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A Material Rhetorical Analysis of Denny Chimes:

Humans have conveyed their thoughts, dreams, and abilities in countless ways throughout history. For thousands of years, stories were passed down through verbal communication—a complex system of sounds symbolically linked to concepts, ideas, and emotions that fostered a fundamental quality in human society: the ability to understand one another. From this essential foundation, we developed writing—various systems of distinct symbols, images, and letters symbolizing unique meanings. Many ancient cultures developed distinctive writing systems, such as cuneiform in Mesopotamia, Egyptian hieroglyphs, and the Greek alphabet, each preserving aspects of the human experience and enabling cultures to transmit their identities across time. As human civilization progressed, so did our means of communication and expression. Classical and medieval art, grand sculptures, and Renaissance architecture allowed societies to convey values, beliefs, and cultural heritage through physical forms. As a result, monuments, statues, and buildings became more than structures. They embodied societal ideals, honoring achievements, leaders, and significant historical events. This evolution marked a shift toward communication transcending verbal or written language, a form in which every detail of our surroundings conveys a unique meaning.

In the late 20th century, scholars like Barbara Biesecker and Carole Blair formalized the concept of material rhetoric, which examines how objects and spaces, whether statues, buildings,

or artifacts, communicate perceived ideas, values, and beliefs. Material rhetoric recognizes that these physical objects can act as a form of language, conveying messages about power, identity, memory, and cultural significance. Within this framework, Denny Chimes, a towering bell tower located at the heart of the University of Alabama campus, offers a rich site for material rhetorical analysis. Through its careful thoughtfulness of design, placement, historical background, and audience, Denny Chimes represents a fluent connection between the mind of the rhetor, the message of the artifact, and the intended impact it has on the audience. The material rhetorical strategies used to craft Denny Chimes have a profound effect on its intended audience by strategically employing the manipulation of the rhetorical sensorium of the audience, drawing attraction to the artifact by associating detail to the space of attention surrounding Denny Chimes and using elements of architecture and color as symbolic functions to relay the profound message associated with Denny Chimes. A message of tradition, excellence, and success that has been a foundational principle of the University of Alabama.

The rhetorical situation surrounding Denny Chimes is essential in understanding its significance to the University of Alabama. Denny Chimes, constructed in 1929, was initially proposed as a World War I memorial to honor Alabama's fallen World War I soldiers. However, after rumors circulated about the possible departure of the beloved and transformational President of the University of Alabama, George H. Denny, the monument was repurposed to be used as a gift and tool of coercion to keep Denny at the University of Alabama. Under Denny's leadership, the university vastly expanded its student body and elevated its academic standards to new heights. He quickly established the University of Alabama as a prominent institution of higher learning in the state and around the country. To honor his contributions to the university, students and faculty came together to raise funds for the bell tower that would come to be known

as Denny Chimes, which still stands prominently on the Quad's south side to this day. The tower's classical architectural design harmonizes with the university's architectural aesthetic, symbolizing stability and tradition over the university's almost two-hundred-year history. Over the decades, Denny Chimes has become a ubiquitous presence on campus, functioning as the literal and symbolic pillar of university life. It serves as a site for ceremonial gatherings, a marker of institutional pride and pageantry, and a touchstone for the University of Alabama students past, present, and future.

Many rhetors are responsible for the creation and message associated with Denny Chimes, including the university administration, student body, alumni, and state leaders at the time of its creation. The collaborative effort that resulted in the construction of Denny Chimes is a symbol of the community's unity in honoring a man who foundationally changed the University of Alabama forever. The administration aimed to establish a visible symbol of stability and leadership on campus, the same vision and message that George H. Denny brought to work every day during his time at the University of Alabama. The extensive student involvement in the creation of the tower demonstrated the student body's influence in shaping the goals and institutional messaging of the University of Alabama, crafting a message of progress, academic achievement, and success for all students who pass underneath the shadow of the tower. The tower's tall, classic architectural design also acts as a reflection of the university's commitment to building for the future, while also respecting the classical Southern traditions that are present in the university's history.

The primary audience of Denny Chimes includes all past, present, and future University of Alabama students, faculty, and alumni, who have connected with Denny Chimes and associated it as a symbol of campus tradition and pride. Its centralized and ubiquitous location on

the Quad ensures that it will always be present in student life, much as the impact of the University of Alabama will always be present in the lives of its students. The tradition of success and the promotion of pride that Denny Chimes exudes acts as an anchor on the memories of those who came before, while inspiring hope and success for those to follow. For current students, Denny Chimes symbolizes a powerful and impactful sense of pride in the history of the University of Alabama, as well as serving as a beacon of achievement and future progress. University of Alabama alumni see Denny Chimes as a nostalgic artifact, reinforcing the lifelong connections and experiences that they made at the University of Alabama. With its prominent position in the center of campus, Denny Chimes is one of the first structures that prospective students and visitors see when arriving at the University of Alabama. This intended audience envisions it as not only a symbol of the university's rich tradition and values but also an opportunity for them to blaze their path in the history of the university.

First, rhetorical critics have long analyzed the relationship between rhetorical artifacts and their effects on the senses of their audiences. By using the concepts developed by numerous rhetorical scholars, specifically in the field of material rhetorical criticism, we can begin to better understand the rhetorical elements surrounding Denny Chimes and their impact on the audience. In the textbook, *Contemporary Rhetorical Criticism* by Sarah Kornfield, Debra Hawhee, a rhetorical theorist, masterfully articulates this relationship between a material rhetorical artifact and its intended audience in her concept of rhetorical sensorium. The rhetorical sensorium refers to “the interconnected senses, both internal and external, through which animals, such as humans, discern the world. The sensorium includes external senses, such as hearing (sound), sight (light), touch (temperature and pressure), taste (sweet, sour, bitter, bland, and so on), and smell (such as aromatic perfumes)” and “internal senses such as pain, hunger, arousal, fatigue,

and ‘visceral organ senses’, such as butterflies in your stomach or heartbreak” (Kornfield 243). Hawhee, drawing on broader concepts in rhetorical criticism, argues that sensation precedes meaning, which directly challenges early rhetorical theories that placed an emphasis on textual and verbal persuasion. Her work directly aligns with scholars like Carole Blair, who emphasizes the communicative power of objects and spaces. Hawhee goes even further to explain that the material world acts upon our senses before we cognitively have the time to process the significance of the message we are receiving, which goes to show the importance of the visual and physical impression an artifact makes on an audience. This is especially true in the case of Denny Chimes, which engages in multiple ways of internal and external sensory manipulation of the audience to create a profound rhetorical impact. Immediately, the tower's imposing height and sleek classic architectural style create an unwavering sense of awe and authority in the audience. This towering presence presented by the carefully chosen height of the tower draws the eyes of the audience upwards, an act that evokes feelings of admiration and reverence even before the audience has made a conscious attempt to consider its symbolic meaning and importance to the university. The stark white color of the base and capstone of the structure intentionally contrasts sharply with the lush, vibrant green presented by the grass and trees on the Quad, further enhancing its visibility to the audience. The use of these contrasting visual elements creates an impression of Denny Chimes that emphasizes its longevity and permanence at the University of Alabama.

The chimes of the bell tower create a bellowing tone that resonates across campus, creating a shared sensory experience of pride and nostalgia for alumni, while also evoking a sense of curiosity among prospective students. The auditory presence of Denny Chimes contributes to the rhetorical sensorium of the audience by bridging generational connections,

embedding the university's identity within the memories of its audiences. Whether it is the fight song or the alma mater, the deep tones created by the handcrafted carillon bells can elicit feelings of nostalgia, community pride, and pageantry that have a profound effect on the senses of the audience, particularly during significant campus events such as graduation ceremonies or football game days. Debra Hawhee and Cody Holding also cite the work of 18th-century researchers Joseph Priestley and Gilbert Austin in their work on the association of the rhetorical sensorium to material rhetoric. They use the terms “heat” and “impression” to explain the relationship between the senses and their impact on the rhetorical meaning of an artifact, saying that “by ‘heat,’ Priestley and Austin meant the bodily manifestation of passion. Our bodies often become hotter when we passionately experience emotions. Priestly and Austin took this phenomenon as material, considering how heat expands, radiates, and can be conducted through other materials. They argued that the hotter a speaker, the more heat radiates to the audience, creating heat - passion - in the audience as well” (Kornfield 242). This association of “heat” and “impression” is a compelling concept when viewing it through the lens of Denny Chimes. The feelings of authority, awe, and admiration given off by the body, in this case, Denny Chimes, can be associated as the “heat” in this rhetorical concept. This “heat” then creates a sensory engagement that creates an immediate connection to the artifact, grounding its rhetorical power in the perceived meaning of the artifact by the audience, or the “impression”.

The rhetorical sensorium of Denny Chimes also extends to its strategic and tactical spatial presence on the Quad. If the intended audience is standing close to the base of the tower, one feels the imposing scale of the structure, imposing its role as a symbol of the institutional authority associated with the University of Alabama. The smooth surface of the locally sourced Alabama limestone and its symmetrical design convey a sense of order and stability in the

tradition and values that the institution is founded on. Through this strategic manipulation of the rhetorical sensorium by the rhetors, Denny Chimes creates a profound effect on the audience's emotions and senses before they even begin to cognitively process its meaning.

Second, building on Hawhee's concept of the rhetorical sensorium, we can identify the importance and influence of the space surrounding Denny Chimes and its impact on how the artifact is perceived by the audience. One of the most important concepts we must consider when analyzing the rhetorical effect of a physical object is how it uses space to create spaces of attention. These spaces of attention are designed to not only draw the attention of the audience to the artifact itself, but also use the artifact's surrounding environment to emphasize certain features of the artifact. In *Contemporary Rhetorical Criticism*, rhetorical critics Kenneth Zagacki and Victoria Gallagher masterfully articulate the impact of these spaces of attention when considering the rhetorical impact of an artifact. According to Zagacki and Gallagher, these spaces of attention are "aspects of a place that are designed to direct humans' attention to particular features of that place, or to the nature of the place itself, through multimodal (sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch) or mixed-modal interactions" (Kornfield 244). Zagacki and Gallagher go even further in connecting the impact of these spaces of attention on the rhetorical sensorium of the audience, which is created by a rhetorical artifact, writing that "spaces, places, and their material entities interact with our bodies (sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch), directing our attention through our existing value and symbols systems to particular locations, features, or entities within that place" (Kornfield 244). Looking at the spaces of attention included in the surrounding area of Denny Chimes, we see that its central placement on the Quad ensures that the message of tradition and success it presents to the audience is an important foundational principle of campus life. Its prominence within the layout of the university itself underscores its rhetorical role as a

centralized symbol of unity and tradition amongst students, faculty, alumni, and the community. In front of Denny Chimes, the cleared path of trees and foliage is also a testament to the effort of the rhetors to draw the attention of the audience to Denny Chimes to intentionally evoke those feelings of awe and authority associated with the rhetorical sensorium of the artifact. Directly across the street from Denny Chimes, the President's Mansion is prominently situated to create a metaphorical connection between the leadership of the university and its students. The placement of Denny Chimes on campus, the layout of the landscaping surrounding it, and the nearby buildings and environment are all examples of how the rhetors that created Denny Chimes wanted to use space to ultimately direct the attention of the audience to the tower. Once the audience's attention is captured, they can truly begin to understand the rhetorical meaning and symbolism that Denny Chimes represents.

In the material elements of Denny Chimes itself, the use of spaces of attention by the rhetors in skillfully considering its height, classical design, and auditory presence across campus directly interacts with its audience to direct their attention toward the tower, thus directing them toward the institutional values that Denny Chimes represents. For example, Denny Chimes' carillon bells often play the university's alma mater and fight song during important occasions, such as game days and commencement ceremonies. These auditory cues that are directly associated with the tradition of the university draw the attention of the audience and reinforce a sense of collective identity and pride among them. As Zagacki and Gallagher noted, these "spaces, places, and their material entities interact with our bodies", drawing direct attention to a particular set of features or values that the rhetor wants us to experience (Kornfield 244). This use of space of attention is similar to the use of space of attention associated with the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. The Vietnam Memorial uses space and reflective surfaces to not

only focus the audience's attention on the names of the soldiers who gave their lives but also show the reflection of the audience in that image, creating a direct relationship between what the soldiers died for in the past and the future that their sacrifice allowed the audience to have. Denny Chimes employs its towering architecture and auditory presence to anchor the attention of the audience on both the values of traditions in the past, and also the prospects of success and achievement in the future. The ubiquitous engagement of these features every single day ensures that the tower remains an enduring symbol of the University of Alabama's identity.

Finally, in addition to its overt symbolic elements, Denny Chimes also embodies important and symbolic cultural meanings through its architectural design and historical context. Debra Hawhee and Cody Holding observed the importance of cultural significance and symbolism in a rhetorical artifact when connecting with its intended audience, explaining that, "materials, places, and spaces can function symbolically through cultural repetition, and thus communicate various meanings (for example, bridges symbolically represent unity, connection, or transition)" (Kornfield 247). The physical materials used in Denny Chimes are an excellent example when examining the impact of the symbolism of a rhetorical artifact through cultural repetition on the audience. The use of locally sourced Alabama limestone not only pays homage to one of the state's most abundant natural resources, but also reinforces a sense of regional pride. This echoes similar strategies seen in other university landmarks around the country, such as Duke University's use of North Carolina stone in its historic chapel. The use of local materials establishes the artifact in its geographic and cultural context, embedding local identity into its rhetorical message. Another symbolic and powerful choice by the rhetors was their choice of red brick in creating the "trunk" of the bell tower. The rhetors decided to use Virginia Brick, which was chosen to honor the home state of George H. Denny. In addition to this, the color of the

brick itself was also taken into consideration. The University of Alabama athletic teams were given the nickname the “Crimson Tide” after Alabama upset a very heavily favored Auburn team in the 1907 Iron Bowl. The weather was a downpour, causing the iron-rich soil to turn a muddy red color. The color of the Virginia Bricks is said to resemble the muddy red color that created the school's nickname, the “Crimson Tide”, which is why it was symbolically chosen for Denny Chimes. Even the type of material that was used in the construction of Denny Chimes was meticulously chosen to convey a symbolic meaning to the audience about the historic traditions of the university.

While the rhetorical significance of Denny Chimes to the University of Alabama is undebatable, the symbolic power of the artifact is not without its critiques. The ultimate decision to dedicate the tower to George H. Denny rather than to the fallen Alabama World War I soldiers could be seen as a reflection of broader tension regarding World War I in the student body and faculty at the time. Critics argue that the shift away from the original purpose is the result of the institution prioritizing its institutional achievements and culture over broader, national historical narratives. This raises important questions that the audience must consider. Why did the university prioritize the memory of its leader over the collective sacrifice of Alabama's World War I soldiers? What does this decision say about the institution's values and its relationship to national historical narratives? This critique can even be broadened to include the historical context of the University of Alabama when it comes to its ties to segregation and the Confederacy. For many years, multiple buildings and monuments around the University of Alabama were named or dedicated in honor of figures that supported the Confederacy or values associated with racism and segregation. This historical context of the university's history in commemorating figures with questionable pasts further complicates the celebratory narrative

surrounding the creation of Denny Chimes. This critique can be directly associated with contemporary discussions surrounding other contested monuments around the country, such as Confederate statues, which some argue glorify elements of history that shouldn't be glorified. As Debra Hawhee's concept of the rhetorical sensorium reminds us, the world of material rhetoric can act upon us in ways that are both sensory and ideological, which in turn prompts the audience to make a critical reflection on the values and assumptions embedded in these material artifacts. While one member of the audience can interpret Denny Chimes to communicate a message of unity and excellence, another may point out its historical ties to exclusionary practices that may complicate its rhetorical impact. This duality of perspective presents a challenge in interpreting the material rhetoric within different cultural contexts, but also presents the audience with an opportunity to expand their cultural understanding.

In conclusion, Denny Chimes serves as a powerful example of how material rhetoric can embody complex messages about tradition, identity, and memory. Through its intentional design, placement, and sensory interactions, the tower communicates values of excellence and unity, while also reflecting the contested nature of public commemorations. By engaging in Debra Hawhee's concept of rhetorical sensorium and Kenneth Zagacki and Victoria Gallagher's conceptualization of the importance of spaces of attention, I can conclude that Denny Chimes is a powerful material rhetorical artifact that has the profound ability to shape the experiences and perceptions of its audiences, anchoring its symbolic power within the cultural fabric of tradition and progress at the University of Alabama. At the same time, its history and contemporary critiques serve as a reminder to all of us that the need to critically examine the narratives embedded in material artifacts is imperative in ensuring that they reflect a more inclusive and accurate understanding of the past. In doing so, Denny Chimes can remain to stand not only as a

beacon of tradition but also as a site for ongoing rhetorical inquiry and reflection at the University of Alabama.

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