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The Detrimental Effects of Cultural Appropriation

Throughout the course of history, many groups of people, namely minorities, have been marginalized by other groups of people. Colonialism, the practice of establishing colonies for economic advantages, is one of the best examples. Most commonly, the customs of the local people getting colonized were whitewashed and replaced with the culture of the colonizers. Indigenous peoples of North America have many unique and significant cultures and practices, such as clothing, food, and ceremonial dances. However, colonizers perceived these customs to be actions of uncivilized, savage people. To this day, those misconceptions are present in modern-day society through offensive Halloween costumes, movies, and museum exhibits. Rayna Green is an activist for Native American rights, and one way she educates the public is through her satirical piece, "A Modest Proposal for the Museum of the Plains White Person". Like Green, Luiza Dreasher uses her writing in her article, "A Point of View: Understanding the Harmful Impact of Cultural Appropriation", to inform people about cultural appropriation. Although the article uses facts to explain the detrimental impacts of cultural appropriation, the satirical piece is more eye-opening to readers through its use of rhetorical appeals, allusion, and caricature which makes cultural appropriation seem more absurd.

The satire appeals to readers through emotions which are more striking to readers, compared to the article which simply appeals to peoples' logic. While explaining her satirical proposal, Green describes the status of an exhibition in the white culture museum, "We have organized

collecting expeditions throughout the country... White people will be honored to have the remains of their grandmothers and grandfathers on display” (Green). By writing so nonchalantly about a sensitive and tragic topic, Rayna Green is able to effectively evoke empathy from the readers. It makes them realize how immoral current museum displays are because of how the artifacts are retrieved. This feeling increases the connection between the marginalized Native American community and the viewer, helping them understand the results of cultural appropriation. However, by using numerical vocabulary and referencing past events like “the 2013 American Music Awards, [where] Katy Perry performed as a geisha” (Dreasher), the article distances the readers from problems. This makes appropriation seem like an issue of the past, which is counter productive to the purpose of this article. When talking about past events, it distracts readers from the fact that cultural appropriation is still an immensely prevalent issue right now. This part of the article has lots of valuable information, but it is not as effective as satire since it doesn’t move readers emotionally. It only helps to make them realize when these instances have occurred, but it does not make appropriation seem applicable to their lives. Therefore, the article is a less eye opening piece for readers.

Rayna Green’s informal persona in the satire creates a stronger writer-reader connection compared to the article, whose formal tone does not allow for that. Rayna Green starts off her satire with a casual, conversational tone: “Let me tell you something of the plans for our museum” (Green). Using casual language makes the readers feel more at ease. Political topics, like racism are controversial topics, which creates hostile environments when discussing them due to differences of opinions of different groups. Green’s language creates a welcoming environment for readers, which creates a safe space for learning. Green’s goal is met because readers can comfortably learn how cultural appropriation is harmful. She also enforces her tone

when she talks about “the great and holy foods of the quintessential white culture - mayonnaise, [and] white bread” (Green). By exaggerating and talking about plain foods sarcastically, readers can easily distinguish the fact that the text is a satire. So, the reader is complicit in this understanding of the problem instead of being directly targeted. This prevents the reader from becoming defensive and set in their beliefs, which allows for them to realize the gravity of cultural appropriation. The satire is more like a conversation, compared to the article which is strictly informational. Dreasher’s article attempts to educate the audience about false stereotypes which have been perpetuated by appropriation using Pocahontas as an example: “Pocahontas was, in fact, abducted as a teenager, forced to marry an Englishman (not John Smith), and used as propaganda for racist practices before she died at the age of 21” (Dreasher). This information may surprise readers since many grew up knowing the story of Pocahontas through the Disney film. However, the formal tone does not allow people to empathize with the Native American community since it is not applicable to everyone’s lives. Also, the informational tone is not as jarring for readers, which does not allow for it to have a lasting impact on them; they will easily forget this information soon after reading the article. Overall, the informal persona in the satire is better at connecting with readers compared to the formal article.

The caricature of white peoples’ culture in “Museum of the Plains White Person” allows readers to reflect on the ridiculous way in which Native Americans are regarded through the process of applying this treatment to mainstream culture, while the article lacks this literary device. Rayna Green applies these misconceptions to mainstream white culture, in order to reverse people’s pre-existing conceptions about Native American Culture. She talks about common American dances, “We have found a few remaining White People who know fragments of their quaint dances and songs, and we will offer living history programs of their dances, the

waltz, the foxtrot, the Texas Two-Step, the disco, frug, bop and polka” (Green). By creating a caricature of the common dances in this manner, Green is able to hold up a mirror to the audience of her media. It makes them comprehend how ridiculous they sound to Indigenous people when they describe their cultural practices in the same manner. She also pokes fun at “a typical chieftain’s three-piece suit and briefcase, a medicine man’s stethoscope and a Barbie shaman’s spike heels and bikini underpants” (Green). This also surprises readers, and makes them understand how inaccurate many depictions of foreign cultures are by inaccurately describing a mainstream culture. Evidently, the caricature of white people is eye-opening for readers, allowing them to effectively comprehend the effects of cultural appropriation.

Although the article uses facts to explain the detrimental impacts of cultural appropriation, the satirical piece is more eye-opening to readers through its use of rhetorical appeals, allusion, and caricature, which makes cultural appropriation seem more absurd. The emotional appeals that Rayna Green uses in her writing enables readers to connect and empathize with her satire, while simply appealing to logic in the article is not as effective. Furthermore, the informal persona that Green adopts in her satire helps to create a connection with the readers, while the formal nature of the article does not permit that. The caricature of white people allows people to see an application of harmful cultural appropriation to a well-known and mainstream culture. These elements make the satire more effective at educating the public of the harsh reality for many minorities. Although the effects of cultural appropriation have long been negatively impacting groups of people, changes can be made now to mitigate these problems in the future. Cultural education and appreciation are critical steps towards equality, and peace, resulting in a harmonious world.

Work Cited

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