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Stephanie G. Chan

Pepperdine University, stephanie.chan@pepperdine.edu

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Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank my parents for allowing me to always express myself creatively, the power of spoken word and its ability to invoke such incredible emotion in large audiences, and Walter Fisher himself for so accurately portraying the fact that people are, in fact, "storytelling animals." I would also like to thank Dr. Diana Martinez for her passion in teaching rhetorical research, and for her guidance as she helped me navigate the wondrous world of Sarah Kay and the Narrative Paradigm.

The Narrative Paradigm in Sarah Kay’s “If I Should Have a Daughter”
Stephanie Chan, Pepperdine University¹

Abstract

In her 2011 TED Talk debut, spoken word poet Sarah Kay presented a breathtaking performance of two of her poems, “B” and “Hiroshima.” Throughout her speech, she takes the audience through the process of self-realization that transformed her into the poet she is today. From her first performance at just 14 years old, to being welcomed by New York’s Bowery Poetry Club, to creating Project Voice alongside her college classmate Phil Kaye, to now teaching spoken word poetry to the teenagers she once was, Kay proves that spoken word as an art form is more than just pen on paper. Spoken word poetry is an art form that yearns to be presented live, needs to live off the page, and will thrive through performance. Through multiple literary sources, Walter Fisher’s narrative paradigm theory, and ideological implications, one can further analyze Kay’s spoken text.

Keywords

spoken word poetry, public speaking, TED Talk, Sarah Kay, motivational speaking, rhetoric, effective communication, interpersonal relationships, narrative paradigm, Walter Fisher, ideological implications

Spoken word artist Sarah Kay made her TED Talk debut in 2011, presenting her story to the world through two poems and a three-step lesson on telling your own. Though her talk was beautifully crafted and executed, this paper will primarily focus on Kay’s narrative through her introductory poem titled “B,” with references to the lessons derived from the body of her speech. Kay’s unique perspective on poetry and spoken word is a narrative in and of itself, with her own story simply

¹ *Stephanie Chan is a Rhetoric and Leadership and Hispanic Studies Double-Major with a Hispanic Studies Minor at Seaver College.*

providing structure to the art form. This text is especially significant due to the role rhetoric plays within the narrative of a spoken word poem, which will be further analyzed throughout this paper. Overall, the following text will argue the importance of telling one's narrative through multiple sources—especially spoken word poetry—and how Kay's work exemplifies her storytelling skills through both written and verbal forms.

Literature Review

The narrative paradigm by Walter Fisher claims that the best communication method for meaningful reporting of events is storytelling and has been extensively analyzed throughout the past 35 years. Rhetoricians for and against the theory have given incredible insight into the effectiveness of the narrative paradigm in many texts, from testimonials to Shakespeare to spoken word. In Fisher's elaboration of his theory a year after its initial release to the public, he expands on the efficacy of the narrative paradigm within social scientific theories, stating the need for a system that assesses "the stories one should adopt to achieve psychological equilibrium or to achieve consubstantiality in order to resolve human conflicts" (Fisher, 1985). Fisher goes on to clarify that the narrative paradigm surpasses all other sociological theories because of its tie to "the concept of narrative rationality which provides principles-- probability and fidelity-- and considerations for judging the merits of stories, whether one's own or another's" (Fisher, 1985).

Professor of Rhetoric and Communication Studies, Alan G. Gross, also studied the effects rhetoric, narrative, and the collective identity had in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. He makes sense of the shared experience between King Lear and daughter Cordelia by using the phenomenological analysis to expand on "Aristotle's well known distinction between *epistēmē* and *doxa*," or justified belief versus popular opinion (Gross, 2010, para 23). Gross also analyzes *King Lear* through the lens of Martin Heidegger's 1927 singular work, "Being and Time," in which rhetoric can be characterized in

the treatise of emotions “if we see rhetoric as the means by which the cultural, societal, and personality structures...are produced and reproduced in public forums” (Gross, 2010, para 24). In brief, rhetoricians analyzing Shakespearean plays can utilize the narrative paradigm to gain deeper insight into Elizabethan-era ideologies.

Two years after Fisher’s initial elaboration on his theory, Barbara Warnick published a critique of the narrative paradigm in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, stating that “the problematic nature of Fisher’s position... relates to ‘narrative rationality’” and proceeds to delineate the concept to discuss further “internal contradictions and problems in the paradigm as a whole” (Warnick, 1987). Warnick argues that Fisher’s narrative paradigm is one-sided and fails to acknowledge the importance of rationality. The just point she makes, however, stating that “because we are all storytellers, we are all competent to judge the stories we hear” (Warnick, 1987), is later approved in Fisher’s latest installment of “Clarifying the Narrative Paradigm” in 1989. Fisher declares, “narration can be interpreted and assessed as modes of expressing good reasons, as rhetorical forms inducing conclusions about people, community, and the world” (Fisher, 1989). Therefore, the most current edition of the narrative paradigm studied and analyzed today has been expanded to include multiple forms of rhetorical and literary texts, all of which have an underlying sense of importance and story for either the author or the audience. Whether or not one chooses to focus on the author’s original intent will always be up to the rhetorician’s judgment, interpretation, and discretion.

Method: The Narrative Paradigm

While it is evident that Walter Fisher struggled with perfecting the narrative paradigm, the final draft of the theory seems to lend itself perfectly to the storytelling nature of spoken word poetry. Fisher’s definition in his first installment of the narrative paradigm in 1984 remains that “the most basic human symbolic response to rhetorical exigencies is storytelling” (Fisher, 1984). It makes sense

to use the narrative paradigm in an analysis of Kay's poem "B" because of the argument that states, "since the beginning of human history, when we have needed to make sense of the world to each other, we have told stories" (Stoner & Perkins, 2016, p. 186). Sarah Kay's talent is that she experiments with this ideal in the form of spoken word, telling audiences her own life stories from the past and future through poetic prose. Specifically, "B" focuses on an intergenerational, metaphorical story that has yet to be completed and lived to fruition.

Many elements are at play within the narrative paradigm. Just as in a children's story, the narrative at hand must present itself to the audience with storybook elements of its own. The stories told must all have a narrator, whose part in the story is simply "a character or observer of events." The difference from a traditional narrator, however, is that a narrative's storyteller would not be "telling" the story but rather "'showing' or 'recounting' the story," using each mode to "signal a different purpose on [their] part and increase or diminish [others'] interest in it." This is because, as human beings, we are naturally drawn to personal narratives and find comfort in relaying information learned through stories of others and our own. A related concept would be the characters in the narrative, described as "the people in the story or things that function like people in the story... [who] are motivated to act by others or by the context, and critics try to understand what those actions mean." The motivation of the characters should be driven by the plot, or "the underlying structure or pattern of actions and causality in the narrative." Causality in each narrative should "connect actions to reveal a rationale for them," thus furthering the story's plot. Lastly, the setting or context is the underlying factor by which all these previous elements are interwoven. In a narrative, the setting/context is "a fusion of all the details of the story external to the characters... serv[ing] as indicator of prior events, circumstances, and conditions surrounding the characters... [and] may even present themes of the story that help us interpret characters' actions" (Stoner & Perkins 2016, p. 187). Ultimately, these

multiple separate elements not only combine to shape people's lives into plotlines and stories but also serve as arguments that make the stories believable.

Through this type of analysis that extends beyond simple literary terms, Fisher argues that "the primary function of the paradigm is to offer a way of interpreting and assessing human communication" (Fisher, 1985). As a critic of the narrative paradigm, one must adequately interpret and evaluate the rhetoric through an approach that takes everyday life and turns it into a discourse that "provides a reliable, trustworthy, and desirable guide to thought and action in the world" (Fisher, 1985).

Analysis: Narrative in Spoken Word

A stranger to spoken word poetry could fall in love with the art after listening to the calming rhythms of Sarah Kay's voice. A rhetorical critic, however, could fall in love with Kay's writing after analyzing the patterns in her narrative. "B" begins with a hypothetical: "If I should have a daughter..." (Kay, 2011, 0:01). This first line immediately establishes Kay as the narrator of the story, with the audience intrigued as to how the rest of her plot may look. Throughout the poem, Kay narrates her way through a could-be future life while reflecting on her past life. This intergenerational narrative establishes that the characters of her story, while not currently present, are her mother and future daughter. Kay's plot throughout "B" is one of an allegorical nature, whereby declaring the lessons she would teach her daughter in the future, she correspondingly teaches the audience lessons of her life thus far. From lines like "she's going to learn that this life will hit you hard in the face, wait for you to get back up just so it can kick you in the stomach," to "no matter how many land mines erupt in a minute, be sure your mind lands on the beauty of this funny place called life," the context Kay uses to tie all the elements of her poem together is highly metaphorical. Metaphors become ever-prevalent throughout this narrative, with Kay directly sharing her thoughts through elaborate visuals

of “look[ing] at the world through the underside of a glass-bottom boat” (1:40) and “look[ing] through a microscope at the galaxies that exist on the pinpoint of a human mind” (1:45). Her vivid descriptions go on in statements like, “I want her to know that this world is made out of sugar. It can crumble so easily, but don't be afraid to stick your tongue out and taste it” (2:45). This immaculate use of colorful language and imagery-ridden metaphors paints a picture in the minds of audience members and readers everywhere, immediately transporting them to the setting of Kay's narrative in her past and metaphorical future life.

While “B” focuses on the past and future lives of Sarah Kay, she depicts her present life in the body of her speech at TED. The narrative of her speech is plotted out more carefully and clearly than her prose, taking the audience through a chronological timeline from the first time Kay discovered spoken word poetry to her current occupation as a spoken word teacher. While the narrator remains unchanged, Kay's real-life characters differ. Without realizing it, the audience becomes quickly introduced to one of the main characters in Kay's speech: a “giant girl in a hoodie sweatshirt” (Kay, 2011, 6:27). Her next few characters present themselves as the adults at New York's Bowery Poetry Club, who taught her that poetry “could be fun or painful or serious or silly” (7:11). In addition, she introduces listeners to Phil Kaye, a fellow teacher performing spoken word around the world, and Charlotte, a student who inspired Kay with her journey. The plot of Kay's speech in the body of her text can be best described as a life testimony that becomes life lessons. She promises the audience that anyone can be a storyteller because no one can tell your story—a line that could have come from Walter Fisher himself-- and provides them with a tangible plan for achieving a storyteller's status. The three-step journey Kay presents is as follows-- step one: “I can.” Step two: “I will.” And step three: “infusing the work you're doing with the specific things that make you ‘you,’ even while those things are always changing. Because step three never ends” (7:30 – 13:34). Throughout her speech,

Kay creates an aura and setting of vulnerability, reminding her audience that she is only human and that anyone can do what she does. She assures the audience that spoken word is her favorite form of storytelling only “because it’s accessible” (12:14). Lastly, Kay states that “spoken-word poetry allows for immediate connection” (12:28), sharing stories that demonstrate the notable pattern of vulnerability throughout her speech.

Implications

The vulnerability and narrative found in Sarah Kay’s spoken word can be easily translated into poetry of any kind. Through an analysis of Kay’s 2011 TED talk, scholars learn about the importance of personal narratives and how each individual’s story can be told in an encouraging manner of any kind. Whether the means of communicating one’s story is through song, letters, poems, or spoken word, the significance of the narrative paradigm lies in the substance of the text. For the sake of this paper, however, the focus on Sarah Kay’s spoken word and poetry will be further analyzed for its implications for readers’ lives.

As seen in the literature review section, Shakespeare’s prose has similar storytelling elements as the narrative paradigm. While the evidence of plot may be more prominent as Shakespeare’s focus in writing are his plays, how he writes many of his works can be seen as poetry through the use of iambic pentameter. The evidence provided above proves that the narrative paradigm theory in literature can be used for more than just personal stories in spoken word. Rather, in accordance with Shakespeare’s plays, the general idea of a personal narrative can come from fiction and nonfiction characters, as long as the individual is set forth with a story to tell.

Within the world of other spoken word poems or poetry in general, the narrative paradigm can be seen in action primarily through the work of metaphors. The use of metaphors in literature is essential and significant because of their usefulness in aiding readers in understanding a storyline or

narrative arc. Metaphors have been taught to scholars at an elementary level as a tool used to compare and contrast. In Kay's, or any other poet's writing, however, metaphors are more likely to be used to bring a more fantastical or subliminal thought to life by comparing it to a more tangible element with which individuals are likely to be familiar. According to Sarah Kay, almost everything in life can be a metaphor. Whether it's a joyous event or a challenging obstacle one may face in their lifetime, individuals can either choose to accept life for exactly what it is or believe that everything happens for a reason-- sometimes for something even bigger than themselves.

The lesson to be learned, especially through Kay's poem "B" is that poetry is more than just rhymes and rhythm. One must listen to every word, look through every stanza, and read between the lines of every metaphor. In future analyses of poems, prose, and spoken word pieces alike, individuals should focus on the metaphors outlined in the literary text and examine how they can be applied to everyday life. If not metaphors, scholars may also choose to read the text for more than just its face value. Instead, we must view the literature as an art form, with an awareness of how comparisons can ultimately bridge the gap between animated fantasies and present-day realities.

Overall, Sarah Kay's speech teaches the audience the importance of being in touch with your narrative and even encourages listeners to become artists of their own. Her bigger-than-herself moment was realizing that she had the power and potential to become a spoken word artist and a longing to share that discovery with many audiences. This paper chose to focus on the text that followed a storyline, encouraging readers to follow Kay's advice and become the authors of their life narratives.

Analyzing Sarah Kay's work through Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm proves to be near-perfect, as Kay's entire TED Talk proved to be the theory in action. In her final step from her lesson on how to be a storyteller, she states that anybody has the power to be a spoken word poet, as long as

they write about the things about which only they can write. From the intensity of “B” in personally moving Kay’s audience to her speech’s success in showing the role of stories in human connection, Sarah Kay’s “If I Should Have a Daughter” embodies the narrative paradigm to its fullest extent.

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