Kenneth Burke’s Pentad and Dramatisim

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Abstract

Kenneth Burke developed dramatism in the early 1900s. Burke wanted to discover the motives of people by looking at their motivation for doing certain actions. In this paper, I will discuss Burke’s Pentad and how it relates to new media in today’s world. One of Burkes quotes of dramatism is, “if actions, then drama; if drama, then conflict; if conflict, then victimage.” This quote summarizes a little of what Burke’s Pentad is about. Burke’s book written in 1945 illustrates his thoughts on dramatism and his pentad. “A Grammar of Motives” explains Burke’s definition of dramatism and breaks down the pentad for others to understand. Burke’s pentad is used in television news as drama to captivate a diverse audience. Communication with drama is what Burke’s pentad is based on. Dramatic scenes and stories captivate the audience and keep them intrigued. The pentad describes the five components of dramatism and helps us to understand the motive behind action.
Kenneth Burke’s Pentad and Dramatism

Literature Review

Kenneth Burke wrote the book, “A Grammar of Motives” where he discusses his development of the pentad. This is also where he discussing the critical technique of dramatism. Burke’s definition of “dramatism is a method of analysis and a corresponding critique of terminology designed to show that the most direct route to the study of human relations and human motives in via a methodological inquiry into cycles or clusters of terms and their functions.” What dramatism is based on are the motives; the reasons why people do the things that they do. Burke then developed a “pentad” that consists of five components and certain questions to ask to begin figuring out the motive. The five components that Burke covers are in the pentad are act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose. Each component asks questions to help develop the motive of the situation. The first component act asks, “What happened? What is the action? What is going on? What action; what thoughts?” Scene asks, “Where is the act happening? What is the background situation?” Agent asks, “Who is involved in the action? What are their roles?” This leads to agency, which asks, “How do the agents act? By what means do they act?” The last component asks, “Why do the agents act? What do they want?“
Burke’s pentad goes back to the term dramatism and what motivates people to do the things that they do. Human action plays a role in Burke’s pentad. What causes the human action to do the motion they did? What is the process that takes place? Burke explains the process in his book, “A Grammar of Motives” and it helps others to understand his understanding and development of dramatism. “In Burke’s mind, dramatisic terms draw us into the realm of human action, not inanimate motion. Dramatism promotes inquiry about human choice and morality in ways that the logico-deductive methods of science and naturalistic philosophy cannot.” Dramatism is intended as a guide to understanding human motivation. Burke describes how dramatism does not seek positive knowledge in the scientific sense, but a guide to understanding human motivation by using an analogy: “In an exhibit of photographic murals…there was an aerial photograph of two launches, proceeding side by side on a tranquil sea. Their wakes crossed and re-crossed each other in almost an infinity of lines. Yet despite the intricateness of the tracery, the picture gave an impression of great simplicity, because one could quickly perceive the generating principle of its design. Such, ideally, is the case with our pentad terms, used as generating principle. It should provide a kind of simplicity that can be developed into considerable complexity, and yet can be discovered beneath it elaborations”. Meaning dramatism is relatively simple, however, it’s not simplistic. Burke believed that to move towards a better life, one must be ready to question assumptions about human nature (Burke, 1945; Lewis, 1984).

In “A Rhetoric of Motives”, Burke suggests that his strategy is at risk of dissolving into the situation it is intended to change. Burke helps us to understand his development through his action-motion pair. Each term shares identities with, and is divided from, its opposite. The term “motion” is linked to the physical world and to scientific terminologies. Burke also links it to
materialism. Burke says, “We should add that with materialism the circumference of scene is so narrowed as to involve the reduction of action to motion.” Motion is the operation of pure agency (Lewis, 1984).

“Dramatism as a method addresses the empirical questions of how people explain their actions to themselves and others, what the cultural and social structural influences on these explanations might be, and what effect connotational links among the explanatory terms might have on these explanations, and hence, on action itself. Dramatism attempts to account for the motivational vocabulary of ordinary discourse and its influence on human action and for particular sociological vocabularies when they are used to explain human action. Burke’s object of inquiry is motive. It’s the language of motives, motives in language, and language as motive. In Burke’s, “A Grammar of Motives” motive is the object of dramatistic inquiry, dialectic is the method” (Overington, 1977).

Burke’s dramatism is based on motives and what causes people do what they do. News media uses a dramatic presentation when telling the world about the events that are taking place. Two important aspects of the use of drama in news are the generation of emotional arousal and the use of underlying myths. Drama appeals to the audience, the feeling is emphasized rather than the reason. Dramatic visuals are shown that are more exciting for viewers. “Dramatizing information evokes an emotional response, which, when negative, can make information processing more difficult” (Milburn & McGrail, 1992). With news stories today most of it is negative. It is hard for us to wrap our head around what is actually happening in the world today. Everything we see in newspapers, on television, magazines, etc. is going to be negative. How often do we actually see positivity in news stories? Milburn and McGrail discuss the dramatic presentation of news in “The Dramatic Presentation of News and its Effects on
Cognitive Complexity.” Television news is altered by selective emphasis. Selecting certain information to disclose is what helps news anchors to tell their story in a dramatic way. The term “melodrama” is discussed in this article. “Melodrama is a dramatic from that relies on emotional arousal and simplification of characters and plot.” When it comes to melodrama there is only one resolution. In melodrama the audience has only option and that is to applaud the hero and condemn the villain. The “dramatic pentad” consists of act, actor, scene, agency, and purpose. According to Kenneth Burke, actions are interpreted in terms of circumstances in which they are taking place. In his book, he writes, “the dramatistic emphasis focuses attention upon the moralistic, hortatory negative, ‘thou shalt not’”(Burke, 1945, Milburn & McGrail, 1992). Most television news channels use some myth in their stories or make an alteration to their story.

**Burke’s Dramatic Pentad**

All of the articles discussed Kenneth Burke’s idea of dramatism and his pentad. What the pentad is used for and how it is used. Burke’s intention for the pentad is to find the reason behind an action. What caused the actor or person to do what they did? What are the events leading up to the reason or purpose? Burke’s Pentad relates to dramatism and Burke is the one behind the meaning of dramatism, as well. Drama plays a role in the pentad and dramatism. The pentad asks questions such as, who, what, when, where, why, and how but in a more complex way. The questions ask, who is involved, what happened, where did it happen, what was the reason? All to find out the reason behind why the actor or person did the thing they did. The pentad describes the five components of dramatism: act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose.

**Rhetoric**
Although Burke’s pentad is related to dramatism it can be found in rhetoric, also. Rhetoric is the art of persuasion. Drama relates to rhetoric because of the understanding of how things happen. Dramatism and rhetoric can be seen on the television or in newspapers to get people to believe the events that are taking place. Burke looks at dramatism in that way to see what the purpose is. Rhetoric is persuading someone into thinking something different. Social media plays a huge role in rhetoric. Rhetoric is all over social media today like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. For example, a recent Facebook post was shared by several people concerning Beanie Babies and the beads that were in them. The post had said that the beads were actually brown recluse eggs that were just now beginning to hatch after thirty-plus years. Everyone believed the post and people were getting rid of their Beanie Babies because of this. However, in reality the post was a hoax. The person who made the post was familiar with rhetoric and persuading people to believe something that was not true. They also brought dramatism into the picture because of the picture that was posted along with the article. The picture displayed a Beanie Babie with a thousand little baby spiders on it. The Internet has definitely become filled with rhetoric and dramatism. Little did we know, we use or see dramatism and rhetoric every day.

**News Media**

When it comes to the news, every news channel on television is emphasizing some major event, when in reality it might not be a “huge” event. Like I mentioned before, the news has become negative and nothing positive comes out of the news anymore. Dramatism and rhetoric are used to tell these news stories, so we, as the audience, will believe the events that are taking place. Recently, the breakout of Ebola has hit the United States. News channels and news media were talking about Ebola constantly. However, just like everything else that gets blown up into
proportion the news stories start to fade away. People can only handle the dramatism of the news for so long before a new event takes place. Milburn and McGrail did a study on the dramatic presentation of news and its effects. In their study they found that the dramatic presentation of news appeared to have a negative effect. Getting their subjects to think along certain lines caused the subjects to not consider any alternative explanation for the events that took place. This relates to the news that is shown today because of the facts that are displayed or discussed on the news. The news uses pictures or scenes that are dramatic and very believable, whether we actually know if it all completely true or not. When it comes to the news it usually covers the five components of Burke’s dramatic pentad. For example, if a crime was committed and the news has all of information they will usually discuss all five components: act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose. As you can see, the news and Burke’s pentad connect in several ways.

Conclusion

Dramatism addresses the questions of how people explain their actions to themselves and others. That is what Kenneth Burke’s pentad is about. What is the purpose behind the action? What caused this person to act in this certain way? Once these questions have answers, you can see the meaning of dramatism. Dramatism, in Burke’s words, is a guide to understanding human motivation. The pentad is used to help find the reasoning of this human motivation that takes place. One can use the pentad to find information on what motivates a person to commit an act. The definition of dramatism is that it is a method of analysis and a corresponding critique of terminology designed to show that the most direct route to the study of human relations and human motives in via a methodological inquiry into cycles or clusters of terms and their functions, according to Burke. Each component of Burke’s pentad asks a question to help find
the motive. Act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose are the five components of Burke’s dramatic pentad. Each component has certain questions to find a motive. Burke’s pentad and dramatism relates to news media and how it is shown. Not only does dramatism play a role but rhetoric does, as well.
Bibliography


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