

The Discourse of Annie Wilkes in the Film *Misery* 1987

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Abstract: *This paper investigates the discourse of the psychopathic character Annie Wilkes in the movie Misery 1990. It focuses on the discourse of Annie in the front-stage and back-stage and how her personality differs in both cases. In collecting the data, I transcribed Annie's conversations and the chosen conversations represent Annie's personality in both front-stage and back-stage. The analysed data shows a huge difference between Annie in the front-stage and Annie in the back-stage. Annie in the front stage looks lovely and friendly while in the back stage she speaks in a violent, harsh and threatening way.*

Keywords: psychopathic, front-stage, back-stage, discourse

1. Introduction

Misery is a 1990 American psychological horror film based on Stephen King's 1987 novel and stars James Caan, Kathy Bates, Lauren Bacall, Richard Farnsworth, and Frances Sternhagen, Directed by Rob Reiner. In this film, Bates plays the role of the psychopathic character Annie Wilkes, who is the main character in this film. Annie Wilkes is characterized as a cunning and disturbed woman who hides her psychosis behind a cheery façade. In this movie, a famous novelist Paul Sheldon is rescued from a car wreck by Annie Wilkes who takes care of him in her comfortable home in the wood. At the beginning of the movie, Annie Wilkes introduces herself as a professional nurse and a big fan of Paul's writings. She promises that he will recover soon and she will take good care of him. Very soon it becomes clear to Paul that her motives are not sensible. Annie displays a series dangerous behaviors through the course of several weeks that reveal her unstable troubled mind. Paul becomes trapped in a game of life and death in the mercy of a woman who is clearly a psychopath.

Annie Wilkes presents two opposite characters that all together make up the psychopathic character of this film. The initial appearance of Annie in the film presents her as a lovely and friendly woman. Later on, she suddenly becomes a violent and evil woman ready to torture and even kill. This pattern is revealed in both front-stage and back-stage.

The character of Annie Wilkes is investigated and related to the front stage and back stage conceptual framework. The reason I choose her character is, she represents two different identities in the front stage and back stage. In front of people, Anne from the first impression is a lovely woman. According to Erving Goffman, on the front stage, "the performance of an individual in a front region may be seen as an effort to give the appearance that his activity in the region maintains and embodies certain standards" (Goffman 107). When she is in the back-stage, she is a harsh and violent monster. Goffman defines the back stage region as a region for insiders: "[The back stage region] suppressed facts make an appearance [...]. A back stage may be defined as a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contracted as a matter of course"(Goffman 112).

Investigating the psychopathic personality in reference the front-stage and back-stage is interesting, as it will reveal the nature of this mixed character and it will help us to have a deep understanding of how psychopathic people would speak in reality.

2. Method

In this study, I will focus on Annie's discourse in the movie Misery 1990. Annie Wilkes appears almost the whole time in this movie along with Paul Sheldon. Annie is able to adopt two personalities and manage them perfectly. Looking into the places where she performs these different personalities will help to deeply understand how this psychopathic person communicate people publicly and lonely and how her speech differs in both cases.

The conversations between Annie and Paul are used in different situations and there is a focus on the conversations where I would find differences in her personalities. In addition, I will use the discourse of Annie which shows how she tries to be nice with Paul in certain places and scenes and how that is completely different in other scenes. For collecting the data, I will transcribe the discourse of both Annie and Paul in the front stage and back stage. The conversational turns will be used as a method for segmenting the data which will be helpful in order to study the interaction between the two characters and how their conversations are influenced by Annie's different personalities. I choose four conversations where two of them show Annie while she is polite and lovely where in the other two she is violent and harsh when she is talking. The reason I choose the conversational turn is, because I find that Annie in the front stage and back stage shows her personalities in the way she communicates and interacts with people. In this case, the conversational turns would be a good choice in segmenting the data. I find some words and phrases that Annie keeps repeating in different situation and to determine their implications on the front stage and back stage, I use cluster analysis to examine and analyze the discourse of Annie. This method involves selecting the key terms in the discourse, using as criteria high frequency. I will give some explanations for why some words are repeated in the front stage and in the back stage and what does that repetition imply.

3. Results

Consider the following conversations which all shows how Annie’s discourse differs between front stage and back stage. Most of the front stage conversations almost appear in the first half of the movie. I find some key terms associated with Annie’s front stage and back discourse which are frequently repeated in both cases.

We look at this first encounter between Annie and Paul and how she tries to be nice with him. This is considered a front stage conversations as she speaks politely as she would do with any stranger.

Paul: ...where...am I...?
 ANNIE: Shhh...we're just outside Silver Creek.
 PAUL: How long...?
 ANNIE: You've been here two days. You're gonna be okay. My name is Annie Wilkes and I'm --
 PAUL:-- my number one fan.
 ANNIE: That's right. I'm also a nurse. Here.
 (Now, as she brings the pills close)
 Take these.
 She helps him to swallow, as Paul's eyes close.

Annie uses the language of compliments and politeness in the front stage.

PAUL: You're very kind...
 ANNIE: And you're very brilliant, and you must be a good man, or you could never have created such a wondrous, loving creature as Misery Chastain.
 (runs her fingers over his cheek)
 Like a baby.
 (smiles)
 All done.

In the back stage conversations, Annie looks frustrated and disturbed and the room where they are is almost dark.

ANNIE: When my husband left me... I wasn't prepared, it wasn't an easy time...
 For a while I thought I might go crazy.
 PAUL: I know how that can be.
 ANNIE: I don't know about you, but what I did to get through it was I dove into work -- days, nights -- night shifts can be lonely at a hospital. I did a lot of reading. That was when I first discovered Misery. She made me so happy. She made me forget all my problems.
 (She smiles now)
 'Course, I suppose you had a little something to do with that too.

Here Annie woke up at the middle of the night and the room is dark. She speaks loudly and uses impolite words.

ANNIE: You...you dirty bird. She can't be dead. Misery Chastain cannot be dead!
 How could you?

PAUL: Annie, in 1871, women often died in childbirth, but her spirit is the important thing, and Misery's spirit is still alive --

ANNIE: (screaming)
 I DON'T WANT HER SPIRIT! I want HER!
 And you MURDERED her!

PAUL: I DIDN'T...

ANNIE: Then who did?

PAUL: No one -- she just died -- she slipped away, that's all.

ANNIE: (screaming)
 She slipped away? She slipped away? She didn't just slip away. You did it. You did it. You did it. You did it. You murdered my Misery.

There are some key terms associated with Annie either in front stage and back stage. I will use cluster analysis to analyze these key terms as they are frequently repeated, in front stage, Annie uses positive and polite words which are repeated frequently. On the back stage, she uses negative or insulting words and phrases. The table below shows how many times Annie repeated each of the key terms shown below.

Position	Front stage	Backstage
Key terms	Annie	Annie
Fine	3	
Hurt		2
Forgive me	3	
Dirty Bird		2

4. Discussion

We can notice that Annie is trying to speak politely in the first encounter with Paul. The front stage conversation reveals Annie’s identity that she shows publicly. It looks that she does not choose to appear polite. She is behaving and speaking unintentionally. Psychopathic people usually appear normal in the first meeting and the conversation between Annie and Paul in their first encounter makes the audience feel that Paul will get good care and comfortable time during his stay in Annie’s home.

The way Annie speaks to Paul makes him feel that he is in the right and safe hands. She uses words like “fine” more than once to make him feel that he will be fine. In the front-stage, Paul is amazed by how kind and lovely Annie speaks. She smiles most of the time and once she makes any mistake, she asks for forgiveness. Annie uses the phrase “forgive me” three times in the front stage. She is trying to be nice and be just perfect.

Later on, Annie starts to express her feelings of frustration and devastation. That is revealed in the back-stage conversations. Annie looks to the window and her back to Paul. She is talking in a low voice and the room is almost dark, which make the audience feel that she is hiding something horrible.

Before Annie shows her harsh personality, we can notice from her low voice how frustrated she is when she talks about her husband's death which makes us anticipate something bad to happen in the next few minutes. The horrible personality Annie reveals is shown in the middle of the night when she enters the room while Paul is wide asleep, she is upset and unstable. In the back stage conversation here, Annie frequently uses insulting words. She starts the conversations with calling Paul "dirty bird". The language shift from a polite to a disrespectful language is clear here. Paul is shocked and confused at this point.

Annie uses the word "hurt" ironically in the back stage as a way to torture him. She knows that Paul is suffering from the pain resulted from his broken legs. She comes once and breaks his legs again to prevent him from walking again. When she broke his legs she says "I know it hurts". Knowing that it hurts while she causes the pain is irony and makes the pain worse.

One of the implications of this study is, Annie's discourse presents a picture of how psychopathic people would acts and speak in reality. The difference between her discourse in the front-stage and back-stage explains how this kind of people communicates using dual personalities which may shock normal people who deals with them.

This study focuses on a small sample of discourses in specific situations based on what the movie presents and this is one of the limitations of this study. In order to fully understand psychopathic people, a wide range of conversations in different situations will help covering most of the secrets about this kind of people.

References

- [1] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959. Print.