

THE FIVE KEY TERMS OF KENNETH BURKE'S DRAMATISM:
IMPORTANT CONCEPTS FROM *A GRAMMAR OF MOTIVES**

Most of us are familiar with the journalistic pentad, or the five W's—Who, what, when, where, and why. Note that Burke collapses “when” and “where” into “scene” and adds a sixth category: “agency” or “how.”

The Burkean Pentad:

- Act* What was done? “What took place in thought or deed?”
- Scene* Where and when was it done? (Context, Background, Situation)
- Agent* Who did it? (What person or kind of person, what co-agents or counter-agents)
- Agency* By what means or with what instruments was it done?
- Purpose* Why was it done?

“Any complete statement about motives will offer *some kind* of answer to these five questions” (xv). We might also ask “where is the motivation, or from whence does motivation flow?”

Burke argues that an entire philosophical perspective, or *casuistry*, can grow from each term (Note: it is typical of Burke to employ a term like “casuistry,” a word with generally negative connotations, in this neutral way. “Casuistry” is “the determination of right or wrong in questions of conduct or conscience by the application of general principles of ethics” (American Heritage Dictionary) but it often refers to the evasion of duty by applying such principles):

For the featuring of *scene*, the corresponding philosophic terminology is *materialism*.

For the featuring of *agent*, the corresponding terminology is *idealism*.

For the featuring of *agency*, the corresponding terminology is *pragmatism*.

For the featuring of *purpose*, the corresponding terminology is *mysticism*.*

For the featuring of *act*, the corresponding terminology is *realism*. (128)

*(e.g. when we ask about the “meaning” of life we are in reality asking how we can align ourselves with some cosmic or universal purpose).

Burke then explores and critiques the major philosophers this perspective. Interestingly, he characterizes Aristotle as a dramatic philosopher, but focused on *act*. He equates Aristotle's four causes with the pentad:

- Material Cause That from which a thing comes into being, e.g. the bronze of a statue. Burke says this corresponds with *scene*.
- Efficient Cause The initial origin of change or rest; e.g. the advisor is the cause of the action, the father is the cause of the child, the *agent* is the cause of the deed.
- Final Cause The end, i.e. that for the sake of which a thing is, corresponds to *purpose*.
- Formal Cause The form or pattern, i.e. the formula of the essence. Burke says this corresponds to *act*.

Burke argues that Aristotle has a fifth cause in his list, which might be called “instrumental cause” but that because Aristotle is thinking in terms of the ends/means (*purpose/agency*) ratio, he discusses *agency* as incidental to the Final Cause (228).

The Burkean Ratios:

It is in the ratios that the heuristic power of the pentad is most evident. In the sections reprinted in *The Rhetorical Tradition* Burke discusses three ratios in detail:

Scene-Act—Burke notes that the *scene* contains the *act*, and launches into what amounts to literary criticism in support of his principles. His first example is Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People*. He argues that in this play the scenes both realistically reflect and symbolize the action, and that the plot of the play is an “internality directed outwards” (In this we are getting into a *scene-agent* ratio, but Burke signaled at the beginning of the section that this was a possibility.) Burke makes similar observations about O’Neill’s *Mourning Becomes Electra*, and quotes a scene from *Hamlet* in which Horatio is worried that the surroundings may inspire Hamlet to commit suicide (3-7).

Scene-Agent—Burke quotes Carlyle describing the features of the Arabian landscape and drawing conclusions about the Arabian people (Edward Said would see this passage as an example of Orientalism). Then he quotes a sonnet by Wordsworth, noting that the octet is all *scene* and the sestet is all *agent*, and that the supernatural quality invoked in the *scene* is transferred to the *agent*. Amid other examples Burke discusses a painting by Seurat in which the pointillist technique causes the characters to nearly dissolve into the background. However, he also points out that the artist’s technique can be covered more appropriately by talking about *agency*. This is an important point, because if painting technique is the *agency*, then the artist is the *agent*, and we have shifted the perspective of the pentad entirely (7-9).

Act-Agent—Burke notes that the two ratios above are positional, in that the scene contains both the act and the agent. This is not true of the *act-agent* ratio, although the potential for the act may pre-exist in the *agent*. For this reason Burke characterizes this relation as temporal or sequential. Burke’s example is the resistance of the Russian armies to the Nazi invasion. Did the motivation for this resistance come out of the socialist scene, i.e. the political and economic structure (*scene-act* ratio)? Or did it derive from the strength and character of the agents (*act-agent* ratio)? Burke notes that socialists tended to argue the former, while American newspapers argued the latter. Most of Burke’s work with the pentad is critical and analytical; he uses the terms to interpret literary and political texts. This last example shows the potential of the pentad to serve a heuristic rhetorical purpose, to generate arguments and positions (16-17).

One simple way to begin using the ratios is to allow them to generate simple questions like the following:

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| <i>Agent-scene</i> | What does the <i>scene</i> reveal about the <i>agent(s)</i> ? |
| <i>Agent-agency</i> | What does <i>agency</i> reveal about the <i>agent(s)</i> ? |
| <i>Agent-act</i> | What does <i>act</i> reveal about the <i>agent(s)</i> ? |
| <i>Agent-purpose</i> | What does <i>purpose</i> reveal about the <i>agent(s)</i> ? |

The Paradox of Substance:

Burke lists a series of words with a common Indo-European root: *stā*, to stand. The most important of these is “substance,” a word made so problematic by John Locke that many philosophers refuse to use it. However, Burke suspects that banishing the term merely conceals its functions.

The paradox begins with the term itself. It is usually used to denote the “essence” of something, or what something intrinsically is. However, etymologically, “substance” means that which stands beneath or supports the person or thing, and thus Burke calls it a *scenic* word. Though “substance” is used to describe something within the thing, intrinsic to it, the word literally refers to something outside the thing or extrinsic to it. Burke takes this to be an inevitable paradox of definition, that the thing must be defined in terms of its background. Burke calls this “contextual definition” (24). The selection in *The Rhetorical Tradition* omits this discussion, but Burke contrasts this concept of definition with what he calls “familial definition,” the first being tied to placement, and the second to derivation or ancestry. Conflicting motivations may arise from different alignments, as when a soldier on the battlefield is motivated both by national feeling and by a desire for self-preservation (37).

Burke says that “whenever we find a distinction between the internal and the external, the intrinsic and the extrinsic, the within and the without, . . . we can expect to encounter the paradoxes of substance” (47). His example is a gerontologist who claims that “chemistry will learn to stimulate artificially those powers of ‘intrinsic resistance’ to disease with which man is born.” Burke points out that introducing chemicals from outside the body

(from the *scene*) will transform the intrinsic motivation into an extrinsic one, and that the body will become dependent on these chemicals.

By and large, these are problems of the *scene-agent* ratio. Is a man “of substance” so because of his ancestry or because of his possessions? Is a person’s character due to his or her nature (intrinsic), or to his or her upbringing (nurture, extrinsic)?

Burke also cautions us against those who say something is “substantially” true, or true “in principle,” when it would be more correct to say “it is not true” (52).

The Four Master Tropes:

The four basic tropes play a major role in “the discovery and description ‘of the truth’” (503), the making sense of reality. To each trope Burke attaches a corresponding “realistic” application:

For *metaphor* we could substitute *perspective*;
For *metonymy* we could substitute *reduction*;
For *synecdoche* we could substitute *representation*;
For *irony* we could substitute *dialectic*. (503)

Burke sees these tropes as overlapping, and indeed in his discussion they cascade from one to the other.

Metaphor—*Metaphor* corresponds to *perspective* because it involves seeing one thing in terms of another, or from the *perspective* of another. Burke says that we could say that characters (as a general term for any distinct entity) possess “*degrees of being* in proportion to the variety of perspectives from which they can with justice be perceived” (504). What he means is that human interaction is subject to more metaphorical perspectives than that of minerals or plants. Thus, Burke notes, human motivation can be seen in terms of economics, stimulus and response conditioning, chemical interaction, religious devotion, class struggle, almost anything. Applying a critical perspective, or a terministic screen, is an act of metaphor. Burke connects this idea to the idea of *perspective by incongruity* he develops in *Permanence and Change*.

Metonymy—Burke argues that the basic strategy of *metonymy* is to convey an “incorporeal or intangible state in terms of the corporeal or tangible” (506). Thus we can refer to the emotions by speaking of the “heart.” Burke sees this as the *reduction* of a higher realm to a lower one. So far so good. However, Burke’s real concern here is the relation between poetics and science. Burke notes that a poet might see an emotion in terms of a look in the eye, a color of a cheek, a gesture, all of which are signs of the emotion. A behaviorist might catalog these same behaviors and see them as equivalent to the emotion. Thus, “the first is using metonymy as a *terminological* reduction whereas the scientific behaviorist offers his reduction as a ‘real’ reduction” (507).

Synecdoche—At this point the *reduction* of metonymy becomes a *representation* of the whole. Burke begins with the dictionary definitions—part for the whole, whole for the part, container or the contained, sign for the thing signified, etc. However, Burke quickly transcends the dictionary. He notes that all theories of political representation are a matter of synecdoche, a part of the population representing the whole. Perception itself involves synecdoche, because the mind uses sensory data to represent the things observed. A well-organized work of art may involve synecdoche as the beginning of a drama may contain the whole. Indeed, a work of art may be a microcosm of society, or the universe. This sort of analysis leads Burke to a principle: “A terminology of conceptual analysis, if it is not to lead to misrepresentation, must be constructed in conformity with a representative anecdote—whereas anecdotes “scientifically” selected for reductive purposes are not representative” (510). Again, Burke is working on distinguishing between poetics and science.

Irony—Burke begins by justifying the equation of dialectic and dramatic. He says “Where the ideas are in action, we have drama; where the agents are in ideation, we have dialectic” (512). Relativism is to see the drama from only one perspective, from the point of view of only one character, and in this monological view there is no irony. Burke argues that “Irony arises when one tries, by the interaction of terms upon one another, to produce a *development* which uses all the terms” (512). From this “perspective of perspectives” none of the other sub-perspectives are entirely right or wrong, and the terms or characters are “voices, or personalities, or positions, integrally affecting one another” (512). Burke speaks of the monological, relativistic viewpoint as a “temptation” for a more ironic one. He also notes that although each of the characters can be seen from the perspective of any other, there is often a “representative character,” that in a sense is the synecdochic representation of the whole structure, such as Socrates in a Platonic dialogue. Burke sees such a character as both embodying one of the qualifications necessary to the total definition (adjectival function) and embodying the conclusions of the development as a whole (substantial function). Irony can be sacrificed to the “simplification of literalness,” i.e. neglecting these dual functions.

Bizzell, Patricia. and Bruce Herzberg, Eds. *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001.

*Burke, Kenneth. *A Grammar of Motives*. 1945. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1969.