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# FORUM

## A Perfume Advertisement as a Teaching Tool

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In the *Rocky Mountain E-Review* at the RMMLA web site you can view a 30-second tv advertisement from the mid-1980s, part of a perfume campaign titled *Jane Seymour in Le Jardin de Max Factor*.<sup>1</sup> Because of its construction, this advertisement serves as a potentially handy teaching tool in any number of classes. I have successfully used it, usually on the first day of the semester, in Mythology classes, Introduction to Literature, The Bible as Literature, in writing classes for the promotion of careful observation and critical thinking skills, and in classes emphasizing critical theory as part of the curriculum. As a sample demonstration class, it once landed me a tenure-track job offer.

Years ago, simply playing an advertisement in the classroom would catch students off guard in productive ways. These days, such defamiliarizations or recontextualizations of this kind of pop culture “text” may be less eccentric. But it’s best not to introduce the ad in any way; just press play and have the students baffled as to the purpose of this viewing exercise.

After a quick glimpse of the perfume bottle, we see Jane Seymour, languid in her vaguely old-fashioned, perhaps early 20<sup>th</sup>-century, garb. She spends a few seconds of leisure time in a lush garden, smelling a flower. An announcer’s voice confirms it: “Jane Seymour in Le Jardin de Max Factor.” Casual semi-textual background music features a male voice: “Le Jardin, la da dee da da. Le Jardin, Le Jardin, la da dee da.” Seymour glances back before entering a boudoir, removing her shawl, and sitting at a vanity. The room is filled with flower arrangements. A strap of Seymour’s next garment strays off her shoulder and down her arm. She fixes us in her gaze: “Some people say romance is back in style. I say it never went

out. Le Jardin says it too.” A hand reaches down among some foliage towards a bottle of the perfume and gently touches it. Cut back to Jane: “It says it subtly. It says it softly. Because if you want romance to come on strong, you have to come on soft.” The male announcer reiterates the sentiment: “Le Jardin de Max Factor. The incurably romantic fragrance.”

After showing the ad in class, asking the most open-ended questions possible is best: what did you see? or, what the heck was that? Students will exorcise their needs to exude about how ancient the ad is (“so ’80s!”) and to declare how dorky they find it. Then you can move the chatter into the realm of how the ad tries to go about selling the product. Students will cite the ubiquity of the flowers throughout the ad and Max Factor’s hiring of Jane Seymour as spokesperson. Either of these can help launch more sophisticated discussion. You may point out that Jane Seymour’s real name is Joyce Frankenberg (according to *Parade Magazine* ten years ago and countless web sites now) – obviously not considered glamorous enough for show biz. A few students always seem to know that she started out her film career as “a Bond girl,” but unfortunately she is best remembered recently for *Dr. Quinn, Horse Birther*, or whatever that tv show was called. What students may not know is that when the ad was filmed, Seymour was best known for assorted period romance pieces, the kind of obscure bodice-rippers presumably shown now only on the Romance Channel, a cable station received by no one I’ve ever met in my life. As for the flowers, the principle is the same as the hiring of Jane Seymour – the advertisers need to create associations. Indeed, if you are finding it difficult to get discussion off the ground, you might ask: what are they selling, and why is this automatically a problem for television advertising? Because Wonka-vision does not exist yet, and the public can’t be relied upon to obey scratch-and-sniff signals with their cards, however those might be distributed, selling perfume on tv has to rely entirely on creating impressions and associations with the product.

I have often encountered an impasse at this stage of the process. Asking what kinds of associations Max Factor has embedded in the ad, or even what other details of any sort they notice, students typically get stuck on flowers and perceive no more. I tend to turn to the title, *Le Jardin de Max Factor*, and ask what that means. Some may have a laugh at the attempt to frenchify a recalcitrant corporation name, but most know the translation of *jardin*. Why *jardin*? “European is classy,” I remember one student volunteering. But what associations does “garden” have? You are hoping someone will blurt out “Garden of Eden,” because that answer offers lots of associations that students can see as relevant to the ad. Most generally, the notion of temptation connects the two. Temptation is the ad’s mode, as Jane Seymour adopts the slinkiness of a seductress and even addresses the topic

of seduction technique: “if you want romance to come on strong, you have to come on soft.” Note also her body language and cocking of the head.

Depending on the nature of the class, this might be the time to introduce the idea of archetypes and/or archetypal criticism, that some critics feel that a text’s meaning is shaped by cultural and psychological myths. Archetypes are the unknowable basic forms personified or concretized in recurring images, symbols, or patterns which may include motifs such as the quest or the heavenly ascent, recognizable character types such as the trickster or the hero, symbols such as the apple or snake, or images such as crucifixion (as in *King Kong*, or *The Bride of Frankenstein*), all laden with meaning already when employed in a particular work, and all sufficiently familiar so that we know automatically how to form assumptions and expectations from our encounters with these. Archetypal criticism gets its impetus from psychologist Carl Jung, who postulated that humankind has a “collective unconscious,” a kind of universal psyche which harbors the forms manifested in dreams and myths and gives rise to themes and images to which we all instinctively respond. Literature, therefore, imitates not the world but rather the “total dream of humankind.” Archetypal story patterns and symbols encourage readers (and viewers of films and advertisements) to participate ritualistically in basic beliefs, fears, and anxieties of their age. These archetypal features not only constitute the intelligibility of the text but also tap into a level of desires and anxieties of humankind.

If the advertisers wanted to capitalize on Garden of Eden associations (lurid features such as sin and attraction and temptation and taboo), what other components – what archetypal images – would still be needed? We’ve obviously got the garden. And we have already implied that Jane is functioning like an Eve archetype. But we should be looking for a forbidden fruit, an Adam, a serpent, and maybe God. And we don’t have any of those.

Here a student will likely protest such a complete dismissal, pointing out that the product essentially functions as the fruit. It’s what Jane/Eve is tempting us with. Furthermore, when we see the product in the ad, the bottle is fortuitously shaped like a roundish fruit, situated among foliage, and a hand descends with fingers extended in the manner that one might pick a piece of fruit. But, you can add skeptically, we would need an Adam for this scheme really to work.

Another student will perhaps observe that “We’re Adam,” since Jane is fixing us in her gaze and “tempting” us with the perfume. A second viewing of the ad will help students register the fact that before Jane Seymour enters the boudoir, she glances over her shoulder to an implied presence remaining in the garden. Perhaps that is Adam. Conveniently, the two theories work together. So as not to

limit the audience, if the viewer is male, he is Adam being seduced by Eve. If the viewer is female and allowing the heterosexual assumptions of perfume advertising to hold sway, then Eve is excusing herself from Adam's company and confiding in us with her secrets.

"But where's God?" – a question I always relish asking during this exercise. By this time, most students are finding themselves savvy enough to assign that role to the deep disembodied male voice authorizing the product at the end of the ad: "Le Jardin de Max Factor, the incurably romantic fragrance."

At this point I usually admit that without a serpent, all our work so far is mere fanciful speculation. Seldom if ever do students have a proposed candidate for this element. Speculation may run to subliminal imagery and I often am asked to run the ad once again so that the foliage may be inspected this time through. It turns up nothing.

So I ask how advertisers might *imply* a serpent. What do snake-like features include? What do snakes do? How might the advertisers have tried to evoke "snakiness"? We brainstorm. Seldom do I hear any viable suggestions at this point for a long while except maybe that Jane "slinks" into the room. I do think there is something of the sidewinder in the ad at that moment, but I am tempted, as it were, at this stage to mention my own notion that the odd scraping back of Jane Seymour's hair I can account for only as a way to reveal a shape to her face that is highly reminiscent of a snake's head. I immediately confess, though, that this kind of remote suggestion is not liable to persuade many people to adopt the archetypal reading of the ad as we have been constructing.

Presumably fans of *Jungle Book*, students sometimes may want to suggest that snakes fix you in their gaze and hypnotize you. It is true that we are concerned here with popular culture and popular notions of serpents, not herpetological accuracy; nevertheless, although Jane does carry out the movements for such a maneuver, the insistence seems pretty slim. Is there any other hint of snake in the ad?

I play the commercial one more time, advising students to watch – and listen – carefully. This time through, I pause right after Jane Seymour states, "It says it subtly. It says it softly." And I ask, "What's she doing?"

"She's hissing."

This is the big moment – a revelatory breakthrough and a completion. I may linger on this by asking for the poetic term for the repeated consonant sounds and tell my students that they may have gotten their five points knowing what that term meant on their seventh-grade English quiz from Mrs. White, but that here is a real point for using alliteration. Jane is hissing, and considering all of the money invested in this ad campaign, surely someone on the set if not before would

have caught this taboo and yelled, “Cut! She’s hissing! Get me rewrite!” – if this were not an intended effect.

In *Le Jardin de Max Factor*, we do have a complete constellation of archetypal images suggesting Garden of Eden dynamics and associations. Any suggestions that it seems a stretch to make Jane Seymour function as both Eve and the serpent can be put to rest with reference to, or ideally with demonstration of, typical medieval images of Eden. A good color example appears in the Joseph Campbell book, *The Power of Myth*. A few are available on my web site listed below. It was typical for medieval artists to conflate Eve and the serpent, so we frequently see serpents in trees with long flowing locks the same color as Eve’s hair, and often serpents with identical visages to Eve’s. *Le Jardin de Max Factor* is well aligned with iconographical history.

I end the exercise with a statement of personal belief designed to reassure students that this will not be a completely weird semester of crackpot ideas and cheesy materials. I tell them that I personally do not believe that because someone might have seen this ad, with or without speculating about the imagery, that that person will find herself mysteriously drawn to Le Jardin perfume the next time she visits the mall. I confess that I do not think that such vague and indirect appeals to the base glop of our corrupted souls, encouraging us to exercise our vile powers to seduce, actually does work subliminally. But, I say, I do think there are rich white guys on Madison Avenue convincing other rich white guys that that’s the way advertising works and thus justifying their enormous advertising budgets. In other words, I do think the images are actually planted in the ad and we did not just make all this up out of communal cleverness.

What I won’t tell them on the first day of class is that even if we did make all this up, there’s still a point – in fact, maybe it’s more valid than simply reading out what was embedded in the text. I won’t try to convince them of the implications of being able to read and think like this, or the function of such reading and thinking as crucial components of their liberal arts education. There will be time for that; they probably won’t drop the class. ✿

### Note

<sup>1</sup> My thanks go to Procter & Gamble Cosmetics/Noxell Corporation who granted permission for the advertisement, *Jane Seymour in Le Jardin de Max Factor*, to be viewed as a potential teaching tool and as a component of this article.

Thanks also to the Visible Knowledge Project, Georgetown's grant impetus for improving student learning, often with the help of the new technologies in the classroom.

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