

Communication 522
Seminar in Kenneth Burke's Dramatistic Theory

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PRELIMINARY SYLLABUS—SOME CHANGES WILL LIKELY OCCUR.

Kenneth Burke was one of the best-known and most respected American scholars of the 20th Century. He won recognition as a poet, literary and music critic, social and political theorist, and lecturer. Burke (1897-1993) dropped out of college so, as he put it, he would have time for some serious studying. He never earned a university degree, yet he lectured and held visiting faculty appointments at various colleges and universities. He remains today one of the most widely read and frequently cited American intellectuals. His work is highly respected in literature, linguistics, sociology, anthropology, and communication studies. An academic cult, *The Kenneth Burke Society* has been created to keep his ideas alive. This group holds triennial conferences and publishes a journal and a newsletter devoted to the study and the critical application of Burke's theories. The society also maintains a Web Site: <http://www.kbjournal.org/kbs>.

Reading Burke is an adventure. Like many adventures, it can at times be a humbling and frustrating experience. Yet Burke is also fascinating, for just when you are about to surrender and concede that you will never master a concept you will encounter a passage which clarifies his point and answers your questions. Clarity cannot be assumed, however, for at other times you will be confident that you understand his point only to have him dart off in some new direction. In reading Burke one must try to uncover the trails of his thought, and with each new reading you will discover nuances and ideas that were previously undetected. Sometimes it takes more than one reading to master Burke. In fact, I have taught this seminar many times in the past and I still feel that I learn more about Burke every time I teach it and reread his essays.

There will be times when I will ask you questions about Burke that you will be unable to answer, and times when you will pose questions for me that I will not be able to answer. So it is with Burke. One of the most interesting evenings that I ever spent was during a meeting of the SCA (now known as the NCA) when Burke "corrected" the experts who had established their reputations by explaining and applying his theories. Surely this should make us wary of declaring our peers to be wrong when they share their interpretations of Burke with us. The class will be most enjoyable if we all share this sense of adventure – a spirit of inquiry that encourages the exploration of highly controversial ideas.

We will work our way through the major works authored by Burke attempting to develop an understanding and appreciation for these works and for his underlying theories of human symbolic behavior. There is more to Burke than will be understood in a single semester, however, even in a class devoted solely to his work. I think we can look forward to some interesting discussions as we read Burke and apply his writings to today's controversies.

Texts:

Kenneth Burke, *Counter-statement, Attitudes Toward History; Permanence and Change; Philosophy and Literary Form; A Grammar of Motives, A Rhetoric of Motives, Language as Symbolic Action, and Rhetoric of Religion.*

We will also read several other essays and criticisms applying his theories.

Assignments:

There are two types of papers expected from you this term. The first is very short (1 or 2 pages maximum) due each week. The purpose of these papers is to help organize your thoughts about the readings and to stimulate our discussions. **You should email your reaction papers to me and to your colleagues by 8 PM on Monday night, the day before class.**

The second paper will be your major research effort for the semester. It should be from 20-25 pages long and should critique/organize/reveal/expand upon/apply a Burkean concept. The paper will be evaluated according to how well you demonstrate: 1) your understanding of Burke's writings; 2) your original insights; 3) the clarity and quality of your writing; and 4) your conformity with appropriate academic and scholarly form. An "A" paper should be superior in every respect and should be suitable for presentation at a professional convention. Several of the papers produced in past Burke seminars have been accepted for publication. Students will make oral presentations of their papers on November 19 and November 26th. The papers are due December 10th.

There will also be an essay-type examination on December 3.

Probe #1
8/27

Dramatism

We want to begin with a broad overview of dramatism – the primary school of thought that owes its life to Burke. Dramatism is like a circle – one never knows quite where to begin tracing it; and it can really be understood only after the tracing has proceeded. The following readings should help:

The Legacy of Kenneth Burke, preface, introduction, chapter 1

Richard Kostelantez, “A Mind that Cannot Stop Exploding,” *New York Times Book Review*, 15 March 1981, p. 11. This is a report on an interview with Burke.

Hugh Dalziel Duncan, “Introduction,” *Symbols in Society*, 1968. A brief look at Burke from a sociological perspective, for now you should read pages 3-16, you will beg for more!

Bernard L. Brock, “Rhetorical Criticism: A Burkeian Approach,” in Brock and Scott, *Methods of Rhetorical Criticism*, 2d. ed., pp. 348-60. This is kind of a *Cliff’s Notes*, approach to Burke, just enough information to make you think you understand his enterprise, but not enough to impress those who do! It does provide interesting and helpful information about dramatism though.

Burke’s obituary column from the *New York Times*, 20 November, 1993.
<http://www.nytimes.com/1993/11/21/obituaries/Kenneth-burke-philosopher-96-and-new-criticism-founder-dies.html>.

James F. Klumpp, “Dancing with Tears in My Eyes: Celebrating the Life and Work of Kenneth Burke,” *Southern Communication Journal*, 61, 1995, 1-10.
From a textbook:

Hugh Dalziel Duncan, “Introduction,” in *Permanence and Change*, pp. xiii-xliv. This is a fine explanation of dramatism but not a well-rounded explanation of Burke.

Probe #2

9/3 (It may be necessary to move this class meeting time)

Counter-Statement

This is Burke's first scholarly book. Do not ask too much of this work. He was just beginning to develop his theories when he wrote this book. At the time he was a young literary critic who had been strongly influenced by I.A. Richards and the literary tradition that would become known as the "New Critics Movement." This book focuses more on literary criticism than it does rhetoric.

This is also one of Burke's more confusing books. You may feel lost because you have not read many of the works that he refers to and also because his terminology is hopelessly confusing. The arguments will make more sense as time goes by. Patience is a virtue when reading Burke.

Do not skip the preface. Pay particular attention to the "Curriculum Criticum."

Probe #3

9/10

Permanence and Change

This is perhaps my favorite Burke. It is most indicative of Burke's interest in communism. Some of you might be tempted to make some connection between these two points.

In *Permanence and Change* Burke begins to develop his sociological perspective of criticism. In this sense this book represents a significant shift from *Counter-Statement*. The book does build upon the principles outlined in *Counter-Statement* though.

You will find this book much easier to read and appreciate. In part this is because Burke was improving as a writer and his concepts were more clearly explained. You should also give yourself some credit though, as you will now begin to understand his style and his arguments.

Read closely the sections of Orientation, Motives, and Piety. They are very important to understanding his world-view.

Probe #4A & 4B

Attitudes Toward History

4A

9/17

We will spend two weeks enjoying *Attitudes Toward History*. We will read the Introduction and Parts I and II for the next class meeting.

It is in *Attitudes Toward History* that Burke really begins to offer specific suggestions regarding the dramatistic process. In the first two sections of the book he talks about acceptance and rejection frames and the different “poetic categories.”

4B
9/24

For this week you will complete your reading of *Attitudes Toward History* by reading Part III. In this section Burke discusses the concept of ritual and offers some key “pivotal terms.” In addition, read: K. Burke, “A Dramatistic View of the Origins of Language,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Part I, 38, (1952), 251-64; Part II, 38, (1952), 446-60.

Probe 5A & 5B

The Philosophy of Literary Form

5A
10/1

This book consists of one long essay (which gives the work its title) and a number of shorter essays. The book is interesting in large part because Burke is again curious about the psychological dimensions of artistic creation. “What does the poem do for the poet?” Burke asks in a haunting question that sends us in some unusual directions. The book also contains Burke’s controversial criticism of Coleridge, where he most clearly reveals his critical methodology. The book also includes “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s Battle,” which is Burke’s most explicitly rhetorical criticism. For the first class session you should read the first 220 pages (through Hitler’s Battle).

Probe 5B
10/8

You should complete your reading of the *Philosophy of Literary Form*. In addition, you should read Burke’s section on “Dramatism” from Combs and Mansfield, pp. 7-17.

Probe 6A and 6B

A Grammar of Motives

6A
10/15

Burke's use of the term "motive," and of the term "grammar." Are different than the more common usage of these terms. This is the first of a proposed trilogy on motive (the second book is *The Rhetoric of Motives* which we will read next; the third is the unfinished *Symbolic of Motives* that we discussed in probe #1). In this book he lays out the framework within which he believes motives might be best understood. This book reveals the deeper philosophical strain in Burke's writing. In this work you should pay attention to the linkages that he sees between philosophy and linguistic strategy. There are three distinct parts to the book and you should pay attention to them as such. The first lays out some critical terms such as the pentad to help you understand the substance of motives; the second relates the philosophical schools to rhetorical strategy; and the third provides a guide for the analysis of constitutions. For the first class you should read Parts I and II.

6B
10/22

For this class period you should read Part III of Grammar of Motives. You might also enjoy reading some of the critical responses to this book, for by the time it was written Burke was at last attracting significant attention across a wide range of disciplines. Please read the responses from Rueckert's, *Critical Responses to Kenneth Burke*, pp. 159-87; 199-208; and 322-44.

You might also enjoy reading: Clarke Rountree (2001). Instantiating "The Law" and its Dissents in *Korematsu vs. United States: A Dramatistic Analysis of Judicial Discourse*. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 87, 1-24.

Probe 7
10/29

A Rhetoric of Motives

The professor who taught the Burke seminar that I took as a doctoral student always claimed that Burke became senile while writing this book, but it may just have been the years of sustained alcohol abuse catching up with him. One source of the frustration with this work is that Burke seems to be recanting some of his earlier arguments, and in many cases, he is recanting those arguments that have the most appeal for many contemporary rhetorical theorists and critics. Another problem is that his writing seems more opaque and less focused than it had been in the previous couple of books. Yet this book is also interesting in that it reveals the extent to which Burke's highly fluid mind has matured since his earlier works. Pay attention for evidence of these attitude shifts. Look especially for the signs that his political and ideological stances were softening (remember as well the time period in which this book was written – there were probably good reasons to soften his ideology). Certainly Burke's notions about Order seem to be very different in this book than they were in *Permanence and Change*.

Probe #8
11/5

Language as Symbolic Action

We are taking this book somewhat out of order. As a result, you will find places where Burke is clarifying and fine-tuning arguments that we have already encountered. The book was originally published in 1966. By this point he was not so much creating new ideas as extending his previously published ones. This book does contain some fascinating essays, however, and I think you will enjoy it. You should read Part I, and additionally pages 295-307.

Probe #9
11/12

Selected Dramatistic Criticisms:

This week we will take a look at some of the critical essays that stand out as interesting examples of the application of Burke's theories.

Cheree Carlson, "Gandhi and the Comic Frame: 'Ad Bellum Purificandum'," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 72 (1986), 446-55.

Bonnie J. Dow, "AIDS, Perspective by Incongruity, and Gay Identity in Lary Kramer's '1,112 and Counting'," *Communication Studies*, 45, (1994), 225-40.

James F. Klumpp and Thomas A. Hollihan, "Debunking the Resignation of Earl Butz: Sacrificing an Official Racist," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 65 (1979), 1-11.

Francesca Smith and Thomas A. Hollihan, "Human Agency and Mental Illness: Conflicting Conservative Arguments in Locating Responsibility for the Tucson Massacre," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, in press.

Leland Griffin, "When Dreams Collide: Rhetorical Trajectories in the Assassination of President Kennedy," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 70, (1984), 111.

Michael J. Hyde and Sarah McSpirit, "Coming to Terms with Perfection: The Case of Terry Schiavo," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 93, (2007), 150-178.

Daniel A. Grano and Kenneth S. Zagaki, "Cleansing the Superdome: The Paradox of Purity and Post-Katrina Guilt," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 97, (2011), 201-223.

11/19
Presentation of final papers

11/26

Presentation of final papers

12/3

Examination

Final Papers Due: December 10 at 5:00 PM