

Discourse
communities,
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in "the laramie proje...



Joseph Harris outlines an analytical approach to rhetoric through the identification and classification of discourse communities. The application of Harris' model to The Laramie Project reveals two individual communities' desires to be perceived as positive entities, but also the actual impact that their rhetoric has on the outside observers. The Laramie Project is a play composed of a series of interviews taken by the Tectonic Theatre Project of New York. The group traveled to Laramie, Wyoming in 1998 to collect over 200 perspectives on the murder of Matthew Shepard. Matt was a student at the University of Wyoming, located in Laramie. He was kidnapped, driven to a remote area, beaten, and tied to a fence. A few days later, he died due to the injuries sustained in the beating. Matt was homosexual and his death was motivated by the perpetrators' hate for the gay community. The play eloquently reveals a series of discourse communities within Laramie as they reflect upon the hate crime that their town is now known for. One identifiable discourse community is the elderly women of Laramie, Wyoming. Two members of this community, Marge Murray and Alison Mears, sit down to converse with an interviewer. Marge and Alison are posed as the insiders of the elderly discourse community, while the interviewer is the outsider who records the discourse that the reader or audience member is exposed to. This discourse community bonds over their roots in the city and shared experiences growing up in Wyoming. As a community, they can reflect on the past together in relaxed and lighthearted spirits. Marge and Alison discuss all topics imaginable. They speak of personal occupations and upbringing in the city, the economic history of Laramie, and current pitfalls that the city has faced due to constant change in society. These topics evoke certain tropes that the interviewer is confused temporarily thrown off by.

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Through his questioning the audience or readers can come to understand phrases like “ S. O. L.” and “ all-togethers” (Kauffman 28). These tropes and many others help highlight the goodhearted nature of the Laramie of the past and the somewhat downtrodden and unequal state of Laramie in 1998. While the two women choose to speak freely of themselves and the topics outlined, they refuse to explore certain genres of speech. The women will not reveal to the outsider personal information that directly harms their current community. Due to prompting by the interviewer, Marge must confront the issue of Matthew Shepard. She does so in a way of refusal of more information. She is closely tied to the case, and will not incriminate or discuss current personal afflictions with the outsider, especially due to the fact that her words will be shared with more individuals through the script of a play. She simply states “ Laramie is live and let live,” while Alison explains that “ She knows more than she is willing to say” (Kauffman 28). In this moment of refusal, Marge helps to identify the authority of her discourse community. Authority is defined by connection to the content of the conversation. The authority is not static, but rather shifts as the topics of discourse shift. Both women act as the authority when speaking on Laramie, history, and more. However, Marge, as the mother of the officer that found Matt, is the authority on this topic and sets the bounds for the conversation at this point in the discourse. The identification and exploration of these two women as members of a discourse community defined by Harris, allows the reader or audience member to properly analyze the practices of the community and their consequential perspectives. In this discourse community the ease of tropes and common background allow the individuals to freely share both personal and over-arching information in a fun and

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enlightening atmosphere. These women are clearly comfortable within their discourse community. Due to their ease, approach to discourse, and strong relation to each other the outsider, the reader, or the audience member is given a chance to peer into their livelihood. They leave a positive impression of themselves and their community. Though the women discuss the economic downfalls of current times, the outsiders are swept up by the discourse surrounding their past experiences and general positive attitude towards life. It is difficult to find a negative outlook on this community when the women so openly expose the root of their being to a complete stranger and outsider to the community. In addition to the positivity that these women thrust upon the observer, a sense of compassion is hard to avoid while examining their discourse. The two women transform from light-hearted to distant and static as they breach genres of speech outside of their community boundaries. The role of authority allows the observer to recognize that as common ground is lost in this community, so is the equality of the speakers. Marge's direct connection to the Matthew Shepard case ignites a reaction in her discourse that shapes the discomfort of the community in addressing the topic at hand. She remains sincere, but is unable to articulate the source of her distress to the outsider. The observer is engulfed in compassion as he or she watches or reads the vivacious discourse community struggle and turn away from the interviewer. This discourse community, like any other, identifies itself with the best attributes and shies away from genres that manifest a negative side to the community. Another discourse community can be identified in the youth of Laramie, and more specifically in the friends of Aaron McKinney. Aaron McKinney is one of the two men that savagely beat Matthew. Shannon and Jen, Aaron's friends, <https://assignbuster.com/discourse-communities-censorship-and-outsider-perspective-in-the-laramie-project/>

were interviewed one night at a local bar. Their discourse community includes Shannon, Jen, Aaron, and other friends; though there is only recorded text from two members of the group. Shannon and Jen explore a wide variety of topics with the outsider in a very short amount of time. Drugs, alcohol, robbery, education, friendship, and more are mentioned and investigated by the two friends. They spend excessive amounts of time on the topic of drugs, where tropes like “tweak” and “bowl” are used frequently (Kauffman 37). Other lexical tropes include the use curse words and derogatory slang terms for homosexuals. Both of the participants in the interview act as speakers in the discourse community, but their speech hints at an absent source of authority. Aaron McKinney, above all is the authority figure in this discourse community. Shannon and Jen freely share their habits with illegal substances and poor life choices. However, as the topic of Aaron McKinney approaches censorship of speech becomes apparent. Their friendship and relations to Aaron are topics that are articulated with a sense of goodwill and humor to the outsider. Once the interviewer prompts the two for further information regarding Matthew or Aaron’s view of homosexuals Jen steps forward to act as the buffer for Aaron. Shannon carelessly begins to throw around information that Shannon regards as private to the community. These topics, those that incriminate Aaron the most, are permitted under strict rules. Jen begins to claim that “yeah, it probably would have pissed him off that Matt was – ” (Kauffman 38). She stops herself in the middle of her sentence in order that she can paint her authority figure in a better light. Suddenly, anger towards Matthew’s sexual orientation is reworded, lacking the discourse community’s tropes, to explain that he simply did not agree with the lifestyle of gay men. She carefully rewords and corrects her own

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statements, as well as Shannon's, in an attempt to uphold their authority figure and respect the tolerated genres of discussion they are allowed. The permissible topics are limited to the common ground in which they identify with each other: drugs, school, and other related activities. The practices of this discourse community allow the members to openly discuss illegal activity, personal opposition to others, and failure of education. The two jest about these usually sensitive areas of discussion with the outsider as if they were discussing a fun day at the park. This structure of the community permits the observer to experience a new understanding of Aaron McKinney, the perpetrator, through the social world that enveloped his life. While Shannon and Jen do not radiate positivity, there is a sense of truth in their words that suggests they are not ashamed of the people that they are or the lives that they live. Though society may look down on this specific discourse community, they do not look down upon themselves. On the other hand, this community also creates barriers for any outsider attempting to piece together the humanity in Aaron McKinney. This discourse community dictates that censorship is a necessary component when speaking to an outsider. This censorship, like that of Marge and Alison's, is done out of protection for the community as a whole. However, for Shannon and Jen it only suggests that their community is involved in even more shameful activities and ways of thinking than the somewhat disturbing reality they freely revealed. This leads the observer of the community to question the moral code in which the community operates, and consequently the moral code Aaron McKinney operates by. It appears that the community clings to a set of ethical rules that do not work in cohesion with the general consensus of their town. If this were false, then the censorship in the interview would

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not be necessary. Shannon and Jen, in an attempt to salvage their discourse community, only further condemn themselves in the views of the outsiders. Joseph Harris' model for discourse communities allows the observer to analyze the groups within The Laramie Project from an outsider perspective. It is revealed that the members of the town, in particular the elderly generation, suffer immensely from the change they have endured over the years. Marge and Alison have coped with changes in Laramie throughout their lifetime. The hate crime and death of Matthew Shepard prompts the two to confront yet another downfall in their hometown. This is tasking duty, and in their inability to address the suffering, the women win the sympathy and compassion of the outside observer. Contrastingly, the outsider views the friends of Aaron McKinney as toxic and malignant members of society. Their discourse community attempts to reveal themselves in a positive light, but fails to do so through their constant censorship. The rules that govern this community allow the outsider to judge their actions, and in turn, judge the perpetrator even more. Both communities fight to portray themselves as positive entities through rhetoric. Harris allows the outsider to analyze their attempts and weigh their successes or failures through his model for discourse communities.