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Critical and Creative Thinking in *12 Angry Men*

In an era of fake news and widespread misinformation, how does one learn what is true and what is false? How can people determine when they are being manipulated and when they are being presented with a valid argument? Looking at the 1957 film, *12 Angry Men*, we can unpack ways in which people construct arguments, convince others, and undermine someone's credibility. In the film, twelve men of the jury are tasked with determining the guilt of an 18-year-old man who is accused of killing his father. After a preliminary vote, it becomes clear that every juror believes the young man to be guilty of murder, except for one—Juror #8. As the defendant will be sent to the electric chair should the jurors deliver a guilty verdict, Juror #8 thinks that the case should be discussed a little more before they "...send a boy off to die..." All the jurors participate in the debate, some delivering better arguments than others as to why they believe the defendant to be guilty or not guilty of committing the murder. By the end of the movie, every juror has been persuaded to vote "not guilty." Over the course of the movie, several different critical and creative thinking skills are displayed as jurors evaluate evidence and try to convince their peers of a guilty or not guilty verdict. Aristotle's rhetorical appeals of logos, ethos, and pathos are three ways in which critical and creative thinking skills are used by jurors to evaluate and discuss the case, which in turn allows them to arrive at a fair and just verdict.

It is very important for a person to have both critical and creative thinking skills. The MasterClass article “Guide to Critical Thinking: Learn to Use Critical Thinking Skills” states, “Critical thinking is the ability to examine information rationally and make a reasoned judgment based on your analysis” (p 3). Critical thinking is important because it allows people to determine if information is credible and if arguments are sound and well-reasoned. In his 2014 TEDx Talk “How to think, not what to think,” Jesse Richardson says, “...creative thinking is, in essence, nothing more than making new connections” (3:43-3:47). Creative thinking allows people to be adaptive and helps them solve problems. It also allows people to see things from multiple perspectives. In the film, the most prevalent of these thinking skills revolve around the rhetorical appeals identified by Aristotle.

There are many different examples of appeals to logos, ethos, and pathos in the arguments in *12 Angry Men*. As the jurors evaluate the evidence throughout the film, there are of course many examples of logos. Logos is about using facts, evidence, reason, and logic to construct a strong and persuasive argument. As the video “What is Logos?” explains, logos is “When a speaker appeals to the audience’s sense of rationale and logic” (Lyon 1:39-1:46). Therefore, the appeal to logic requires the use of critical thinking in order to analyze information and use the understanding gained from that to construct an argument. Juror #3 uses logos at the beginning of the film when explaining his reasoning for voting guilty. He lists different pieces of evidence that were presented in court including the testimonies of the two witnesses (the woman who saw the murder, and the old man who heard the murder). However, his logic is faulty because it is based on inaccurate evidence.

Fortunately for the defendant, logos is also used to prove that both of these testimonies are unreliable. Juror #9 recalls that the woman who testified had marks on the sides of her nose,

and it is determined that these marks were probably from eyeglasses. As the woman was trying to fall asleep before she witnessed the murder, Juror #8 makes a logical guess that, if indeed this woman did wear glasses, she would not have had them on. Nor would she have enough time to put them on before she saw the killing. The woman claimed she saw the accused kill his father, but Juror #8 argues, "I say she only saw a blur." This causes other jurors to apply their critical thinking skills and examine the woman's testimony from a logical perspective, which causes Juror #4 to change his vote to "not guilty." He is the second to last juror to do so. Although he has been one of the jurors who was most in favor of a guilty verdict, he is also one of the most reasonable. Therefore, he is willing to concede after being presented with a valid argument.

Logos is also used to disprove the old man's testimony. The old man testified that on the night of the murder he heard a fight. The old man claimed he later heard the defendant shout, "I'm gonna kill ya!" He also claimed to have heard the body of the father hit the floor just a moment after. He said he then went to the door and saw the young man running out the apartment. Juror #8 pokes holes in this story arguing that the L Train was "roaring" by when the defendant shouted, and the old man would not have been able to hear him. Even if he had, it would have been impossible to identify the voice. Here, Juror #8 uses logical reasoning to assess the old man's testimony and hypothesize what might have actually happened. Later Juror #8 also questions whether the old man could have gotten from his bedroom to the door as quickly as he claimed. "...I'd like to find out if an old man who drags one foot when he walks 'cause he had a stroke last year, could get from his bedroom to his front door in fifteen seconds," Juror #8 says to Juror #4. Juror #8 paces out the jury room and reenacts how the old man would have gotten from his bedroom to the door all the way down the hall while dragging one foot. Juror #2 times this and declares it took him forty-one seconds. Juror #8 speculates that the old man "...got to his

door as fast as he could, heard somebody racing down the stairs, and assumed it was the boy.” By appealing to logic, Juror #8 tries to convince the other jurors that what the old man testified had happened, would not have actually been possible.

The use of ethos to construct an argument is also shown several times in the film. Ethos is about using the credibility or character of the arguer to persuade others of their argument. As the video, “What is Ethos?” explains, ethos is about “Whether or not a speaker appeals to listeners’ sense of trust and their desire to listen to a credible speaker” (Lyon 1:14-1:23). An example of a flawed appeal to ethos occurs when Juror #10 tries to convince his fellow jurors that people raised in slums are untrustworthy. Offering his own experience, he explains that he has “lived among them all [his] life” and “...they’re born liars.” In this case Juror #10 tries to appeal to ethos in order to support his own bias, only to undermine his own appeal with a fallacy. As a fallacy is defined as a common error in reasoning that undermines the logic of an argument (“Logical Fallacies” p 1), the hasty generalization that Juror #10 makes is “...a conclusion based on insufficient or biased evidence” (“Logical Fallacies” p 4).

Another example of how ethos is used in an argument occurs when the jurors discuss the downward angle of the stab wound that killed the father. It is questioned whether the defendant (who is seven inches shorter than his father) could have stabbed downward with the switch knife. A couple of the jurors reenact how the young man might have done so. However, Juror #5 points out that they are holding the switch knife incorrectly. Exhibiting his expertise, he demonstrates the correct way to use a switch knife and says that “anyone who’s ever used a switch knife wouldn’t’ve handled it any other way.” To back up this statement, Juror #5 proves his credibility (ethos) saying he has seen many knife fights and that these knives “came with the

neighborhood” from which he is from. Both his background and knowledge of how to use a switch knife causes some of the other jurors (mainly Juror #8) to seriously consider his point.

Appeals to pathos are also evident in the film. Pathos is about appealing to the emotions of the audience and using that to convince them of an argument. The video “What is Pathos?” defines pathos as, “When we appeal to our audience’s emotions” and “When the speaker draws out or involves the listener’s feelings” (Lyon 1:25-1:32). Juror #8 uses pathos several times including when he explains that the young man on trial has had a difficult life. He says the jurors owe it to the defendant to examine the case more seriously. He does not necessarily do this to change the minds of the other jurors, but rather to get them to sympathize with the boy and thereby persuade them to take a closer look at the evidence and have a productive debate. It should also be noted that here and throughout the film, the jurors refer to the 18-year-old defendant as a “boy,” when by law, he is not. This could also be seen as an appeal to pathos as it may make other jurors feel guilty for voting for the death of a “child.”

Juror #3 also incorporates appeals to pathos in his arguments. During his first interaction with Juror #8, Juror #3 calmly implements an appeal to pathos in his argument. He asks Juror #8 if he really believes the defendant to be innocent. Juror #8 simply responds, “I don’t know.” Juror #3 then says, “I mean you sat in court with the rest of us. You heard what we did. The kid’s a dangerous killer, you could see it.” By calling the accused a “dangerous killer” Juror #3 attempts to instill a sense of fear of the defendant in Juror #8 (although this does not work). Juror #8’s critical thinking overrides this appeal.

In the film critical thinking is used to determine the credibility of the testimonies of the two witnesses. Juror #8 puts his critical thinking skills to the test when he debates the loopholes and faults of the two testimonies. The jurors also utilize their critical thinking skills when

analyzing how well-reasoned and logical the arguments presented by the other jurors are. Creative thinking aids jurors in making new connections between different pieces of evidence. Creative thinking also helps jurors work together as they scrutinize the case. In addition, it allows the jurors to empathize with the defendant.

In conclusion, appeals to logos, ethos, and pathos are all apparent in the film *12 Angry Men*. Combined with the usage of their critical and creative thinking skills, these appeals help jurors sort through evidence, construct their own arguments, and evaluate the arguments of other jurors. When these appeals are valid they are effective in convincing others of a certain point. But when they are based on fallacies, ultimately they are not. In general, critical and creative thinking skills are important in order to judge and question data and knowledge one may be presented with. These skills help a person develop their own opinions and understanding. Appeals to logos, ethos, and pathos can be useful ways to help identify well-constructed arguments. This classic movie is a great demonstration of how these appeals are used to effectively come to a valid decision based on credible evidence. This extends to everyone's ability to apply their critical and creative thinking skills to determine what is true.

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