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English 1105: First-Year Writing

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24 October 2022

Life as a Superhero: What a way to make a livin’

A superhero is someone who gives purpose to their personal struggles by using their natural talents and abilities to advocate for and protect others. A *rhetorical* superhero fully encompasses these attributes by using their rhetorical skills to inspire and convince others to take part in the same fight. Dolly Parton has earned her place as one of the most famous rhetorical superheroes by creating the song “9 to 5.” This iconic piece of film and music history has become a rallying cry for underappreciated workers across the country by using rhetorical devices such as ethos, pathos, and logos, to engage society and garner their support.

In 1946, Dolly Parton was born in a rural area of eastern Tennessee. Her family was very poor and she was one of 12 siblings, so self-sufficiency was an integral part of her growing up. Her humble upbringing inspired much of her work such as her song “Coat of Many Colors.” This song gives audiences a glimpse into the poverty she experienced, the deep gratitude she has for her family, and how she would not change anything because it has made her who she is. She began working at the age of 10 and made her debut at the Grand Ole Opry when she was just 13. Despite this young success, she stayed in her hometown to finish high school but moved to Nashville the day after she graduated. Since then, she has remained committed to education through her charity work such as establishing Dolly’s Imagination Library to deliver books to children, donating technology to schools, and creating scholarships. Beyond this, she has strived to create opportunities in her hometown to help others disrupt the cycle of poverty that she was

able to escape. She has done this by creating jobs with her theme park Dollywood and providing financial assistance to families affected by the 2016 wildfires that destroyed many homes around the Great Smoky Mountains.

Even without knowing Dolly Parton or her background, it would still be clear that she knows what she is singing about because writes with such conviction and confidence. It has been established that Dolly Parton understands the plight of the working class, but she also has experience as a boss and an executive. Since she has been on both sides of this dynamic she has the perspective necessary to appeal to her audience and raise the standards that employers should follow. Additionally, she does not just sing about how this issue exists, she is actively leading by example and trying to solve it. In 1986, she co-founded Sandollar Productions to create an example of how business should be done in the film industry. Some may say that this was just her cashing in on her famous name, but her involvement with the company remained very discreet. Most people did not realize she was involved until someone noticed the company's name at the very end of the credit sequence of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which is one of the company's most famous productions. After researching the company, people realized that Parton is a co-owner. This connection was not made until years after the show wrapped and her fame was never used to buy instant success for the company's projects. Recently, it came to light that one of the female producers at her company had not been paid the same royalties as the male producers, so Dolly asked her to have lunch and then hand-delivered a check to her along with a personal apology. The fact that she pulls from her personal experience and lives her life in accordance with the argument she advocates for builds her credibility with the audience.

"9 to 5" has been a source of inspiration for countless people in the privacy of their day-to-day lives, but in some cases, it has become a part of historical moments too. Jewelry

mogul and self-made millionaire Kendra Scott has spoken about how watching and listening to “9 to 5” as a child influences the way she runs her company today. She has made her company a “utopia for working women” and credits her company’s success to the celebration of female employees who make up 95% of the company (Nolasco). Additionally, this song’s message is still so pertinent to today’s issues that Elizabeth Warren chose it as her walkout song during a 2019 rally where she officially announced her run for president. My connection to this song isn’t as consequential as a presidential run or building a multi-million dollar company, but I think it is shared by many people. I come from a blue-collar background and I am a first-generation college student so listening to this song ignites the work ethic that my parents instilled in me. For my entire life, I have watched my dad go above and beyond in his job while his dedication goes unnoticed. So for me “9 to 5” serves as a reminder that there is more to a person than the daily, mundane tasks they do and that their dreams and goals are just as extraordinary as those of a CEO.

Dolly Parton’s use of pathos is probably the most prevalent and effective rhetorical device in this piece. It is common knowledge that people remember things better once they have an emotion associated with it and she uses that to her advantage. The entire song encapsulates feelings of frustration, desperation, and anger. She perfectly explains what it feels like to be looked down upon and taken for granted. She explains the dynamic between boss and employee by saying “they just use your mind and they never give you credit.” Also, she equates this with the feeling of being “a step on the boss-man’s ladder.” Once she ignites the anger of her audience, she reminds them “It’s enough to drive you crazy if you let it” and encourages them to keep chasing their dreams and to never let themselves feel as small as the boss makes them out to

be. This song takes the audience through a rollercoaster of emotions but leaves them with a strong memory that influences how they see the world and approach the issue of unequal pay.

Her use of pathos and invoking of these emotions directly relates to her use of exigence and kairos. She uses the present tense in this song and makes it clear that this problem is going on right now, so something must be done right now. This incorporates a sense of urgency that invites the audience to take part in the equal pay movement. The social context of the song and film is important to note because while the main goal is entertainment, the film was also made to bring attention to the treatment of women and underappreciated workers in the workplace. Some might argue that “9 to 5” lacks kairos because it is a generally upbeat song which some say is inappropriate for discussing topics as serious as unequal pay and gender inequality in the workplace. However, the issue at hand requires attention from a large number of people so the universality of music is necessary to be effective in engaging the audience. She uses kairos and exigence in an unorthodox way, but that does not mean she used them in an inappropriate or incorrect way. If anything, Dolly Parton has shown how to craft a new and creative argument in a debate that is often repetitive.

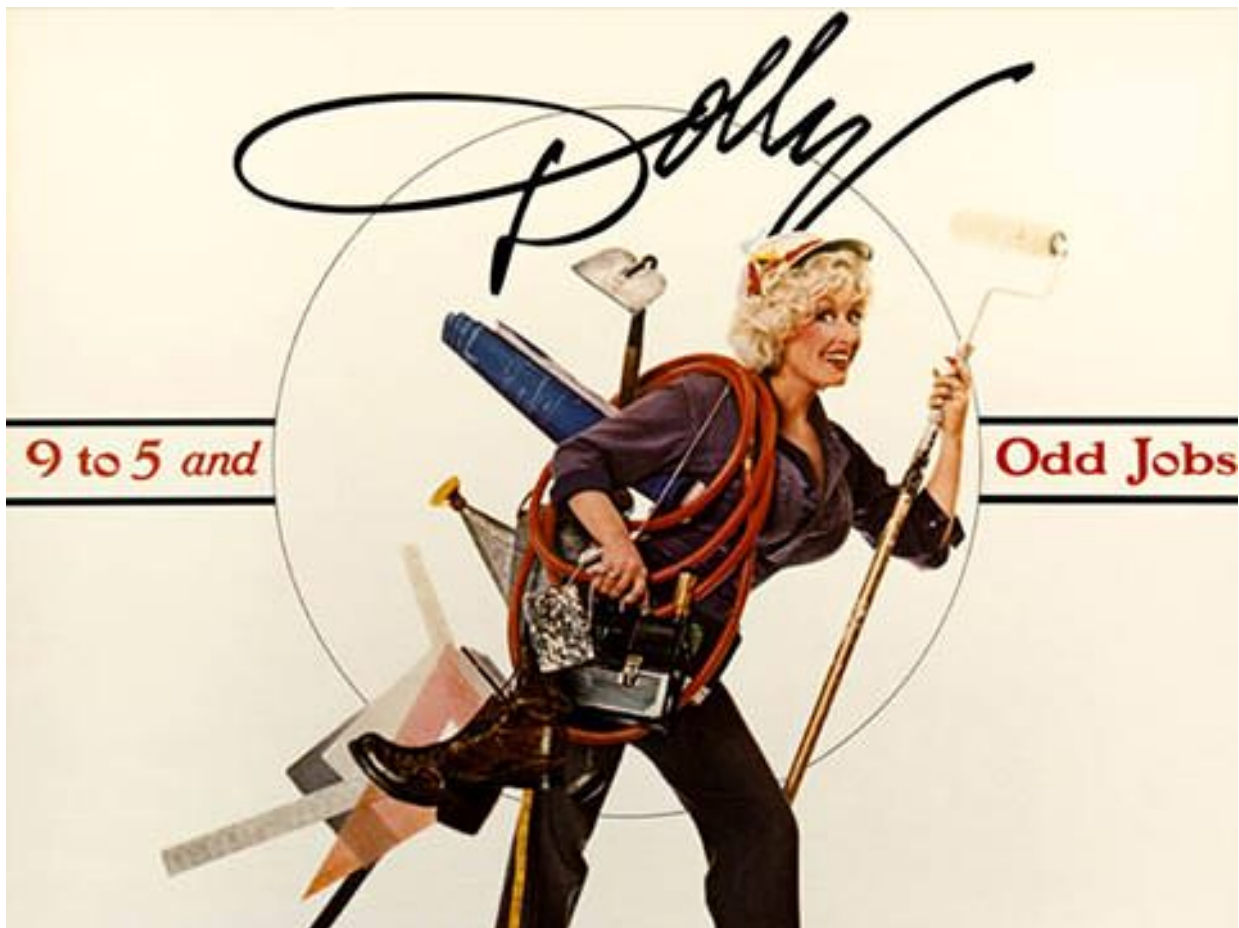
When making an argument, most authors would be able to use evidence from experiments, expert opinions, or statistical data to prove their point, but songwriters do not have this option. This left Dolly with the challenge of clearly displaying how women are treated in the workforce and how much they contribute. She made the decision to put the audience in their position by taking them through the day of an employee and including tangible, logistical details to give the audience a sense of what this lifestyle is like. By taking them through a typical day the audience is able to compare their preconceived notions with the reality that Parton presents to them. She continually restates the message of the song from saying “barely gettin’ by, it’s all

takin' and no givin'" to "9 to 5, for service and devotion." These details prompt the audience to pause and think *well it is not very logical that these workers don't get the credit they deserve*, which enables them to see the larger message of the song and the critique of society that it holds. By including these details she appeals to the audience's sense of logic and makes them want to rally around her and be on her side. Her incredible talent for songwriting and creativity allowed her to include logos in a unique and unconventional way that is just as, if not more, effective than citing scientific evidence and statistics.

In a sense, her audience is everyone in society, but she is speaking directly to and relating to underappreciated employees, especially women, and giving them a means of catharsis. By writing this song she gives validation to these women's feelings and allows them to feel heard. She continually uses "you" to refer to herself and other employees and adds a sense of partnership by referring to them as "folks like me." Also, by bringing in background singers at key points she gives a sense of community as the background singers represent her audience joining in with her. Another way she connects to her audience is by resonating with them through acknowledging their goals and dreams and the fact that she sees them as more than just an employee. This detail is especially important because if anyone else had been tasked with writing this song, they probably would have never acknowledged this facet of the workers' experience. Since Dolly Parton has been in the position of working to make a living and still working to chase her dreams she understands the struggle and complexity of the working class experience. This enables her to be one with her audience and never come off as condescending or belittling to her audience's experiences.

Dolly Parton's work as a rhetorical superhero teaches the world that there is more than one way to create change and as she puts it "I don't get out and have to preach it or march in the

streets. I write about it.” This conveys an important message about using your own unique skills to make the world a better place and remaining persistent in your advocacy. The impact of this song cannot be denied considering the fact that it is still used as an anthem for underappreciated workers and the equal pay movement over 40 years after its release. There are many different ways to be a hero and Parton’s example of a *rhetorical* superhero serves as an example of how nonconformity is necessary for personal growth and societal advancement as a whole.



The album cover for *9 to 5 and Odd Jobs*, featuring “9 to 5”, depicts Parton as a hard-working woman of many trades.

<https://dollyparton.com/life-and-career/music/9-to-5-and-odd-jobs-album/996>

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