Straw Man

Definition of Straw Man

The term *straw man* refers to a form of informal fallacy used in arguments and debates. A type of rhetorical device, straw man is based on refuting the argument of one's opponent on a view he doesn't share. When the subject wants to prove that his or her perspective or argument is superior to an opposing argument, he uses straw man argumentative fallacy.

It is taken literally, misleading the audience into thinking the subject has misunderstood the opposition's argument or position. In England, straw man is also commonly known as "Aunt Sally." Read on to learn more about *straw man* in literature.

Use of Straw man in a Presidential Speech

> "It was a little cocker spaniel dog in a crate he had sent all the way from Texas. Black and white spotted. And our little girl – Tricia, the six year old – named it Checkers. And you know, the kids, like all kids, love the dog and I just want to say this right now, that regardless of what they say about it, we're going to keep it."

(US President Nixon's "Checkers Speech" in 1952)

U.S. President Richard Nixon gave this straw man response to his critics, who accused him of taking money illegally from election campaign funds for personal use. They never criticized him for receiving a dog as a gift; however, this argument became successful despite being an informal fallacy.

Examples of Straw Man in Literature

Example #1: *Oedipus Rex* (by Sophocles)

> "OEDIPUS:
> Monster! thy silence would incense a flint. Will nothing loose thy tongue? Can nothing melt thee, Or shake thy dogged taciturnity?
>
> TEIRESIAS:
> Thou blam'st my mood and seest not thine own Wherewith thou art mated; no, thou taxest me...
>
> TEIRESIAS:
> : Yea, I am free, strong in the strength of truth.
>
> OEDIPUS:
> Who was thy teacher? not methinks thy art.
>
> TEIRESIAS:
> Thou, goading me against my will to speak."

Oedipus is a strong-willed character that does not like to be proved wrong. At first, when the wise man does not reveal the truth, Oedipus keeps begging him. He finally uses straw man by saying that a blind man is not wise, particularly when Teiresias points at him as the cause of the tragedy befallen the citizens of Thebes.

Example #2: *The Crucible* (by Arthur Miller)

> "Procter: I have no love for Mr. Parris. It is no secret. But God I surely love.
> Cheever: He plow on Sunday, sir.
> Danforth: Plow on Sunday!
> Cheever: I think it be evidence, John. I am an official of the court, I cannot keep it.
> Procter: I – I have once or twice plowed on Sunday. I have 3 children, sir, and until last year my land give little."

Cheever and Procter argue over the innocence of Procter in the court. Cheever brings up the issue of religion to overshadow the issue. Cheever's straw man argument appeals to emotions and prejudices, rather than reason and intellect.

Example #3: *A Modest Proposal* (by Jonathan Swift)

In "Modest Proposal," Swift has used the straw man argument to convince readers. He, in fact, responds to the governmental issue of handling an increasing population, and offers a solution through this informal fallacy. It is a straw man objection, with which the author reminds readers that reducing population is an overall goal anyway.

He introduces a good objection that there are a number of ways to fix the problem, as he presents the idea of giving the children of the poor to the elite class as food. Though this idea is not logical, it makes his argument effective, as readers are led to think about real solutions to the actual problem.

Example #4: *Othello* (by William Shakespeare)

> "DESDEMONA:
> And have you mercy too! I never did
> Offend you in my life, never loved Cassio
>
> OTHELLO:
> By heaven, I saw my handkerchief in 's hand.
> O perjured woman, thou dost stone my heart,
> I saw the handkerchief."

In these lines, Othello does not listen to his faithful wife, instead using straw man fallacy to refute Desdemona's argument. He just talks out of emotions and anger, rather than using his intellectual reasoning.

Function

The use of the straw man device is very common in literature, history, political debates, advertising, and all those fields of life where arguments

undermine the argument of an opponent, writers and speakers use it to belittle or weaken the opponent's position, to make it vulnerable to an argumentative attack. It could be annoyingly effective as, in response to this, the opponent may be lured into expressing something contradictory.