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The white lady of mourning: glamour, power and a woman's understanding

Abstract:

Rhetoric can serve as a useful tool in the creative writing process, providing insights into the construction of cultural meanings. Using the tools of visual rhetoric, this article explores one Australian funeral company's use of marketing images that consciously subvert the traditionally gendered depiction of funerals and mourning. The author analysed the company logo and 14 banner images found on the marketing pages of the White Lady Funerals website. Findings from the analysis reveal a new and potent construction of the role of women in the mourning process which both reinforces traditional elements of female visual presentation while actively subverting the dominant symbols of women as passive and prostrate victims of mourning. Equally important, the analysis for this paper serves as a useful tool for the creative writing process.

Biographical note:

Dr Matt Eliot is a Senior Lecturer (Research) at Central Queensland University's Noosa Campus. He is pursuing his second PhD, in Creative Writing, where he is focusing on Gothic memoir and popular science writing, and the intersection between these two genres. His creative nonfiction writing is strongly influenced by phenomenology, medieval tantric philosophy and the beauty of Noosa's river, lakes, ocean and forests.

Keywords:

Creative Writing – Rhetoric – Visual Rhetoric – Gender – Mourning – Funeral

Introduction

In 1897, Joseph Conrad wrote, ‘My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you see’ (Conrad 2008: 4). With these words, Conrad evokes some of the key elements of the creative writing process: text structures, sensory experience, the author’s intent and the anticipated reader’s response. In order to derive essential understandings of how these creative writing elements typically interact to create desired effects, Wayne Booth in his germinal work *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (2010) analysed existing works of fiction through the lens of rhetorical studies. While Booth’s work has primarily been used in Literary Studies, rhetoric can be a useful tool allowing the creative writer to gain insight into cultural phenomena and how these phenomena can be reflected in text.

Rhetoric is an academic and philosophical discipline centred on persuasion, especially through the use of arguments. While Booth confined his work primarily to text, visual rhetorical studies investigate the arguments embedded in visual media. In discussing arguments, J. Anthony Blair states:

Arguments supply us with *reasons* for accepting a point of view. The fact that certain propositions are deemed true, probable, plausible or otherwise worthy of acceptance, is considered to provide a reason, or a set of reasons, for thinking that some claim is true, some attitude is appropriate, some policy is worthy of implementation, or some action is best done. (2012: 41)

Creative writing, whether fiction or non-fiction, is filled with arguments: for the veracity of the narrator, for the il/logic of the narrative, for the relationships between setting, character and action.

The use of visual rhetorical analysis provides the writer or scholar with alternate means for unpacking complex visual arguments in terms of interlocking claims and their evidence. While the primary work in this area has focused on the interaction of text and accompanying images (Westbrook 2006, Alberti 2008), one frontier that remains open, however, is the use of visual rhetorical analysis to spur the creative writing process. In *Writing as A Visual Art*, Tonfoni and Richardson claim ‘The meaning of a word or phrase depends first on how we represent it in our minds’ (2000: 15). Visual representations unpacked through visual rhetorical analysis can reverse this process. The analysis takes the superficial tropes of the targeted imagery and brings them to life through an interpretive process which for this writer begs the production of text to capture the texture and nuance of the visual arguments involved, supporting both the claims and their evidence. With this use, imagery can serve as a touchstone both in the inauguration of a writing project as well as during key points of refinement.

This article uses visual rhetorical analysis as a tool to examine arguments about gender, mourning and death as instantiated in the website banner images on the White Lady Funerals website. In the next section, death and mourning in Australian culture are explored. The following explores the visual rhetorical analysis and the analysis of White Lady Funeral images. The article ends with a summary of the lessons learned in this project.

Death and mourning in Australia

Relationships to death and to grieving in Australia are transforming rapidly, as death rates are declining and the general population is dying at advancing ages (McCrindle Research 2014). In addition, death and mourning as social occasions are also changing:

The personalisation of funerals is a growing trend in Australian society, with 61% viewing funerals as an occasion to honour the departed and recognise their life. *More than half (52%) view them as a celebration of a life*, while 2 in 5 (39%) a time to farewell the departed. Just 1 in 5 Australians (21%) view funerals as a reminder of our mortality and a reflection on eternal things. (McCrindle Research 2014: 6, emphasis added)

The images used to market funeral services often depict elements of the services rendered as well as the benefits received by clients. In his article ‘The new semiotics of death’, Alex Gordon’s market research regarding funeral services imagery revealed that depictions of death and mourning in funeral service marketing are currently evolving as society changes its attitudes about the cultural role that funerals play in the lives of surviving families and communities (Gordon 2014). In Table 1 below, Gordon compares the familiar and traditional Victorian visual codes of mourning with emerging visual codes that reflect our changing relationship to the marketing of death and of mourning:

Existing codes	Emerging codes
Masculine	Feminine
Powerlessness	Choice
Top-down authority	Bottom-up participation
Ritualised uniformity	Diversity and personalisation
Formal and sombre	Informal and fun
Mourning	Celebration
Hidden/closed	Revealed/open
Temporal remoteness	Now
Decay	Growth
Destruction	Construction
One-way	Two-way and interactive
Soul immortality	Virtual immortality
Down	Up
Linearity and finality	Circularity and incompleteness

Table 1. Gordon’s emerging visual codes related to funeral services (Gordon 2014).

In Gordon’s analysis of this cultural shift, these emerging visual codes portray funeral services where customers are active participants in the design and implementation of the service itself, where women are more frequently seen in both authority and customer roles, and where the funeral is seen as a site of celebration, healing and community bonding. This article explores one possible instantiation of Gordon’s proposed codes: the visual images used to promote White Lady Funerals, an Australian funeral services company.

White Lady Funerals entered the Australian funeral services market in 1990, where it was well received as both a welcome alternative to the male-dominated profession (Pringle and Alley 1995) and for its efforts to lessen the cultural stigma attached to the commercial aspects of death and mourning (Carden 2001). In this project, the author employed the tools of visual rhetoric to analyse the company logo and prominent banner photographs from the White Lady Funerals website (White Lady Funerals 2017) in order to investigate whether, and how, Gordon's emerging visual codes were present.

Visual rhetorical analysis as an investigative tool

Visual rhetorical analysis is a media analysis framework concerned with the native power of images to communicate and reify meaning. This framework has grown out of a variety of academic disciplines including technical communication, art history, cultural studies, and classical (linguistic) rhetoric – each of which have adapted this framework to suit their own principles and methods. Sandra Foss suggests that an inductive approach can be taken to analyse images for their rhetorical methods and meaning (Foss 2004). In this approach, the visual features of the artefact are investigated in terms of cultural context, interrelationship and symbolic value. The analyses of these features are then brought together in an interpretive framework grounded in the specific characteristics of the images themselves.

This approach was first popularised by Roland Barthes in his classic essay 'Rhetoric of the Image' (1964). In this, Barthes used a Panzani advertisement (pasta and tomato sauce products artfully arranged in an open market bag) to explore the power of advertising images to invoke concepts including cultural heritage (Italian in this case), market freshness and consumer preference. While acknowledging that the interpretation of the symbols in advertising images is variable depending on the interpreter, Barthes effectively argues that all the visual elements within an image that act as signifiers work together to draw upon shared cultural understandings – thus allowing for a generally reliable interpretation across the target market.

Diane Hope uses visual rhetorical analysis to explore the role of gender in the visual elements of advertising. Using the frame of 'gendered environments', Hope investigates the power of 'essential masculinity and essential femininity' embedded in advertising images to drive the construction of consumer identity. Hope states that visual rhetoric:

depends on strategies of identification; advertising's rhetoric is dominated by appeals to gender as the primary marker of consumer identity. Constructs of masculinity or femininity contextualize fantasies of social role, power, status, and security as well as sexual attractiveness. (2004: 155)

For Hope, the use of idealised gender imagery in advertising creates a powerful resonance within the consumer to achieve (or purchase) needed goal states. This focus on idealised gender cues in advertising images is relevant to the White Lady Funeral website, where all images of employees and most images of customers and funeral attendees are women. Given that the company's slogan is 'A Woman's Understanding', depictions of women and of femininity are central to the website's rhetoric.

Marketing images on the White Lady Funerals website

The White Lady Funerals website is comprised of eight primary pages, each of which may have a number of subpages. For the purposes of this study, the website’s logo and banner images were analysed. The logo was selected for this study as it appears on all pages and is commonly understood to embody a company’s market identity (Ghodeswar 2008). Banner images were selected for analysis based on their size and placement on the page, as large images have been shown to increase telepresence in online advertising (Lombard and Snyder 2001). The home page on the White Lady Funerals website has a slide show of four large banner images. Single banner images were also found directly beneath the top navigation bar on the following pages: ‘Prepaid Funeral Enquiry’, ‘Arranging a Funeral’, ‘Why Funerals Matter’, ‘Aspects of Service’, ‘Personalised Funeral Service’, ‘Elements of Religious Services’, ‘Repatriation’, ‘LifeArt Coffins’, ‘Physical Memorials’, ‘Funeral FAQ’, ‘About Us’, ‘The White Lady Promise’, ‘Customer Testimonials’, ‘Community & Events’, ‘White Lady in Your Community’ and ‘Coping With Grief’. As some banner images were used on multiple pages, a total of 14 banner images were analysed in addition to the company logo. These images were categorised as follows:

Image Type	Number
Company logo	1
Individual staff	1
Groups of staff	3
Staff interacting with customers	6
Miscellaneous	4

Table 2. White Lady Banner images analysed.

Each of these image categories were analysed for rhetorical elements related to the commercial depiction of public mourning. The following section reports findings from each category analysis,¹ as well as examples of website banner images included for the purposes of review and critique.²

Website images: features and meanings

The White Lady Funerals company logo (Fig. 1) has an image of the White Lady, dressed in a white suit and maroon fedora, holding a rose. Next to her, in black, in all capitals text, is the company name ‘White Lady Funerals’ with the term ‘White Lady’ in larger bold font. Underneath the company name, the company slogan is presented in red cursive text: ‘a woman’s understanding.’



Fig. 1. White Lady Funerals company logo (White Lady Funerals 2017).

The 'White Lady' is iconic to this company's marketing, appearing throughout the website. Looking like an amalgam of fashion model and clergy, her facial expression, stance and gesture communicate a presence that is calm, uplifting and compassionate. The white rose she holds in the logo is an elegant if malleable symbolic object – commonly signifying love, celebration and respect. The glamour of this photograph is echoed in the text fonts and most intriguingly in the red cursive slogan. Is glamour important to the grieving process? How is this highly fashionable figure related to 'a woman's understanding'? As a service that is marketed primarily to women, 'a woman's understanding' becomes an ambiguous promise to attend to the needs of the female customer through the collected knowledge of the women employees. Most of the banner images show the White Lady in action, conducting her funereal and pastoral duties. These images help unpack the marketing strategy embedded in the logo image.

There is one 'Individual Staff Member' photograph. This is a standard head shot, taken outdoors with a manicured garden backdrop. The White Lady employee is groomed and shot like a fashion model, smiling. Most photographs of White Lady staff feature this smile, especially when shown interacting with customers and attendees. The smiling White Lady is an instantiation of the emerging visual code of Celebration, with the funeral being an opportunity for uplift and healing.



Fig. 2. The White Lady (White Lady Funerals 2017).

There are three 'Staff Group' photographs. In these images, the White lady staff are shown interacting with the coffin: arranged around it at the back end of the hearse, carrying the flower draped coffin toward the church (Fig. 3), and standing at the church entrance on either side of the coffin. In these images, the White Ladies are posed with an almost military precision. They embody professionalism and teamwork, control and authority, even if their smiles in some photographs appear less than genuine.



Fig. 3. The White Ladies' professionalism and teamwork (White Lady Funerals 2017).

The six photographs in the 'Staff Interacting with Customers' category are the most evocative in terms of the product ostensibly being sold (funeral services) and the role of the White Lady in implementing those services. In these images, the White Lady is shown interacting with solo adult women, solo female children and groups of females (presumably mothers and their daughters). In one photograph, the White Lady also interacts with the sole male figure found in the banner images.

These images are rich in graphic elements that communicate the White Lady ethos. Two photographs are close-ups of the White Lady interacting with young women. In one, the White Lady holds a little girl in her arms, pointing upward with a glowing smile on her face (Fig. 4). The implicit meaning is the communication of some kind of spiritual wisdom, as if the White Lady is comforting the girl by pointing toward Heaven. In another banner photograph, the White Lady stands next to a young woman who has apparently just released a white dove, with a church in the background to emphasise the spiritual element (Fig. 5). Here the White Lady has an ecstatic look on her face, as if she is presiding at an important ritual. In other photographs, the White Lady is standing next to the hearse with its flowered casket while family members (female members only) view the coffin inside. In all cases, the White Ladies are depicted as authority figures dispensing calm, compassion and uplift. Finally, there are four 'Miscellaneous' photographs, depicting elements of the White Lady experience including flower arrangements and a White Lady Funerals storefront.



Fig. 4. The White Lady as mentor and teacher (White Lady Funerals 2017).



Fig. 5. The White Lady as minister or shaman (White Lady Funerals 2017).

One photograph depicts a solo White Lady customer without an accompanying staff member (Fig. 6) – a middle aged woman wearing a wry and pleased expression, as if she is a client who is pleased with her funeral experience. Again, the empowerment of the female response to grief is emphasised.



Fig. 6. The White Lady customer (White Lady Funerals 2017).

Instantiating Gordon's 'New semiotics of death' emerging codes

Gordon's evocative article presents a summary of the new codes used in popular culture to articulate and depict both death and mourning. The initial aim of this project was to explore the White Lady banner images through the lens of Gordon's emerging codes (see Table 1). While all of Gordon's emergent codes were concretely present in the banner images, a number of these codes were especially explicit – 'Feminine', 'Up' and 'Celebration'.

Feminine

Gordon suggests that funeral services are traditionally depicted as a male-oriented industry, with male clergy and funeral attendees dominant in imagery. Gordon's positing of the feminine emerging code suggests that the increased use of female-centric imagery reflects a growing increased emphasis on compassion and caring over grief and mourning in funeral-related graphics. Carden suggests that White Lady Funerals has 'accelerated' this transformation in funeral marketing since its inception in 1990 (Carden 2001). The White Lady images have an almost overwhelming bias toward the female and the feminine. This emphasis could be called subversive in terms of the

portrayal of authority figures in the funeral process. The images portray the White Lady as facilitator, teacher and spiritual guide – with little need for the traditional male clergy (who are either not present or unseen). The images portray the White Lady as wielding her power to complete the funeral services to her female customers' satisfaction.

Up

Traditional funeral images have a downward focus, with an emphasis on employees' and customers' heads bowed toward the grave and the coffin – including those lowered in prayer. The White Lady imagery offers, instead, an upward focus, particularly in the two images where she interacts with young women. In both these cases, her focus is seemingly on the sky which may be a metaphor for a heavenward gaze and/or general transcendence.

Celebration

Old visual codes related to mourning and death, bequeathed to us from Victorian culture, emphasise solemnity, grief, loss and finality. New visual codes related to death emphasise celebration – whether a celebration of the deceased's life or an opportunity for the family to bond in a positive way. The omnipresent White Lady is dressed more appropriately for a wedding than a funeral; her tailored white coat and skirt seemingly a cross between couture fashion and clerical garb. The bright whiteness of her uniform is in direct conflict to the black traditionally required of the clergy, widows and mourners, signalling a paradigm shift in the purpose and the tone of the proceedings. The sunny nature of the photographs themselves, including the golden gardens and the smiling White Lady, underline the positivity of the overall experience.

Glamour, power and a woman's understanding

The totality of these banner images support Gordon's argument that mainstream representation of the mourning process is changing in important ways. While the banner images feature the many tropes of the funeral service (coffin, bearers, family flowers, for instance), it is the White Lady who is the focal point of the majority of the images. Given her prominence and omnipresence, the banner images make the argument that the White Lady herself is the product being sold. With this understanding, it is important to further unpack the White Lady's signification within the banner images.

The word *glamour* comes from the Scottish and originally had connotations of magic and spells of enchantment (Cresswell 2010). In modern parlance, *glamour* is strongly associated with female beauty framed within tropes of luxury culture and objectification (Brown 2009). In the website banner images, the White Lady embodies the key elements of modern glamour: couture-like garb, full (and professionally done) make-up, gloves, pearls and maroon fedoras. Indeed, some of the images have the high production values of a professional fashion photoshoot. Virginia Postrel has reframed glamour to expose its aspirational roots (2013). For Postrel, glamorous images (whether of women's fashion or of heroic armed forces in battle) offer archetypal blueprints for

future states of being. Similarly, John Berger in his classic *Ways of Seeing* (originally published in 1972) posited that ‘Publicity persuades us of a transformation by showing us people who have apparently been transformed and are, as a result, enviable. The state of being envied is what constitutes glamour’ (Berger 2008: 125). From these viewpoints, glamour serves as a persuasive device which triggers a viewer’s desires and longings for a prized and idealised state.

In this sense, the White Lady serves as a performative archetype of power during the difficult period of mourning after the death of a loved one. Controlled, nurturing, kind and possessing spiritual knowledge, the White Lady represents the antithesis of the prostrate and grieving widow. In terms of glamour, she is an idealised female archetype that combines the roles of empowered Mother and Priestess. She serves as a representation of (and gatekeeper to) Gordon’s emerging codes of female centric and celebratory mourning. In addition to the personal power radiating from the White Lady, the marketing images also portray a type of communal power expressed through female-to-female relationships and networking. The images primarily show women interacting with other women in the funeral context. The relationships depicted among these women range from mentoring/teaching to comforting to collaborating. The images serve as a type of guidebook to a new paradigm of power for customers and their families. In Gordon’s terms, the power contained in the emerging codes of choice, construction, and participation.

Conclusion: the power of visual rhetorical analysis for creative writing

So, what then is ‘a women’s understanding’, which serves as the company’s slogan? Based on the analysis of the website banner images, this author suggests that White Lady Funerals is actively constructing an idealised potential: mourning as empowerment. In its web presence, White Lady Funerals is presenting the possibility that women customers can gain inner strength, beauty and deeper connections with female friends and relatives through the use of its services.

The rhetorical analysis of the White Lady Funerals website imagery provides data which could be used to inform the creative writing process. In this case, the images, individually and in total, present the female-centric funeral experience as being a healing, bonding, and empowering experience. Each image presents an idealised female figure responding to grief through the embodied representation of desired states of power and through the depicted actions. Facial expressions, posture, colour, shape and the placement of people in relationship to one another: each of these can be touchstones for the writer’s inspiration. This suggests that the use of visual rhetorical analysis is one tool which can provide the writer or scholar with a means for unpacking complex visual arguments in terms of interlocking claims and their evidence. In this way, both quotidian and more unusual imagery can serve as a touchstone both in the inauguration of a writing project as well as during key points of refinement.

Endnotes

1. See White Lady Funerals website, at <http://www.whiteladyfunerals.com.au>.
2. Use of these images in this discussion is covered under the Australian Copyright Council’s policy ‘Fair dealing for criticism or review’.

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