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**“This Whole Quest for Love”:
The Role of Narrative in *The Bachelor***

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Abstract

Reality television has exploded into a popular culture phenomenon in recent years, and it is likely to remain a permanent media staple. With its spike in popularity, reality TV has attracted scholarly interest, but most of this attention focuses on audiences' responses to and motivations for viewing these fact-based programs. This study, however, is more concerned with the rhetorical strategies employed in reality television that appeal to viewers and compel them to keep watching. Centering specifically on the immensely popular romance program *The Bachelor*, this study examines the narrative elements evident in the show that connect audiences to other stories pervading our culture.

Introduction

Since 2000 with the introduction of mega-hits like *Survivor* and *Big Brother*, reality-based television has become a cultural phenomenon. Once believed to be a fleeting fad, reality programming now dominates the airwaves; one can hardly flip channels without catching snippets of some kind of unscripted entertainment. As audience interest in these programs has increased, so have scholarly studies on the subject. After more than a decade of renowned success, it is safe to assume reality television is not only here to stay but has also become a staple in television entertainment. Therefore, reality TV merits academic research because of its endurance in our culture, as well as the persistent allure it holds for viewers.

What is reality television? As more of these programs have been created, the category of reality TV has become more nuanced. There is much discrepancy as to what exactly constitutes reality television, and it is no longer accurate to lump all fact-based shows into the same group. In fact, there is no single, clear definition of reality television. Lisa R. Godlewski and Elizabeth M. Perse offer a very broad definition to help explain the category: "unscripted programs that record real people as they live out events in their lives, as these events occur" (149).

Within this larger genre, however, there are many different subgenres of reality television that all affect audiences differently. Among these subcategories, one of the most popular is romance-driven dating programs, particularly if they feature a competitive element. ABC's *The Bachelor* is perhaps the most appealing and longest running of these types of programs, with millions of fans who tune in every season to see if the leading man will succeed in finding true love.

The Bachelor first premiered in 2002 and features a young, single, devastatingly handsome man faced with the task of selecting his future mate from a group of twenty-five women he has never met before. The show is currently in its seventeenth season ("The Bachelor"). On each show from week to week, the Bachelor must eliminate those he does not envision a future with, eventually leaving only two finalists left standing to vie for the leading man's affection. Ideally, in the season finale, the Bachelor will propose to his newfound love. In their histories, each show has produced very few relationships that actually lasted until the altar. This paper will seek to shed light on why *The Bachelor* has been so successful at reaching such a wide audience.

Review of Literature

Although numerous studies on reality TV have been conducted in the past decade, the research field is still quite young. Naturally, with something as immensely captivating as reality TV, scholars become curious as to what has brought it to such a state. Studying reality television enables us to determine the psychological needs it fulfills for viewers. Many critics have been intrigued by what motivates audiences to watch fact-based television, as well as the gratifications they receive from viewing such programs. Among some of these motivations include identification with the participants, involvement with the story, and a sense of mystery as to what will happen next.

Within the broader category of reality TV, studies also exist on the subgenre of romance/dating shows. These kinds of shows first became popular through game shows like *The Dating Game* and *Love Connection*, but have taken on new forms and subjects as reality programs. Richard M. Huff explains that the appeal behind this subgenre of reality TV is its “relatability” for viewers (108). He goes on to say, “Virtually everyone has been in a relationship of some sort and has been in the perilous world of dating at one point” (108). Therefore, watching others embark on the journey of finding true love is something audiences appreciate because they, too, have undergone this journey and can sympathize with its joys and pitfalls. Seeing ordinary people find love on reality television encourages viewers who are still searching for love that it could exist for them, too. As one might expect, women, especially young women, compose the largest demographic of reality dating show viewers (Huff 108). This is no surprise, as women tend to be more enraptured by love and romance than their male counterparts, and so they are more likely to get caught up in romantically themed shows.

Intriguingly, Maja K. Krakowiak, Christine Kleck, and Mina Tsay’s analysis revealed that viewers perceive dating/romance programs to be the least realistic of any reality subgenre (14). They add, “Although unscripted, dating/romance shows are heavily staged; contestants are placed in situations where they, along with twenty other suitors, are vying for the heart of a single man or woman, a situation that is not sensible or common in real life” (18). This is certainly true of *The Bachelor*, where participants are whisked off to a new exotic location almost every week with elaborate dates planned out for them.

Even so, this fact does not deter millions of viewers from being enthralled with the magic of a very public love story. Despite knowledge of the artificiality and extraordinary

circumstances, viewers (particularly single females) buy into the concept of romance/dating shows (Roberti 126). Reality programs that focus on dating and romance typically include fairytale elements that most audiences can appreciate. These shows follow the classic formula of boy meets girl, boy falls for girl, boy and girl live happily ever after. Having been exposed to this concept for most of their lives, viewers can relate because it appeals to something they have always known and probably want for themselves. Zora Andrich, former *Bachelor* contestant and finalist, recalled from her time on the show, “There’s a romantic in everybody. So many people, strangers, said they cried, they cried when I won. It was such a fairytale they were moved to tears. Everybody wants that. Everybody wants a happy ending” (qtd. in Huff 119). So many people become attached to the stories they see in dating/romance programs, and they want the stories to end happily with the participants finding true love. Furthermore, many viewers can relate to the vulnerability the characters exhibit on the shows by opening themselves up to possible acceptance or rejection. This vulnerability makes the participants seem more like real people because real relationships require us to let down our guards and face the likelihood of heartbreak. Participants on reality dating shows, just like people in everyday life, must also go through the ups and downs of romance.

Many studies on the subject of reality television discuss the subgenre of dating/romance shows and mention *The Bachelor* in their analysis. However, little research exists that focuses solely on *The Bachelor*. The few studies that are centered on this program mostly concentrate on its treatment of race, gender, and sexuality. In *The Surveillance of Women on Reality Television: Watching the Bachelor and The Bachelorette*, Rachel E. Dubrofsky examines *The Bachelor* for issues of gender and race she believes to be disturbing. Dubrofsky looks at how *The Bachelor* portrays overly emotional female contestants and how these women tend to fail at finding love on the show. The women who compete for the Bachelor’s affections often come across as petty and overdramatic because so much screen time is often devoted to their tears and catfights. Dubrofsky also notices *The Bachelor*’s lack of racial diversity by primarily featuring white participants. There has never been a non-white Bachelor, and even when non-white female contestants appear, they are frequently eliminated very early in the process. It should also be noted that a non-white woman has never been a *Bachelor* finalist. All of this appears to send the message that only white people, the “normative” race, have hope of finding love on *The Bachelor* and perhaps in real life, as well.

Gust Yep and Ariana Ochoa Camacho, on the other hand, argue that *The Bachelor* serves to reify conventional sexual norms by only including heterosexual participants in normalized heterogendered relationships (338). In the history of *The Bachelor*, neither non-heterosexual contestants nor a non-heterosexual Bachelor has ever been featured. This continues to uphold our society's heteronormative views of sexuality. All of these studies are relevant when contemplating *The Bachelor*, as there are many elements included in the show that send troubling messages about race, gender, and sexuality. This particular analysis, however, does not focus on these issues and opts instead for a more rhetorical approach.

Problematic features aside, *The Bachelor* remains one of the most popular reality-based programs on the air. Thus far, research on this topic has concentrated mostly on audience viewing patterns. As we can see through examining these studies, viewers are motivated to tune in to *The Bachelor* for a variety of reasons and receive many different kinds of satisfaction from watching. This study, however, is more interested in what the show itself does to capture audiences' attention. That is, what are the rhetorical methods *The Bachelor* incorporates to appeal to viewers? Until now, there have been no prominent studies that have taken this approach to *The Bachelor*.

Methods

Previous research on reality television is also lacking in the variety of methods used to examine it. Most studies on the subject apply a uses and gratifications perspective, particularly in studies conducted in the social sciences. This content analysis approach involves measuring viewers' responses about why they enjoy watching reality shows. Again, this method yields results on audience motivations for viewing reality TV, not analysis on the tactics exercised to influence those motivations. Little research has been performed from a rhetorical standpoint to determine what reality shows do that sparks and maintains audiences' attention. Rhetorical criticism is very well suited for this topic because it can help answer questions about the effects of reality programming on its audience. At its core, rhetorical criticism deals with the language a rhetor wields to sway others to a certain message or way of thinking. In order to accumulate viewers, creators and producers of reality television must do just that. Therefore, they must know exactly how to appeal to audiences to hook their interest. This is especially true of *The Bachelor* because its producers must ensure that viewers will not only accept its premise of an average,

single man searching for true love among strangers, but that they will also find this concept entertaining and engaging.

Rhetorical criticism is extremely broad, however, so this study’s scope must be limited to narrower focuses under the larger umbrella of rhetorical analysis. One such branch of rhetorical criticism that is appropriate for analyzing reality television is narrative criticism. This approach, as one may assume, inspects a text for its narrative features—that is, how stories are used in a text to communicate its message or connect to a larger metanarrative (Foss 307). But what is a narrative? Even though everyone recognizes a story when he or she sees one, it is still beneficial to define it here. Rhetorician and critic Sonja K. Foss offers several characteristics that classify a narrative. First, a narrative must be a piece of discourse made up of two or more events (307). Second, these events must occur chronologically as a logical sequence (308). As a third requirement, a narrative must contain “some kind of causal or contributing relationship among events” that depicts “a change of some sort” (308). The fourth characteristic of narrative is that it is necessarily about a “unified subject” (308). When evaluating whether something may be considered a narrative, one should look for the presence of these four defining qualities. Walter R. Fisher also explains that narration is “a theory of symbolic actions—words and/or deeds—that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them” (291). In other words, narratives function rhetorically to signify a meaning that reaches beyond the context of the story itself. In rhetorical studies, narratives serve more than an entertaining or aesthetic purpose; they serve as vehicles for communicating a message of the text.

Moreover, humans communicate with one another largely through stories because narrative structure is universally understood, and stories are a way for us to make sense of the world around us (Fisher 292). Human discourse is dominated by stories, and television is no exception. One reason why television is so pervasive in our culture is because of its ability to depict human stories. Reality TV, in its claims to portray real people and real events (though we have recognized some contention on that), is designed to represent the truest of human narratives. Since most reality shows, including *The Bachelor*, contain a narrative arc and follow a traditional narrative structure, they are worthy subjects for narrative analysis.

Fisher is credited with developing narrative theory and the narrative paradigm, which he describes as “a dialectical synthesis of two traditional strands in the history of rhetoric: the argumentative, persuasive theme and the literary, aesthetic theme” (291). Before Fisher’s theory,

it was established that the only true form of human communication was based on argument, logic, and reason. Fisher offered the narrative paradigm as an alternative to the rational world paradigm, advocating narrative as having a greater presence in our communication than argument (291). Fisher expanded Kenneth Burke's notion of symbols as determinants of meaning by declaring, "Symbols are created and communicated ultimately as stories meant to give order to human experience and to induce others to dwell in them to establish ways of living in common, in communities in which there is sanction for the story that constitutes one's life" (296). Based on this, narrative criticism is relevant to *The Bachelor* because it can reveal narratological elements of the show that viewers recognize and respond to. Since stories enable humans to explain their experiences, audiences can appreciate narratives present in *The Bachelor* because they pertain to their own lives, as well as other grand narratives seen in their culture at large.

While there are no existing studies that have applied narrative criticism to *The Bachelor*, there are countless studies in which narrative criticism has been used for other purposes. Stories pervade our texts, both discursively and non-discursively. Therefore, narrative criticism can be exercised on any text where stories are present, which in our culture is basically anything. For example, in his essay "Telling America's Story: Narrative Form and the Reagan Presidency," William F. Lewis explicates the different types of narrative seen in Ronald Reagan's presidential discourse and how they influenced his time in office, as well as reactions to him (313-37). Politicians often use discourse that is rife with narrativity, and Lewis' study is just one example that dissects this. Mary P. Sheridan-Rabideau, on the other hand, critiques the notion that counter myths must completely reject dominant myths in order to create new meaning in her article "The Stuff That Myths Are Made of: Myth Building as Social Action" (440-69). Instead, through studying two organizations for adolescent girls, Sheridan-Rabideau argues that "valuing and engaging the tensions within and between various myths prove[s] more productive than seeking to overcome them" (464). After all, counter myths cannot exist without a dominant myth from which to differentiate. These two studies are just some of the innumerable examples of how narrative analysis can be employed.

It should also be noted that while no narrative critiques of *The Bachelor* have yet been conducted, there have been previous studies that probe the narratology of other reality television shows. For instance, Michael H. Eaves and Michael Savoie have applied Fisher's narrative

paradigm to *Big Brother* and conclude that narrative coherence and narrative fidelity are upheld over the course of the show’s airing (91-97). Likewise, Australian critic Graeme Turner demonstrates that reality TV’s massive appeal is not limited to the United States when he discusses how much of reality television is modeled after the narrative style of soap operas (415-22). Since soap operas depict stories in a way that audiences are already familiar with and find intriguing, it makes sense that reality television would borrow from this familiar narrative form.

Finally, in “Reading the ‘Real’ in *Survivor*: Unearthing the Republican Roots in Reality Narrative,” Tony Tremblay takes a narrative approach to *Survivor* in order to analyze what has led to the show’s—and reality TV in general’s—immense and enduring popularity. Tremblay traces the “historical fascination with the ‘survivalist’ narrative” and considers how “Enlightenment attitudes, Social Darwinism, and other ‘republican’ ideologies—such as individualism, competition, and surveillance—sustain the contemporary fascination with reality simulations” (47). Tremblay taps into the narrative strategies used in *Survivor* that contribute to the show’s enormous success, pointing out that these strategies help explain the general allure of reality programming. This study of *The Bachelor* seeks to accomplish similar goals in hopes of uncovering the narrative factors at play within the show and how these contribute to the show’s success among audiences.

Analysis

Because rhetorical and narrative analysis hinge on the language present in a text, it was necessary to examine transcripts of *The Bachelor*. This would provide more accurate results than simply watching the show, as the exact words used would already be written down and available for analysis. What’s more, *The Bachelor* was between seasons during the time of this study, so live or previously recorded viewing of the show was not possible. While action and dialogue are more easily transcribed and readily accessible for fictional programs, they are not as common for reality-based programs. This is most likely due to the lack of a formal script for reality shows, rendering transcription much more difficult and tedious. Even so, I was able to locate transcripts for a partial season of *The Bachelor*. These transcripts are from Season 15 of the show, featuring Brad Womack as the leading man. This season was Brad’s second appearance on the program, after becoming the first bachelor in the show’s history to reject all the available bachelorettes in Season 11 (“The Bachelor”). I examined each available episode transcript chronologically,

perusing them for narrative features that either appeared multiple times throughout the season, and/or made connections to another narrative outside the scope of the show.

However, the limitations of these transcripts should be acknowledged. First, as stated before, the transcripts only amount to a partial season—six episodes, to be exact. Within these episodes, some are only partially recorded, as in they did not always follow the episode to its conclusion. Furthermore, the transcriber sometimes failed to indicate exactly who was speaking, and the only way of determining what is happening in each episode is based on context clues provided by the dialogue. Even so, what is available for study is still sufficient for drawing rich conclusions about the season as a whole. The provided transcripts contain enough information to conduct a satisfactory narrative criticism. In fact, I was able to find numerous examples of narrative evident in the six existing transcripts. Every season of *The Bachelor* follows a similar pattern and narrative structure, so it is safe to speculate that what is true of this season is true for the entire series and vice versa.

As I read through the transcriptions for each episode in Season 15, I highlighted dialogue from the participants that contained narrative elements, according to Foss’ definition of narrative. I ended up with four and a half pages worth of narratological phrases displayed in the six episodes, amounting to a total of 81 examples. These examples of narrative occurred repeatedly in each episode and throughout the season. I organized these narratological examples into categories and will discuss each category in the order they appeared most frequently. Due to the constraints of space, I have limited my findings to the two most eminent categories: fairytale romance and love as a journey.*

Fairytale Romance

Since *The Bachelor* follows the premise of a romance, it is not surprising that fairytale elements would appear in it. Most fairytales contain some sort of romantic trait, and fairytales are, by definition, narratives. These narratives are present throughout Season 15 of *The Bachelor*. In every season as the story progresses, the participants are often whisked away to international, exotic locations from the Caribbean, to Europe, to Asia. These destinations add to the fantastical atmosphere in which the contestants are expected to fall in love. When one feels they are living in a fantasy, the conditions for love are even more heightened, making it that much easier to feel

* The other categories included vulnerability/openness, being oneself, and taking risks/facing fears.

the effects of romance. It is no wonder participants on *The Bachelor* feel drawn to someone they have barely met. Sharing such a special, romantic experience with someone could make anyone fall in love, or at least think they have.

In Episode 2, Brad takes Jackie to Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills for their first one-on-one date and tells her she can buy whatever she wants. He explains, “This date is Jackie’s very own ‘pretty woman’ experience” (“*The Bachelor* – Jan 10, 2011”). Immediately, this remark connects to Julia Roberts’ shopping scene in the iconic romantic comedy *Pretty Woman*, another narrative (*Pretty Woman*). Brad is recreating this scene for Jackie, which is an experience many women would be thrilled to have. It works, too, because Jackie exclaims, “I feel like Cinderella. I feel like a princess. . . . I have never experienced anything so magical. . . . It’s like a fantasy. I am seriously living in a dream right now” (“*The Bachelor* – Jan 10, 2011”). Jackie’s saying she feels like Cinderella, a fairytale princess, instantly hearkens back to the classic fairytale of the destitute girl who went to the royal ball, won the prince’s heart, and escaped her evil stepmother. Fairytales and romance are almost always linked, and this is evident in *The Bachelor*.

Another example of this type of narrative occurs in Episode 5, when Brad takes Shawntel Newton shopping for their one-on-one date in Las Vegas. Like Jackie, Shawntel is also allowed to purchase anything she desires. Shawntel returns to the hotel where the other contestants are, and she is greeted with a bit of jealousy. Of Shawntel and Brad’s date, Ashley Spivey declares, “I mean, it’s like the perfect ‘pretty woman’ moment that every girl dreams about” (“*The Bachelor* – Jan 31, 2011”). Again, we have a reference to this memorable romance film. Clearly, this is a scenario many women fantasize about. Shawntel affirms this when she says, “I am so excited, and I feel like a princess” (“*The Bachelor* – Jan 31, 2011”). Experiencing this *Pretty Woman* date has left her feeling like she has received the royal treatment. *Pretty Woman* itself is a modern fairytale that contains facets of classic fairytales—rags to riches and gaining the “prince’s” affections (*Pretty Woman*). *The Bachelor*, similarly, displays many of the same components. Here, Brad is the prince seeking his princess.

Love as a Journey

At several intervals in Season 15, finding love is compared to a journey, quest, or mission. A journey, by nature, involves a process that leads to some kind of accomplishment or destination. In the case of *The Bachelor*, that destination is falling in love and having that love returned, ideally by winning the competition and ending up with the Bachelor. In Episode 2, one

of the women (the transcript is unclear about which one) refers to her being on the show as “this whole quest for love” (“*The Bachelor* – Jan 10, 2011”). Her use of the word “quest” adds importance to the purpose of finding love with Brad and even gives it an epic quality. According to author, folklorist, and anthologist Josepha Sherman, “Quests appear in the folklore of every nation” and even in cultures not considered nations (142). Beyond folklore, quests are pervasive in literature and mythology, especially with the hero’s quest. Poet and literary critic W.H. Auden describes a hero’s quest as one where the story’s “hero aims to obtain something or someone by the quest, and with this object to return home” (35). This concept is present in countless books, films, and other stories, and is one that appears in *The Bachelor* as well.

Another time when love is described as a journey is seen in Episode 5 when Brad pays another visit to his therapist, Jamie. Brad is distraught over the likelihood of hurting the women competing for his attention, to which Jamie reminds him, “Your loyalty is not to any of the girls. It’s to—it’s to the mission, your mission, which is to find her. You know, all of you are on a journey. Then you’ve got your individual journey, and you have the journey that you’re experiencing, that you’re sharing with each of them” (“*The Bachelor* – Jan 31, 2011”). With this statement, we see that Jamie and Brad believe Brad’s purpose for participating in the show is greater than he is. It is a mission that will define the rest of his life because he is tasked with the goal of finding his future wife. Again, we can see evidence of the hero narrative, with Brad as the hero of the *Bachelor* story. In order to be considered heroes, heroes must succeed in completing their journey or quest. Brad must see his journey to find love through to the end, where he will hopefully be rewarded for his efforts.

Discussion

To conclude, I would like to refer back to the questions I posed at the outset of this study: What narrative elements are present in *The Bachelor*? And, how do these elements bolster the program’s widespread appeal to audiences? As indicated through my analysis, there are multiple instances of narrative throughout Season 15 of *The Bachelor*, and I only discussed the most prominent ones. Others are mentioned in the show, though not as pervasively, so they were not addressed here for the sake of space. Many of the narratives selected for analysis had to do with the romantic and relational aspects of the show, such as the comparison of love to a journey, mission, or quest, with the end goal being to find true love. Additionally, because romance and fairytales are so often connected, these two narrative themes also came up many times.

All of these stories reference other narratives that we recognize in our culture, of which *The Bachelor* is a part. Because reality television programs have become so ingrained in popular culture, it is no shock that they have borrowed from other cultural elements in order to establish relevance and staying power. *The Bachelor* certainly displays examples of this cultural sharing through its use of narrative. Whether with the hero's journey from literature and folklore, classic fairytale romance, or common relationship myths that can be found in any women's magazine, *The Bachelor* contains several different types of narrative that compel audiences to keep tuning in. Since these different stories are so prevalent in our larger culture, they are easy for viewers to catch, even if only subconsciously. Most people who watch *The Bachelor* and similar dating shows have been in some sort of amorous relationship themselves, so the romantic narratives woven throughout the program strike a chord with them. These stories are so evident in our culture that we typically come to accept them as true; they become the myths by which we live. Audiences of reality dating programs, and most people in general, want to succeed in their own relationships, so they can relate to the people on the shows seeking to achieve just that. Humans want to root for love because if others can find it, there is hope that we can, too. Seeing these narratives of love play out on reality TV adds to that feeling of hopefulness, both for us and for participants.

While other examinations of reality television have focused on audiences' motivations for viewing these programs, this study has gone further to ponder what strategies reality TV shows employ to capture their viewers' attention. Narrative criticism has revealed the use of well-known stories in *The Bachelor*. These stories connect fans to similar narratives in their own lives and overarching culture. Because reality television is such an immensely popular media spectacle and promises to endure for years to come, it is a subject worthy of rhetorical study. Rhetorical criticism allows us to gain a deeper understanding of how our world works, so further scholarship on reality TV programming is needed in the field. Admittedly, this study was limited to only one season of *The Bachelor*, so further studies could examine whether these findings hold true for other seasons of the show. Additional research could also apply these same methods to other reality programs to compare the results. Scholarly studies on reality television are still only burgeoning, so it will be exciting to see how the field continues to grow.

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