

AN ECOCRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ENVIRONMENTAL TOXIC DISCOURSE RHETORIC IN HBO'S *CHERNOBYL* MINISERIES

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ABSTRACT

Discourse is essential in our daily lives as they cover all types of communication such, as speaking, writing and non verbal interactions. Because of that this researcher conducts this ecocritical research by analysing toxic discourse rhetoric in dialogues and screen captures by using theory from Lawrence Buell (2001). This research only focus on types of toxic discourse rhetoric found in all five (5) episodes of HBO's Chernobyl miniseries. The main objective of this research is to find out how often HBO's Chernobyl miniseries utilizes the rhetoric of toxic discourse and to find out the kind of toxic discourse rhetoric that have the most appearances. The data was found by watching all five (5) episodes of HBO's Chernobyl miniseries by using qualitative method with documentation technique. The researcher has founded 56 rhetoric of toxic discourse in HBO's Chernobyl miniseries. This research showed that all of the 4 types of toxic discourse rhetoric was found. All of them are the rhetoric of the myth of betrayed Edens (2 data), a world without refuge from toxic penetration rhetoric (25), the threat of hegemonic oppression rhetoric (23) and the ghoticization of environmental exposé (2). Based on the data in this research the most dominant appearance is the rhetoric of a world without refuge from toxic penetration and the least amount of appearance is the rhetoric of the myth of betrayed Edens.
Keywords: Ecocriticism, Toxic Discourse Rhetoric, HBO's Chernobyl Miniseries.

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INTRODUCTION

In human society discourse are essential as they cover all types of communication such, as speaking, writing and non-verbal interactions. Among individuals, dialogues as one of the modes of discourse is a means of expressing ideas, feelings and facts. It is not restricted to two people but can involve many others. In an effective dialogue, all participants must comprehend the language and the context in which it occurs. This understanding ensures that the dialogue progresses coherently and contributes constructively to the overall discourse. For instance environmental or ecocritical discourse delves into how language and communication shape views on the environment and ecological concerns. This form of ecocriticism discussion analyzes how stories about the environment are formed and their influence, on opinions and policies regarding sustainability and preservation.

According to Garrard (2004), ecocriticism explores the ways in which literature imagines and portrays the relationship between human being and the environment in all areas of cultural production, which cast a broad stroke in the kinds of media researchers can analyse through the lens of ecocriticism. Ecocriticism is an important way in which humans can analyse the impacts of environmental degradation through literary texts and theoretical discourse. Ecocriticism itself studies how the emerging technological advancements shapes our way of thinking about the environment and how we should change our policy regarding it. Discourse analysis through ecocritical lens then becomes important in the way researcher can analyse the thinking behind any ecologically concerned pieces of literature.

Discourse is pivotal concept in the realm of linguistics and communication studies, which studies about the use of language in context and the structural ways in which language is employed to convey meaning. Language as action as conceived in discourse according to H. H. Clark & Brennan (1991) is where the speakers understood one another with ease and experienced and the exchange as coherent because they communicated within a context of mutual knowledge known as common ground. So, in a given discourse, a historical and socio-political context is always embedded within their conversation without the explicit expression of any of the speakers. H. H. Clark & Brennan (1991) also stated that people in conversation can seek and provide evidence until they conclude that they understand one another well enough for current purposes.

Toxic Discourse Rhetoric

One of the themes of ecocriticism is toxic discourse. Toxic discourse as conceptualized by Lawrence Buell, refers to language rhetorics in literature that express the realities of environmental hazards. According to Buell (2001, p. 30-31) toxic discourse rhetoric is simply an “expressed anxiety arising from perceived threat of environmental hazard due to chemical modification by human agency”. It also discusses about the anxieties of late industrial culture from deeper-rooted habits of thought and expression (Buell, 2001, p. 30). Therefore, as a mode of analysis toxic discourse can be prevalent in dissecting the dangers of environmental hazard due to chemical modification and how it shapes public perception and influence environmental policy. There are 4 types of rhetoric in toxic discourse which include; the mythography of betrayed Edens, a world without refuge from toxic penetration, the threat of hegemonic oppression, and the gothicization of environmental exposé. These four types of rhetoric in toxic discourse encapsulates the kind of language being utilized in expressing environmental hazard due to chemical modification by humans in many areas of cultural production such as books, movies, and miniseries.

1. The Mythography of Betrayed Edens

One of the rhetorics of toxic discourse is that of mythography of betrayed Edens, where idyllic, unspoiled landscapes are corrupted by human action and industrialization (Buell, 2001, p. 37). By framing environmental degradation as a betrayal of Edenic purity, toxic discourse evokes a powerful sense of loss and urgency, compelling audiences to recognize and address the profound consequences of their actions on the environment.

Example:

“THERE WAS ONCE a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings. The town lay in the midst of a checkerboard of prosperous farms, with fields of grain and hillsides of orchards where, in spring, white clouds of bloom drifted above the green fields.”

"Then a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change. Some evil spell had settled on the community: mysterious maladies swept the flocks of chickens; the cattle and sheep sickened and died. Everywhere was a shadow of death."

Carson (1962, p. 15-16)

2. A World Without Refuge from Toxic Penetration

Another rhetoric of toxic discourse is the totalizing images of a world without refuge from toxic penetration, where no place is safe from contamination (Buell, 2001, p. 38). This imagery highlights the interconnectedness of all parts of a community, emphasizing that no part of a community is an island unto itself; all residents benefit or suffer when any of them do (Buell, 2001, p. 38).

Example:

"For the first time in the history of the world, every human being is now subjected to contact with dangerous chemicals, from the moment of conception until death."

Carson (1962, p. 15)

3. The Threat of Hegemonic Oppression

Another toxic discourse rhetoric is called the threat hegemonic oppression. In toxic discourse it perpetuates an us-versus-them dichotomy, starkly delineating the roles of oppressors and victims while simultaneously implicating us in our acquiescence and complicity as consumers of chemical products (Buell, 2001, p. 41). This discourse frames the narrative around clear adversarial forces: the invader, often represented by industrial entities whose unwanted activities target and degrade local environments.

Example:

The origin of these insecticides has a certain ironic significance. Although some of the chemicals themselves—organic esters of phosphoric acid—had been known for many years, their insecticidal properties remained to be discovered by a German chemist, Gerhard Schrader, in the late 1930s. Almost immediately the German government recognized the value of these same chemicals as new and devastating weapons in man's war against his own kind, and the work on them was declared secret. Some became the deadly nerve gases.

Carson (1962, p. 28)

4. The Gothicization of Environmental Exposé in Literature

This toxic discourse rhetoric is the dramatization of many environmental exposés often employs gothic elements to heighten the sense of horror and urgency, with the narrative becoming most lurid when the victim never had a choice in their fate (Buell, 2001, p. 42). This gothicization is particularly vivid when depicting victims who are powerless to escape their circumstances, amplifying the tragedy and eliciting a strong emotional response from the audience.

Example:

"So thoroughly has the age of poisons become established that anyone may walk into a store and, without questions being asked, buy substances of far greater death-dealing power than the medicinal drug for which he may be required to sign a 'poison book' in the pharmacy next door. A few minutes' research in any supermarket is enough to alarm the most stouthearted customer—provided, that is, he has even a rudimentary knowledge of the chemicals presented for his choice."

Carson (1962, p. 174)

METHOD

This research uses qualitative method to conduct the research. The method is used because the researcher intends to analyse the rhetorics of toxic discourse in HBO's Chernobyl miniseries. The qualitative research method according to Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p.2) is a multimethod way involving an interpretative naturalistic approach to its subject matter. That means that qualitative method study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.2). Based on that the researcher focuses on the qualitative interpretation method of texts and images in an audio-visual medium; a miniseries.

This research uses all five episodes of the HBO's Chernobyl miniseries. Because of that this research uses a documentation method. Documentation method according to Ali (2018, p.91) is a method that involves identification stage, classification stage and categorization stage. Based on explanation from Ali above, the steps of collecting data are as follows:

1. Watching every episodes of HBO's Chernobyl miniseries from start to finish.
2. Identify rhetoric of toxic discourse in each episode of the HBO's Chernobyl miniseries.
3. Collecting identified rhetoric of toxic discourse from each episode of the the HBO's Chernobyl miniseries and separate the textual data from the screen capture data in a word file.

The researcher uses all five episodes of the HBO's Chernobyl miniseries. In order to analyse the data the researcher do these following steps:

1. Understanding the content of the source of data and the kind of ecological theme of concerns that the source of data tackles.
2. Classify the collected data based on the types of rhetoric of toxic discourse.
3. Analyse the classified data using Lawrence Buell theory of toxic discourse.
4. Depict the analysis results.
5. Draw the conclusion from the results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION



RESULTS

The researcher found 56 data in all five episodes of HBO's Chernobyl miniseries. The researcher found all the types of rhetoric of toxic discourse in this research. Those data consist of the rhetoric of the myth of betrayed Edens with only 2 data, a world without refuge from toxic penetration that dominated most of the data with 25 data, the threat of hegemonic oppression with 23 data, and the gothicization of environmental exposé with 6 data.

No	Types of Toxic Discourse Rhetoric	Number	Percentage
1	The Myth of Betrayed Edens	2	3,6%
2	A World Without Refuge from Toxic Penetration	25	44,6%
3	The Threat of Hegemonic Oppression	23	41,1%
4	The Gothicization of Environmental Exposé	6	10,7%
	Total	56	100%

DISCUSSION

1. The Mythography of Betrayed Edens

Data	Duration	Types of Rhetoric
1.  2. 	00:55:20 - 00:55:25	The Myth of Betrayed Edens

(Episode 1 “1:23:45”)

The scene screen capture in Chernobyl miniseries that contain the rhetoric of the myth of betrayed Edens can be identified using semiology when the frame is depicting a peaceful and harmonious place or livelihood suddenly corrupted by the existence of a harmful toxin, in this case radiation. The connotative meaning of the screen captures below is what was once a lovely refereshing green place has become infected with harmful toxins as the result of human activity. The rhetoric of the myth of betrayed Edens employed above match with statement from Buell (2001, p.37), that says the myth of betrayed Edens comes from a realization that there is no protective environmental blanket from ecological disaster, leaving one to feel dreadfully wronged.

2. A World Without Refuge from Toxic Penetration

The dialogues which contain the rhetoric of world without refuge from toxic penetration is filled with the insinuation that the place where they live has been contaminated with harmful radiation which they cannot escape (Buell, 2001, p. 38). The analysis below depicts Legasov explaining that the radioactive particles will be carried by winds across continent and the air, water, and food surrounding the power plant will be contaminated. The rhetoric of a world without refuge from toxic penetration is indicated

by Legasov in explaining the range and span of time that radioactive particles have as a result of a nuclear power plant explosion.

Legasov : Winds will carry radioactive particles across the entire continent, rain will bring them down on us. That's three million billion trillion bullets in the... in the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat. Most of these bullets will not stop firing for 100 years. Some of them, not for 50,000 years.

Gorbachev : Yes, and, uh, this concern stems entirely from the description of a rock?

(Episode 2 “Please Remain Calm” at 00:13:21 - 00:13:56)

3. The Threat of Hegemonic Oppression

The dialogues which contain that rhetoric will be characterized by the use of us-versus-them dichotomy, and the kind of language that portray presence of an invader whose unwanted attention has targeted the local population which is affected by the toxin (Buell, 2001, p. 42). In the analysis below Bryukhanov is addressing an assembly meeting containing important executive members of the Communist Party in USSR, where Bryukhanov is explaining to the interlocutors that the matters of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant explosion is a state secret and it is important for them to ensure that the incident has no adverse consequences. The rhetoric of the threat of hegemonic oppression is clearly made clear by addressing the matters to the important members of the state as what they are supposed to do on such an occasion or else they might suffer the consequences.

Bryukhanov : First, the accident... is well under control. And second, because the efforts of the Soviet nuclear industry are considered key state secrets, it is important that we ensure that this incident has no adverse consequences.

(Episode 1 “1:23:45” at 00:39:05 - 00:39:20)

4. The Gothicization of Environmental Exposé

The dialogues and screen capture which contain that rhetoric will be characterized by the overdramatization of how the victims of radiation will look like as well as the impacts of nuclear radiation will be to humans and the environment. Also it describes the polarization of saved versus damned while the storyteller is much more like us than the hapless hardly human victims and the typification of the plight of whole class of victims being actually worse than they actually are in real life (Buell, 2001, p. 42). In the analysis below Akimov and Stolyarchuk, the two operators in the control room when the nuclear power plant exploded, Akimov says that if they acknowledge that the core of the power plant has exploded a million people will be dead. The rhetoric of the gothicization of environmental exposé is made clear by how the screenwriter chooses to overestimate the number of potential victims in the Chernobyl disaster as one (1) million people when in actuality Greenpeace has issued that the Chernobyl incident eventually amounts to only 50.000 to 90.000 people (Imanaka, 2016, p. 246).

Legasov : Page three, the section on casualties. "A fireman was severely burned on his hand by a chunk of smooth, black mineral on the ground, outside the reactor building." Smooth, black mineral... graphite.

(Episode 2 “Please Remain Calm” at 00:10:49 - 00:11:03)

CONCLUSION

In conclusion all four types of toxic discourse rhetoric are found in HBO's Chernobyl miniseries. This shows how HBO's Chernobyl miniseries tackles such important ecological subject matters in their show. The content of the show notes how much toxic discourse rhetoric is used in expressing its ecological concerns as theorized by Lawrence Buell. This means that the show is also trying to persuade its audience to be more knowledgeable about the harmful toxins that are in their immediate surrounding. The researcher founded 56 data from all five episodes of HBO's Chernobyl miniseries. The rhetoric of a world without refuge from toxic penetration is the most occurring toxic discourse rhetoric in this research, with 25 data (44,6 %). In the second place there is the threat of hegemonic oppression rhetoric with 23 data (41,1 %), while in the third place there is the gothicization of environmental expose rhetoric that consist of 6 data (10,7 %), and lastly, the myth of betrayed Edens rhetoric with only consisting of 2 data (3,6 %).

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