideological representations connote—summon—one another. (125-6)

However, ideologies do not assume power until individuals enact them and their construction is made a reality. It is through this action that ideologies become concrete and occupy cultural space. Ideologically shaping these realities and thought processes acts as a mode of control. Gender and sexuality scholar Rosemary Hennessey explains that the material force of ideology reproduces what counts as "reality" (21), and if this influence goes unnoticed, it can perpetuate unrealistic, stereotypical, and patriarchal views that do not represent women as equals, but rather, as people to be dominated. This stereotypical treatment of women has surfaced in our social and cultural constructions of gender within Western society, and is focus of the subsequent discussion.

Cultural and Social Constructions of Gender

Ideologies as described in the previous section communicate *knowledge* and understanding to perpetuate our social expectations of one another within culture. Sociology and Women's Studies scholar Allan Johnson, in his work, *The*

Gender Knot (1995), argues that the ideals of *male identification* are located within our cultural values in maleness and masculinity. Johnson states:

> In a male identified society the activities of men underscore what is preferred, normal, and desirable. The qualities commonly associated with masculinity, such as competition, individualism, invulnerability, rationality, and physical strength are honored. The qualities commonly associated with femininity, such as cooperation, nurturing, emotionality, and care, are undervalued or trivialized. (6)

Traditional expectations dictate that women should remain calm, sophisticated, and maintain a household. For example, women have been relegated to the domestic sphere where their role is to keep a home running smoothly, performing as hostess, and taking care of the needs of the husband and children. In Donmoyers' *Finding Space: A Criticism of Rhetorical Construction of the Female Action Hero in Film* (2003), she states, "putting women in the character of the hero contradicts these traditional roles" (2). Since competition is valued in our Western society, being a woman carries expectations of acting feminine; therefore, acting aggressively will often be met with disapproval, if not hostility (Johnson 6). Challenging these rigid stereotypes begins with critiquing language choice, structure, and recreation. Rhetorically analyzing one's chosen language can challenge the status quo to allow rhetors to be, as rhetorician Cheris Kramarae puts it, "thieves of language" (Penfield 137).

Language is the greatest disseminator of gender ideology and patriarchy. As such, a linguistic interpretation of a filmic text can be fruitful in its representation of Western culture today. Language perpetuates a cycle of social expectancies through institutions of learning, religious values, home life, media, and friendships. Within our colloquial conversations, we are measured against each other and conditioned to point out the differences between each sex: "girls are dumb," while "boys are smart." Use of this type of language is how dominant cultural institutions reify dominant ideas about gender and maintain the status quo.

Western culture, historically and today, continues to reify the idea of gender as a binary model with two rigid and static options of male or female (Gender Spectrum). Not only is this model heteronormative, but it also dismisses other identities that are apart from or outside of the male/female binary. Hence, gender and sex are not interchangeable. Biological sex and gender are different because gender is not inherently connected to one's physical anatomy. Our sex is determined by our physical attributes and biological makeup of sex hormones,

chromosomes, and reproductive structures. Gender, in contrast, is connected to one's sense of self, whether that is male, female, or beyond binaries, and relies on an individual's perception of their identity. Therefore, gender is a socially constructed concept much like race. Gendered expectations and ideologies are placed upon our personhood from an early age. For example, the majority of girls across many cultures are brought up to play with dolls (objects that are beautiful and quiet, much like the expectations that women are prescribed to follow), while boys have an unlimited choice of toys. However, boys are encouraged not to play with toys that are associated with feminine qualities (kitchen sets, makeup, and/or playing "dressing up"). As noted in an article by Gender Spectrum,

> Through a combination of social conditioning and personal preference, by age three most children prefer activities and exhibit behaviors typically associated with their sex. Accepted social gender roles and expectations are so entrenched in our culture that most people cannot imagine any other way. As a result, individuals fitting neatly into these expectations rarely, if ever, question what gender really means. They never had to, because the system has worked for them. (1)

Evidently, gender is one of the primary ways that we determine social behavior, but it is important to note that as complex beings, we use identities to interact in the world, and gender does not account for all of them. I argue, however, that it is vital to focus on gender construction, since it has been embedded culturally and socially within ideologies, entertainment, and language in Western society.

Theoretical Framework

This section discusses the theoretical framework of this study. It includes an explanation of rhetorical criticism, feminist rhetorical criticism, and it introduces the ideas of Cheris Kramarae.

Rhetorical Criticism

Rhetorical criticism helps locate and interpret both the surface and the submerged meanings created within the rhetorical text (Donmoyer 46). To reflect the various meanings that a text encapsulates, a critic must be aware of the symbols used in the message and how such a message is positioned in systems of thought. The purpose of rhetorical criticism is to help critics "understand their experience more richly, to see levels of meaning and significance that they would not have seen before, and to instill in people habits or techniques of 'reading' discourse" (Brummett 56). A closer look at the decisions made by the rhetor can

allow the critic to begin to understand what is there and what is not. In Burke's simplistic phrasing, "A way of seeing is also a way of not seeing—a focus on object A involves a neglect of object B" (*Permanence and Change* 49). Following Burke, I am interested in who is represented and who is not, who is empowered and who is not, and to reveal what is covered beneath the surface. This rhetorical critique pursues an understanding of what this text claims to communicate about Western culture through a feminist lens. The following section explains how feminist rhetorical criticism plays an influential part in the analysis of of *Crimson Peak*.

Feminist Rhetorical Criticism

Feminism includes many forms of thought, and is packed within various interpretations of the movement and meanings attached, depending on which space in the feminist spectrum one inhabits. Kramarae and Treichler refer to feminism as "a radical notion that women are people." Although this statement may raise some eyebrows in disagreement, it lays the foundation of feminist thought. Feminist advocates and critics focus on arguing against evidence of patriarchal systems that most civilizations, including the Western world, have subscribed to for generations (Nudd, 2009, p. 257). The diverse richness of feminism uncovers the experience of men, women, and various identities within a patriarchal social system that has been engulfed in a war between divisions of race, power, and social status.

For the focus of this essay, I argue that gendered language reflects the "patriarchal rubric" to which females and/or feminists are expected to adhere (Nudd, 2009, p. 259). As previously noted, gender as a social construction is problematic and influences our language choices to reflect stereotypes and male domination. This construction within society is one focus that feminist rhetoricians have identified amongst the plethora of issues of *male centeredness* and *male identification* that dominates each of the sexes. "[Male domination] means that men can shape culture in ways that reflect and serve men's collective interests—to promote the idea that men are superior to women" (Johnson 6). Male centeredness and male identification both influences and enforces "systematic disparity between genders to be maintained" (Nudd, 2009, p. 258). Hence, it is vital for scholars to uncover how *language* is used to define gender by following the work of feminist rhetorical theorist and critic Cheris Kramarae.

Cheris Kramarae

In 1974, Kramarae published an article titled "Women's Speech: Separate but Unequal?" in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. Her essay and subsequent oeuvre started a conversation about gender and language that has changed feminist scholarship forever. According to Foss, Foss, and Griffin, hers "was one of the earliest efforts to incorporate, value, and legitimize the study of women's communication in the discipline… Also, Kramarae's diverse areas of interest in technology, education, and women's studies, recognize her as an author, scholar, and theorist of feminism" (37). Her interest with intersections of gender, language, and power influenced her co-authorship of *The Voices and Words of Women and Men* (1980). In the book, Kramarae explains how language and the way we verbally interact differs for each sex—through the perspectives of men and women—and engages a range of issues including female-male interactions, women's use of narrative chaining, and the relationship between language and social change. In her research, she observes the use of language by women and men from the theoretical frameworks of the muted group, reconstruction of psychoanalysis, speech-style, and strategy frameworks (Foss 37).

As an experienced scholar of language and its uses concerning gender, Kramarae's focus on the linguistic nature of the world is a main feature of her contributions to rhetorical theory. Kramarae contends that the world is constructed through language via the available linguistic and syntactic material, in turn "imposing a structure on people's thinking and on their interaction" ("A Feminist Critique" 8). Moreover, "The labels and descriptions we use help determine what we experience" (Foss, 39). Kramarae's ideas call attention to the constraints with which an individual must contend in order to fit within linguistic structures and, indeed, think and create meanings of the world. The linguistic nature of the world tells us that "no "human experience [is] 'free' from accompanying language" (Foss, Foss, and Griffin 39) and our communication through various languages, symbols, and text (e.g., text messaging or use of Emojis) relates to our societal position. Hence, it is the project of Kramarae to study language for the great amount of information it holds regarding society: "[I]f we can discover the principles of language usage…we will at the same time discover principles of social relations" (*Women* 119). This specific interest in language is a prime feature of the subsequent rhetorical criticism of the productions of gender within this filmic text.

A foremost concern of Kramarae's work is social relations as it relates to gender. She seeks to understand how women are treated in language and the kinds of English words that operate in the Western world (Foss, Foss, and Griffin

39). For example, in Western culture the recent trend of young teenagers' use of the word "bitch" to reference their close friends is one way that language is used between young females now. This term can also be used in its traditional and negative way to demean a female by calling her the equivalent of a dog. Today, both sexes use this word casually to refer to one another, but this usage of language has negative connotations attached that many youths may or may not be aware of due to their immaturity, lack of awareness and/or knowledge, and/or lack of experience. An interesting aspect of this kind of language use of "bitch" between men is that it is only employed with the intention to insult one another such as, "you're acting like a little bitch." The relationship with the word "bitch" between males relates to the Western sexist hierarchy that exists to serve males as dominant societal members, whereas, females' use of this term denotes a sign of friendship and connection.

As this rhetorical study of gender construction in *Crimson Peak* is fixed within a mediated text, and because Kramarae's background in research of technology and women has been vast, she is an ideal resource for this project. In a 1997 article entitled "Technology Policy, Gender and Cyberspace," she states, "technology not only unites, but also divides: the rich and poor, individuals and countries, upper classes and working classes, women and men" (1). Without a doubt, Western society is highly influenced by dominant ideologies of women serving men as a schema by which to understand the world. Societal members witness such ideologies at work within technology especially, as it has been adapted into the daily routines and coveted as a connection to the world around them. Therefore, Kramarae suggests that the Western world creates language practices that reflect these social relations, and that they are rooted in "hierarchal relationships between men and women" (Foss, Foss, and Griffin 39). This idea relates to Kramarae's *mainstream world*, where the basis of hostility toward women is prevalent.

Mainstream World, a concept reflected in Kramarae's research of language structure and usage, explains a hostile treatment of women based on the social constructions of gender through various communication practices (Foss, Foss, and Griffin 39). As social constructs, much like race, "the categories 'women' and 'men' are *ideas* that must be learned and reinforced" through language (Kramarae, "Gender and Dominance" 470). Such constructs work to divide rather than unite men and women, because "we are trained to see only two sexes. And then we do a lot of work to continue to see only these two sexes, which we call male and female, boys and girls, men, and women" (Kramarae, "Gender and Dominance" 470).

Also in the Mainstream World, language systems not only categorize men and women but also compartmentalize them based on their supposed gender. This creates unbalanced power relations between the sexes to guarantee dominance to occur of men over women. If language equates to gendered categories and creates a disparity of power between the opposing sexes, then it can also "perpetuate the ideologies of those in power" by privileging perceptions, experiences, and modes of expression" (Kramarae, Schulz, and O'Barr 16) to fit an ideal image of "women serving men" (Foss, Foss, and Griffin 39). As discussed previously, ideologies concerning gender categories have worked so fluidly since their inception that social members are unaware of their existence and power over their lives and language. Equalizing the sexes and opening lines of communication can fight these ideologies head-on. But an equal social, political, and economic position between men and women has been a controversial battle that continues to rage on within feminist scholarship.

Kramarae's Feminism

Kramarae clarifies that her definition of the feminism works to disrupt the systems of language that criticize female activists for creating discussions about the daily hostility and unfair treatment to which they are subjected. She argues against the "tendency to discredit feminists who critique male power [and use labels] such as 'embittered 'or 'unattractive'" (Kramarae and Spender 10) to avoid the issue of how male power has been used to corrupt and abuse the position of women. As Kramarae explains, by "locating the problem in the women who protest, rather than in their own privilege, men can deny their own agency and further frustrate and exacerbate the position of women" ("Punctuating" 137).

Kramarae's definition of feminism works against this very idea of women being unable to communicate on the same level as men because of a gendered differential that is socially constructed by men in power. She uses a critical analytical approach to challenge the linguistic system and the institutions it produces (e.g., education, politics, religion). "With its focus on disrupting mainstream linguistic structures, feminism is characterized by 'rethinking' and 'restructuring'" in a process Kramarae terms "equilibrium busting'" (Foss, Foss, and Griffin 52). Following Kramarae, for this study feminism should not be viewed in a static state, but as an ongoing process that disrupts the linguistic and empowered structures that create a hostile environment for women.

Gender in Postmodern Horror

Donomyer asserts that filmmakers have [mis]represented women on the screen since the inception of technology. At times, female characters and their situations, relationships, behaviors, reactions, clothes, etc. are depicted in ways that reflect real women. At other times, the depictions are demeaning, stereotypical, or worse, obscene (1). As Neve Campbell's character, Sidney Prescott, once beautifully remarked of horror's usage of female characters in Wes Craven's *Scream* (1996):

> **Phone voice:** Do you like scary movies?
> **Sidney Prescott:** What's the point? They're all the same. Some stupid killer stalking some big-breasted girl who can't act who is always running up the stairs when she should be running out the front door. It's insulting. (Craven)

It is true that contemporary horror is not immune from its ill displays of gender and does flirt with classical notions of misogyny with patriarchal characters within the story, such as in horror films like *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Next Generation*, and the *Scream Trilogy*. Although each film has central female characters that survived the story, their bodies were objectified in overly sexualized manners and their female friends were mutilated beyond recognition. "In modernist terms, it has been considered a degraded form of pleasure and inducing mass culture" (Pinedo, 1996). This kind of treatment has often been met with feminist criticism.

Many feminist scholars interested in film theory prescribe a psychoanalytic framework to analyze the psychological effects such films have. Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey's influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" inspired feminists attracted to the psychodynamic approach in film. Mulvey argued that narrative forms characteristic of mainstream Hollywood cinema use women differently and serve men. The object of "the gaze," associated between the female and the screen and the possessor of the gaze owned by the viewer and the man, produced psychological tensions. This tension was only resolved by the male viewer's identification with the male protagonist of the film. However, film studies scholar Linda Williams scrutinized Mulvey's theory to expose her straightjacket association between males and the pleasures of looking, or *spectatorship* (744). Williams highlights that often in horror, contrary to mainstream cinema, women do possess the gaze. This is accomplished by the female character's ability to first witness, inquire about, and know the monster. Consequences for possessing this position of power ultimately results in punishing the female in horror films through violence for appropriating the gaze

and disrupting the masculine narrative order (744). Yet, if the gaze can be possessed by both sexes and women in the film are not victims of violence and punishment, as in *Crimson Peak*, then the gaze loses its power to enforce dominance and patriarchy on its viewer. Instead, a man or a woman can attract the viewer in their fictional form to persuade the audience against traditional patriarchy and embrace a new hero or a new enemy.

Cynthia A. Freeland, author of *Feminist Frameworks for Horror Films* (1996), critiques current feminist studies of horror films that are psychodynamic. Typically, this sort of feminist theory relies upon descriptions of women as "castrated or representations of threats evoking male castration anxiety" (Freeland). This rhetorical criticism rejects the idea of the psychodynamic as a feminist lens and instead aims to understand the culture within the text. As a critic studying *Crimson Peak*, I want to understand how Western cultural values and beliefs are reflected in the conversations between the actors in this film. In the following section, I will analyze each character's language use to uncover how postmodern film is beginning to have an influence on social constructions of gender.

Critique of Linguistic Practices

In what follows, I explicate how I employ a rhetorical approach to Kramarae's critique of linguistic practices to observe the patriarchal world within *Crimson Peak.* Comparable to the social construction of gender, language is also socially constructed in a manner that renders us "open to alterations that fit" the designated role of women (Foss, Foss, and Griffin 54). Through linguistic choices, rhetors "can either tacitly accept and thereby help perpetuate the status quo, or challenge, and thereby help change it" (West, Lazar, and Kramarae 121) from an oppressive system to an open conversation. As this rhetorical approach focuses on the analysis of linguistic structures to discover if a rhetorical text serves to dominate women, it best suits the premise of the present essay. Hence, it is vital for this rhetorical analysis to critique linguistic practices in order to create and use language that "undermines, unmasks, and overturns ruling definitions and paradigms" (Foss, Foss, and Griffin 54).

According to Foss, Foss, and Griffin, in order to understand the mainstream world this critique first needs to address the question of *what our world is*. By interpreting the quotations used as examples from each character, I will describe the context of the scene and how the character fights against patriarchal language. Secondly, a successful *critique of linguistic practices* involves a focus on the "products such as constructs, definitions, and histories from the experiences,

perceptions, and insights of women and using the information gathered to identify the inadequacies and distortions in the mainstream versions" (55). By focusing on the gender construction of each character's use of language choice, I will critique each quotation from the film in the following section. Afterward, a discussion of the analysis will tie the examples together to the approach used by Kramarae.

Site 1: Edith Cushing

Edith's language choice during the beginning scenes will begin this rhetorical criticism, as she represents the protagonist of this story. In this scene, Edith is attempting to publish her manuscript. She takes her work to Mr. Ogilvie to be considered for publication, yet, he only compliments her feminine handwriting with "nice and confident loops," and offers some gendered advice:

> **Edith:** "He told me it needed a love story. Can you believe that? […] He said that just because I'm a woman."

What the World Is. The fictional character of Edith struggles to gain recognition as a writer. Those around her mock her as "Jane Austen" for her ambitious passion for writing. While the females around her are concerned with gaining attention from the opposite sex, Edith has no trouble attracting suitors with her intelligence, wit, and strength. This distorted perception of patriarchal views of women belonging in a marriage with low ambitions is still unfortunately practiced today.

Critique. The constructions and gendered descriptions within Edith's language for this scene are very common of women in the early nineteenth century and in today's experience with sexism when applying for a job. Edith is experiencing a common stigma that is attached to females when entering the workplace: the feeling of not belonging in a male centered and identified arena is supported by patriarchal views of a woman's place.

Site 2: Lucille Sharpe

Contrasting Edith, the antagonist of *Crimson Peak* is Lucille Sharpe (Chastain). She can be characterized by her dangerous, intelligent, and cold demeanor. Not only is she a talented musician, but she is also powerful, independent, and strong. Unlike her brother, she is unafraid to get her hands dirty. Upon meeting Edith, she is set out to obtain her father's inheritance in order to "buy" Edith with the ring of Lucille's mother (who she killed in cold blood). Lucille Sharpe is considered

the "mastermind" of a devious plan to isolate Edith from her friends and family in order for her brother, Thomas Sharpe (Hiddleston), to marry her for her father's fortune. Once she arrives at the home of the Sharpes (Allerdale Hall), Edith becomes very sick and realizes that Lucille is slowly killing her with poisonous tea. Although Lucille is set out to kill Edith, it is not because she enjoys it, but because she is in love. The man she loves happens to be her brother, Thomas, and she is willing to do anything for their love.

In an argument with Thomas, Lucille is aware that Edith knows that the tea is making her sick and stops drinking it. Thomas sympathizes for Edith and defends her weakened state.

> **Lucille**: "[O]f course she's dying. She knows everything. She stopped drinking the tea. Doesn't matter. I put the poison in the porridge."

What the World Is. Lucille is assertive. She knows what she wants, and although that may be very different from the norm, she does not await a male to step in and handle the dirty work for her. She is surprisingly cool and composed when she kills, and without hesitation or remorse for the women she murders. She is the best kind of killer. She answers to no one but herself. Her language implies her dominance in the relationship with her brother. He fights to protect Edith from Lucille, but Lucille sees Edith as a child with a lot of money and an opportunity to satisfy her greed.

Critique. Although, Lucille is independent, she does covet some patriarchal values of the past, meaning that her love for her brother has caused her to lose her mind, and the jealousy she feels toward Edith extenuates her loathing for her. Lucille is not weak or being dominated because she loves; rather, it is her actions that speak louder, because she is willing to murder anyone to stay with her beloved brother.

Site 3: Edith & Lucille

During the final scenes of the film, Lucille and Edith square off. Edith is hurt and Lucille is in a hysterical state due to murdering her brother because of his love for Edith. She could not have that, so she stabs him in the eye. This is the last conversation the two have before one of them is dead in the snow.

> **Lucille:** "I won't stop till you kill me or I kill you."
> **Edith:** "I heard you the first time." [She stabs Lucille with a butcher knife.]

What the World Is. Both female central characters in this story are finally at odds, physically and emotionally. Loss has followed them everywhere they have been, and now they are practically stripped down to their bare bones. In this excerpt, it is hard to find any distortions other than the obvious, as a mediated text. This scene is very powerful and very different from most final scenes in horror films. It is not relying on computer-generated imagery (CGI) or make up to create the terror. It is conveyed through these two females that want to fight to stay alive and to do that, they must go through each other.

Critique. As mentioned above, it is very rare to end a film with two female characters fighting to the death, and the constructions produced by their language choices convey strength and survival. With no one to protect either of them, they rely on intuition and their need to fight. In the end, Edith survives and ends Lucille's life.

Findings

In this final section of this essay, I provide and assess the findings of this rhetorical criticism of *Crimson Peak.* One of my major complaints regarding the language used in the film was the subtle yet obvious jealousy between the two female characters. Granted, each character was highly independent and tenacious. Yet they had to kill each other over a male interest in the end. For example, after Thomas declared his love for Edith, Lucille killed him and planned to murder Edith as well because of her jealous rage. Perhaps she was mentally unstable, too. But her weakness was Thomas, and in the end, it killed her.

Edith, in contrast, demonstrated more independence overall. For example, after she found out about the love affair of the Sharpes, she did not allow their betrayal to break her down. Instead, Edith rose to the occasion and challenged Lucille. Therefore, my main critique of Lucille's character is her stereotypical "girlfriend" behavior that led her to be consumed by a man. Yet, in my opinion, during the last scene of the film, the non-stereotypical behavior of Edith as the heroine redeemed Lucille's faults. For example, after the battle and the final moments of the film, Edith saved her friend, Alan, who attempted to rescue her but was stabbed by Thomas.

Edith Cushing's character does fight against gendered language, and she is an excellent representation of non-patriarchal values that were attempted to be imposed upon her. Although her character is Caucasian and privileged, she does not allow her wealth to stop her from being independent. The character of Edith

fights against traditional female roles of patriarchy throughout this film, and in the end, she was the survivor who stopped the Sharpes' evil from continuing.

Lucille Sharpe's character has some undertones of traditional patriarchy, as she warrants her murders by virtue of her love for her brother. In the film, she comes from a loveless family, and it would seem reasonable to find attachment in a sibling, but she has a very deranged understanding of love. Also, the jealousy that Lucille experiences toward Edith makes her seem very stereotypical, as she calls all of the attention for herself by Thomas. Her needy state suggests that she is still falling in line with stereotypical horror characters who are in love, but in the end, allow that love to kill them.

My findings demonstrate that gendered language within a horror film can represent female characters as strong, independent, characters—even being portrayed as heroes and villains. The significance of these findings suggests that horror films are beginning to shift away from traditional stereotypical roles of women, often as a damsel in distress. A tension that was found within the characters was that Lucille's character did not measure up to the challenge of stereotypes. Unfortunately, her character was more aligned with patriarchal and hegemonic ideologies than that of Edith's, which I found to be surprisingly depressing.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that although *Crimson Peak* contains some traditional forms of patriarchal ideology, it nevertheless transcends the imprisoning bounds of socially constructed ideals of gender by challenging the societal expectation of the behavior of women in situations of disempowerment. I employed Kramarae's critique of linguistic practices to quotations from *Crimson Peak* to demonstrate how the film challenges traditional narratives of women in horror films and can represent a new beginning of feminist film texts.

Not only are the two main characters of this film female, but also their characters are portrayed realistically in the way they encounter obstacles and share complex experiences that females can identify with. The primary limitation of this research concerns my reliance on only one text for analysis. I encourage future scholarship within communication studies and beyond to ask questions about how gender and language are used in recent films outside of the horror genre. I am interested in furthering this research by involving an audience analysis portion to open up a dialogue of how recent movies impact filmgoers by asking if the female actresses are breaking gender boundaries or conforming to them. Examining language use in film can be representative of the culture in which we,

as social actors, thrive. It is important to be aware of how language can acknowledge some groups of people and completely ignore others.

In this rhetorical criticism of *Crimson Peak*, a message of gender equality and justice can be interpreted as a step in the right direction for Hollywood entertainment. Yet gender oppression and female underrepresentation on screen is still prevalent. In her recent study of gender inequality in popular film, Communication scholar Stacy L. Smith found that females are "grossly underrepresented in 2012 films" (1). This study resulted in the following findings:

> Out of 4,475 speaking characters on screen, only 24.8 percent are female. This translates into a ratio of 2.51 males to every 1 female on screen. 2012 reveals the lowest percentage of on- screen females (28.4 percent) across the 5-year sample. Off screen, only 16.7 percent of the 1,228 directors, writers, and producers are female actress the 100 top- grossing films of 2012. (1)

These statistics are alarming and should serve as motivation for future scholarship to continue research regarding gender representation through the use of language in film texts. There is clearly more work to be done by scholars of Communication Studies and rhetoricians. Yet language use is not confined to institutions of education. On the contrary, language extends beyond the classroom, and the change we seek exists in our everyday interactions with one another. The way we talk to each other and having an awareness of other identities such as gender is the first step in changing dominant discourse. On the most basic level, gender equality begins with us, and it is our responsibility as progressive people to not only seek gender justice but also engender it with actions and embody it within ourselves.

To close, I will end with my favorite line from *Crimson Peak, which* represents an outlook of what we as advocates of feminism hope to accomplish for the future of films. As Edith leaves Alan to fight Lucille, she says to him:

> "I'm going to get us out of here. I will get help. You have to trust me. I'll come back for you. I promise, I will. Go hide."

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