

2019

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Recommended Citation

Quick, Katherine (2019) "Rhetorical Theory in the Age of Social Media in Dear Evan Hansen," *Pepperdine Journal of Communication Research*: Vol. 7, Article 1.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/pjcr/vol7/iss1/1>

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Rhetorical Theory in the Age of Social Media in Dear Evan Hansen

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Written for COM 587: Rhetorical Theory (Dr. Diana Bowen)

Abstract

Broadway hit musical, Dear Evan Hansen, has revolutionized the culture of theater, as the show discusses many issues facing society such as loneliness and anxiety as caused by the increasing use of social media. The musical creates a space to talk about important issues that often go unsung. In the song, “Waving Through a Window,” the main character Evan details many of his anxieties and worries, as he desires to fit in at school and navigate the world around him. This paper argues that the writers of Dear Evan Hansen effectively argue that today’s society is one in which teenagers are vulnerable, anxious, isolated, and lonely, which can be partially attributed to social media; this can be supported by examining “Waving Through a Window” through the lenses of the dramatist and postmodern theories, exploring the individual experiences and the realities shaped through rhetoric.

Keywords: dramatist theory, postmodern theory, individual experience, social media, loneliness, anxiety, Broadway, Dear Evan Hansen

Broadway has long been the stage for stories to be told—stories of culture, of heartbreak, of pain, of loss, of celebration, and of life. Nestled among the classics lies a new musical that has captured the nation’s attention- Dear Evan Hansen, drawing in over 8,000 viewers a

week in New York City,¹ and many more to the national tour and album on Spotify. This show tells the story of a teenage boy, Evan, in high school who struggles with loneliness and anxiety who will do just about anything to fit in, opening up a conversation for the changing social climate in the age of social media. When the school bully, Conner, commits suicide, Evan finds himself with a cast signed by Conner that was originally a joke, leaving the rest of the school to puzzle whether or not they were friends. Evan takes the opportunity and crafts a made up friendship—longing for the chance to get to know Connor’s sister, Zoe, and reaching for the day where is he accepted by people at school and not paralyzed in conversation. The musical begins with the song, “Waving Through A Window,” where Evan introduces himself to the audience as being someone who no one else pays attention to or sees, finding that everyone attaches themselves to their identities on social media, rather than feeling as if they are truly seen and understood. In studying “Waving Through A Window” in Dear Evan Hansen, the writers, Benj Pasek and Justin Paul, effectively argue that today’s society is one in which teenagers are vulnerable, lonely, anxious, and isolated, which can particularly be attributed to social media; this argument can be uncovered the lenses of dramatist and postmodern theories

¹ “Statistics- Broadway in NYC” (The Broadway League, 2018).

by observing the individual experience and rhetorically crafted world.

The age of social media creates a complex culture. There are so many messages that are constantly being sent to all who choose to use it. According to Pew Research, 95% of teenagers have access to smartphones, 45% of whom report that they are on the internet “almost constantly.”² With teenagers spending increasing amounts of time isolated and on the internet, the narrative changes. According to Dr. Twenge, author of *iGen*, teenagers are safer now than teenagers of previous generations, primarily because they are not engaging in risky behaviors to the same extent.³ The amount of teenagers who stay home on their Friday night is a number that continues to rise and this isolation is creating a culture of loneliness. The issue of loneliness and the desire to belong in a time where connections feel hard to forge is one that is tackled in *Dear Evan Hansen*, creating a cultural shift in theater as the writers make space for the discussion of important issues, such as mental health. When considered in context, “Waving Through a Window” is sung by the main character, Evan, as an introduction to his struggles with loneliness and anxiety. During the previous summer, he fell out of a tree while working in the forest and realized that there was no one around to help him get up. Evan truly believes that no one cares about him, using the metaphor of tapping on the glass and no one being able to hear him. This struggle to be seen

² Monica Anderson, “Teens, Social Media & Technology 2018.” (Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech., 2018).

³ Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today’s Super-connected Kids Are Growing up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy?: And Completely Unprepared for Adulthood: And What That Means for the Rest of Us* (New York: Atria Books, 2017).

and to be accepted is one that is prevalent throughout the show and ultimately resolved. One must first, however, examine the song through the lenses which the writers emphasized in their creation of a show that has truly changed the culture of Broadway: dramatist and postmodern theories.

The first lens which the audience can examine this issue is through the dramatist theory, a theory which seeks to understand the influence of rhetoric beyond persuasiveness.⁴ Kenneth Burke, the theorist who created dramatism, explains, “we use rhetoric to navigate our way through these rhetorically created social structures and rules.”⁵ In *Dear Evan Hansen*, Evan is living in a world where the rhetoric being used around him tells him who he should be and who he should be with. He is operating in fear, wondering how he can begin to interact with his peers and how to be seen. Right from the beginning of the song, “Waving Through a Window,” Evan sings, “I’ve learned to slam on the brake before I even turn the key- before I make the mistake...before I lead with the worst of me.”⁶ Evan has not even stepped out the door to go to school and he is already shutting down because of his anxiety; he does not want to even begin to enter the day because he does not want to show people a negative side of himself. In an age that is entirely focused on appearance and manicured images, Evan is terrified that people will see who he really is and then be rejected for it. He then continues in the second stanza of the song, “Give them no reason to stare. No slipping up if you slip

⁴ Timothy Borchers and Heather Hundley, *Rhetorical Theory: An Introduction* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2018), 173.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁶ Ben Platt, “Waving Through a Window,” (Atlantic Records, 2018).

away...so got nothing to share. No, I got nothing to say.”⁷ He does not want to draw attention to himself or say anything that will embarrass himself, so he convinces himself that being quiet and not saying anything at all will be the best option. The world that Evan is trying to navigate is entirely created by the rhetoric of social media and the expectations that it brings. The lyrics are one layer of the rules, as is the set of the show. On the stage are screens hanging from all sides—showing live tweets and messages from the characters of the show. Smartphones and interactions with their peers on their smartphones consume the characters. This song in the show, in particular, focuses in on the struggle to operate within this generation and social structure.

An additional component of dramatism that is very apparent within the song is that of perfection. Burke declares that humans are “rotten with perfection.”⁸ The desire to live the perfect life, according to Burke, “often causes us, or our society, great sufferings in the process.”⁹ Humans want to be seen as fitting ideally into society, never making mistakes and always saying and doing the right thing. Burke explains that this type of behavior can lead to the creation of a society that is rotten, leaving members with feelings of guilt.¹⁰ Evan experiences this desire for perfection, as do many of the characters within the show. In this song, Evan sings, “On the outside, always looking in, will I ever be more than I’ve always been? Cause I’m tap, tap, tapping on the glass; I’m waving through a window.”¹¹ He

questions his own abilities to belong and to become who he wants to be. Evan feels figuratively trapped between the position in society that he currently holds and the position that he desires to obtain. The writers use language as a symbol—creating the world that Evan lives in and the digital world that humans dwell in today.¹² The writers of *Dear Evan Hansen* are able to make a commentary about the role of technology in teenagers’ lives in the present day because of the symbol of Evan and the scene that they set up around him. Burke believed that the theater was a way to show the symbols of life, which is well summed up: “humans enact real roles on live stages as they attempt to impact others.”¹³ There are choices that humans make that shape their world; the symbolism is not accidental.¹⁴ The writers are critical of the symbols that the modern society is made up of, as they describe a character who is unrelenting in his desire to fit in and be a part of the “crowd”, even when everyone else is likely feeling lonely too.

The criticisms of modern society continue in the musical, *Dear Evan Hansen*, which can be viewed through a postmodern theoretical lens. Postmodernism takes language beyond that which is rational and objective and moves into a space that is subjective and influenced by personal biases.¹⁵ It recognizes that there are multiple truths, and truths are relative to one’s experience. There are not simple cause and effect relationships, rather there are many complexities that surround each rhetorical situation.¹⁶ In *Dear*

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*. (Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1966), 16.

⁹ Borchers and Hundley, *Rhetorical Theory*, 177

¹⁰ Ibid., 177.

¹¹ Ben Platt, “Waving Through a Window.”

¹² Kathleen M. German, “Dramatism and Dramatistic Pentad.” (Thousand Oaks, CA, SAGE Publications, Inc., 2009), 321.

¹³ Ibid., 321.

¹⁴ Ibid., 321.

¹⁵ Borchers and Hundley, *Rhetorical Theory*, 320.

¹⁶ Ibid., 321.

Evan Hansen, the individual experience and individual truth are themes that are emphasized. In the age of social media, there are many truths that are spread quickly; the focus on the individual and their own perceptions and experience is heightened. In “Waving Through a Window”, Evan begins to question what he once considered to be a truth. When he broke his arm over the past summer when falling out of a tree, which was later revealed to be a potential suicide attempt, Evan waited for someone to come and no one came to help him. In the song, he repeatedly questions, “When you’re falling in a forest and there’s nobody around, do you ever really crash, or even make a sound?”¹⁷ Evan is questioning reality, wondering if something is an individual truth or a universal and objective truth if it is a single individual who undergoes the experience.

The idea of the individual experience in postmodernist theory is one that can be further examined in postmodern ontology or the “nature of reality.”¹⁸ Postmodern ontology claims that there is no one unified human experience; instead, there are many experiences that are defined by “subjects speaking, listening, reading, and writing their own versions of reality.”¹⁹ Dear Evan Hansen is set apart from other musicals because it deals with more than the typical, universal narrative told by musicals, proclaiming one universal ideal. It dives into many different stories, traditions, and experiences, not one single human experience. The issue of anxiety, an increasingly individual issue, is one that is not often brought up on the Broadway stage, demonstrating a

change in the climate of Broadway. The character of Evan symbolizes this experience for many people, all while acknowledging that everyone understands their own world differently- an ethical and inclusive approach. While sharing different experiences, the writers are able to critique social media by showing how people can change their realities by only portraying the positive parts of themselves while leaving the negative parts isolated and hidden. Although the listener is unable to see the set, in the staged version of the musical, the message is particularly compelling when coupled with screens of messages that show the individual. When the audience sees the characters typing their own messages on their social media accounts, they are left to observe both the written and physical message. Rhetoric is more than just language; it is the layers of the message that create a full experience. There are many messages and symbols out there in the world, each creating a new reality when viewed through the lens of Postmodernism.

The musical, Dear Evan Hansen, changes the landscape of musicals forever. It gives attention to important topics like loneliness and anxiety that are often left out of everyday conversation, particularly in the song, “Waving Through a Window.” The story of Evan Hansen has brought together people from all across the world to talk about their own experiences and the pressures to look and behave a certain way on social media. When considered through the lenses of postmodern and dramatist theories, the writers of Dear Evan Hansen were effective in their ability to communicate the importance of the individual experience and individual truth, and the realities of using rhetoric to navigate the world as we know it. With society becoming increasingly

¹⁷ Ben Platt, “Waving Through a Window.”

¹⁸ Christopher Joseph Westgate, “Postmodern Theory” (Thousand Oaks, CA, SAGE Publications, Inc., 2009), 773.

¹⁹ Ibid, 773.

individualistic and isolated, this musical provides the space to begin hard discussions on the issues facing society and unifies the individuals who

attend in pursuit of celebrating each person's experience.

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