Rhetorical Analysis of The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks

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Abstract

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks is a story of a woman from the 1950s who was improperly treated for her Cancer, and ended up having cells which had extremely unique properties. Author Rebecca Skloot saw to spread awareness of the woman behind these special cells, as well as seek justice for Henrietta and her family. On top of this, the author wanted to personify the source of HeLa cells, as they were commonly depersonalized by the science community. Those who would likely be reading this book were either those within cell culture research, or simply someone interested in various sciences, and the stories surrounding them. Through the rest of this analysis, various different uses of rhetorical strategies will be identified.

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# Life

Through the first section of the book titled Life, the author introduces Henrietta, and tells about her family. Through this, the reader finds out about Henrietta having Cancer, and being admitted into Johns Hopkins to receive treatment. The author also introduces George Gey, the main scientist who finds Henrietta’s cells and discovers their unique properties of being able to live indefinitely, and multiply whilst doing so. Throughout this section of the book, the author uses many rhetorical strategies, namely metaphors and similes.

One such instance of a metaphor used in this section was in the introduction of Gey where it says “He (Gey) called himself “the world’s most famous vulture, feeding on human specimens almost constantly.”” (p. 30) The metaphor in this is where Gey calls himself a vulture, then describes how that is so. The reason why the author includes this in the story is to show the reader how he is self-aware of the questionability of his studies, and the ethics surrounding them. Aside from this, it shows that Gey simply does not care about the patients he gets his samples from, only that he gets them in the first place.

Another instance of a strategy used in this section was when the author was speaking with Sadie about how she and Henrietta used to enjoy life back in the day, it said “She giggled like a young girl” (p. 43) The purpose of this simile was for the author to convey how the conversation of Sadie’s youth with Henrietta had brought her back in the form of her laugh, and how it was quite obvious to Skloot that Sadie greatly enjoyed the times where they would go out and dance around as kids.

# Death

During the second section of the book, named Death, the author goes on to talk about what all had happened with the HeLa cells after Henrietta’s death. Skloot also intertwines some conversations with the Lacks family in with this section, as to show how she was beginning to form a relationship with the family. While talking with the Lackses was not easy, as they had grown trust issues against almost all of the reporters wishing to speak with them, Skloot had slowly but surely gained the trust needed to later find out more about Henrietta’s circumstances in the final part of the book. In this section, Skloot uses strategies more in the range of personifications and alliterations, as there is more opportunity for things like these to become prevalent in the reading.

The first instance of personification to be discussed is near the beginning of the section. It is around the time where Henrietta is being taken away to the morgue, as the neighbors watch the truck carry her away. On page 91, it says “Amens echoed from a nearby porch.” This instance of personification demonstrates how, even after her passing, Henrietta had touched the hearts of the townsfolk, and had their prayers and support throughout. The purpose of this was to show how distraught the people around her were due to her death, and that they were praying for God to take care of her in the afterlife.

One such instance the author uses a bit later on in the section was of alliteration, and it was after Cheetah came in and smacked Deborah. On page 150, it says “”Don’t do that again” Deborah said, standing stone-still, her hands still in the dishwasher.” The use of the term ‘stone-still’ was with the intention of enforcing how Deborah was very fed up with Cheetah and his abuse, and was nearing her final straw. We later see this to be true, as near the end of the chapter, Deborah throws him down a set of stairs, and locks him out in the cold to die overnight.

# Immortality

In the third and final section of the book, named Immortality, the author talks more about what had occurred after she began to speak with the Lackses, and what they had gone to find out together from the documents not previously accessible. During this section of the book, she goes on to use more analogies and similes, as well as speak more in the first person, as she’s currently within the story as a character of herself.

The first instance of a simile in this section was during the part where Deborah, Gary, and the author were together, and Gary was calming Deborah down with song and gospel. During the part of intensity where he was attempting to release the burden of her mother, the author says “Gary swayed back and forth, breaking into song again, his voice deep and old, as if coming from the generations who worked his tobacco fields before him.” (p. 292) The use of this was to give the image that his voice was deeply rooted in their ancestry, implying that it felt like many generations before him were all speaking to Deborah in that moment.

The next strategy which was used in this was the analogy when they were observing the cells once again, and the author describes them as “Beautiful and otherworldly- glowing green and moving like water, calm and ethereal, looking precisely like heavenly bodies might look.” (p. 295) The way she describes the cells, and then goes to compare them with water shows how the cells flow along in the container. This combined with how she compares the cells to heavenly bodies, furthers the description of them being ‘calm and ethereal’.

References

Skloot, R. L. (2010). *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks.*