

K. Doherty \*

Dr. Julie Sparks

English 1B

February 12, 2015

Rhetorical Analysis of “Why You Can’t Sit Down to Eat Without Making a Statement”

**Context:** In our current age of unprecedented and ever-expanding access to information, we are able to find out where our food comes from and the impacts that it produced along the way from field to plate. Accordingly, as Scott Canon discusses in his article, “Why You Can’t Sit Down to Eat without Making a Statement,” we American consumers are discovering some disturbing things about our food’s origins and production costs, both in terms of its environmental damage and the suffering it can cause, whether for the humans who raise and harvest it or for the animals we eat. This was written against a context of increased concern about climate change, our polluted and overfished oceans, increased rates of food-influenced diseases like diabetes and cancer, and growing awareness of contemporary slavery in, for example, the orange groves of Florida and the cocoa plantations of West Africa. Growing concerns about GMOs, growing antibiotic resistance, shrinking rainforests, pesticide buildup in our environment, growing influence of huge “factory farms” at the expense of small family farms, and exploitation of fast-food workers are also part of the article’s context.

**Thesis/forum:** Scott Canon brings in these issues throughout the essay to show how complex and ethically confounding our food choices have become, and how conflicted we are about making those choices. The closest thing to a thesis statement is this line: “In the global

[Type text]

village of 21st-century food production, what you eat makes a political statement.” Originally published for *The Seattle Times* in 2005, Canon’s message remains relevant today.

The **audience** for this article would likely be both those who are already interested in contemporary food issues and those who aren’t but are intrigued by the title, which might seem like an overstatement to the uninformed. Considering that Seattle is a pretty progressive region, this newspaper’s readers are likely to be sympathetic to the idea that we should do what we can to fight climate change and promote social justice with our consumer dollars. Considering that Canon makes an effort to cover both sides of the many food controversies he mentions, though, it is likely to draw in more conservative readers, as well.

**Logos:** Going beyond the price tag to find what food *really* costs in terms of human rights violations and environmental damage, Canon builds a solid Logos appeal by modeling the ways well-intended consumers make decisions based on limited information. For example, Canon cites granola as a food most believe is healthful, but then he reveals a little-known fact:

[M]ost oats in this country are imported — new short-season varieties of more heavily subsidized soybeans have elbowed oats out of acres in the upper Midwest. So if that granola isn’t certified organic, its oats were probably grown in countries with less stringent labor standards and are more likely to carry traces of pesticides outlawed in the U.S.

Covering issues as complex as the impacts of imported, farm-raised shrimp and the surprisingly progressive policies of McDonald’s, Canon provides numerous examples of how hard it is for consumers to see the full impact certain foods have, and what it means to continue those practices.

[Type text]

Canon also uses plenty of statistics to bolster his logos appeal, though some of his citations are very brief or absent. For example, he says, “Government research shows that in 1930 Americans spent an average of 21.2 percent of their family income on food. Today, that portion is 6.1 percent — the lowest in the world,” but he doesn’t cite an actual study. On the other hand, Canon does make an effort to quote relevant experts on both sides of any controversy, and he includes enough about them to suggest where their loyalties (and thus their biases) might lie. For example, he quotes Dennis Avery, cited as the director of the Center for Global Food Issues (CGFI), to point out that ““We haven’t given high-yield farming enough credit for the high yield,”” but notes that he is the author of *Saving the Planet with Pesticides and Plastic* and that his CGFI is “agribusiness-supported.” Conversely, Canon also quotes Ben Lilliston, a member of “the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, a group that sees itself as the champion of small family farms,” Who says, ““This global food system has been a great benefit to agribusiness, but it has not been a benefit at all for farmers’ [. . .] ‘Both here and in the developing world, there are fewer farmers every day.’”

**Pathos:** Throughout the article, Canon subtly draws on the audience’s good conscience, attempting to promote both smarter and more socially responsible consumerism. Discussing the global damage caused by irresponsible food production, from environmentally destructive shrimp farming to imported goods contaminated with various diseases, Canon also works to change the belief that the current food industry is environmentally sustainable and safe. By revealing fairly unknown risks and repercussions of common food stuffs, Canon tries to inspire a healthy sense of alarm and caution while he also begins to shift audience values from short-term self-interest (such as a focus on foods’ price) to long-term, collective values like environmental sustainability and more widespread human rights. For example, Canon reports that

[Type text]

“Half the cut flowers sold in the United States are grown in Colombia, where human-rights groups say farmworkers are exposed to dangerous amounts of pesticides,” yet he also says that when offered organic flowers, consumers “say, ‘Why should I care? I don’t eat flowers,’ [because] ‘They just weren’t willing to pay a premium for organic flowers.’” Although his approach is subtle, Canon attempts to change his audience’s values and perspective by showing the harmful repercussions of negligent or just ill-informed consumerism.

Canon is also subtle in urging his readers to use their consumer power to make the world a better place. For instance, although the following passage could be called a logos appeal, since it offers a series of examples from history to prove ordinary people can change things, it also operates as a pathos appeal by inspiring hope and making readers want to follow these examples of good people taking a stand for positive change. Canon says,

Consumer pressure changed fishing practices so now countries that don’t properly monitor dolphin-free tuna catches face U.S. import restrictions. Starbucks and others hold on to consumers by making their suppliers deliver “shade-grown” coffee raised below the rain-forest canopy rather than on land razed to make way for farming. A generation ago boycotts of grapes gave bargaining leverage to California farmworkers.

**Ethos:** Like his pathos appeals, Canon’s ethos appeal is also subtle, letting his evidence and gentle tugs at his readers’ conscience establish his authority and good character. This is important because he is not a famous pundit and doesn’t even have his own page on his newspaper’s website. He is not an established authority on food issues. Yet, by diving right into the problem and offering plenty of supporting evidence, Canon establishes his credibility by

[Type text]

showing he's done his homework. He also demonstrates good sense by addressing both the positive and negative impacts of any given food choice, establishing himself as a man who understands both smart business practices and smart environmental practices. By framing the food industry's human toll as a problem to be solved rather than just a business expenditure to be written off, Canon shows that he is caring and can see the big picture, just as he wants his readers to. Although ethos is not the most prominent of the three appeals in this piece, Cannon ensures that the audience sees him as someone with good sense and good morals. Finally, by writing with the assumption that his readers would want to know the impacts of their food choices and do the right thing, he also demonstrates good will.

Overall, I believe Canon makes an effective argument, ably supporting his message on smarter consumerism for his audience of conscientious consumers. Depending primarily on his extensive logos appeal, Canon also uses the ethos and pathos appeals to ensure that his message will appeal to the whole reader: heart, mind, and conscience.

\*[It seemed only right to include the name of the student whose original paper I used to form the backbone of this sample, but it was greatly expanded by the prof to make a model for the longer assignment. This is from a semester when I asked for just 600-700 words. This one, without this bracketed note, is 1460 words, a bit over the assignment minimum of 1400. My rough drafts tend to be longer than my final drafts, though. If you want to read the original piece being analyzed here, it is still posted at <http://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/why-you-cant-sit-down-to-eat-without-making-a-statement/> ]