Using Kenneth Burke's Pentad

By John R. Edlund

Literary critic and rhetorician Kenneth Burke calls humans "the symbol using animal." In his long career exploring how humans communicate, he has invented a variety of systems for analyzing speech and writing. In his book *A Grammar of Motives* he describes what is perhaps his most useful device, a five-term system for analyzing the motivation of characters that he calls the "pentad" (xv).

Most of us are familiar with the the five W's—Who, What, When, Where, and Why—sometimes called "the reporter's questions." A sixth question, "How?" is often added. These questions are designed to elicit the basic facts of a situation. A good news story should answer all of these questions in the first three paragraphs. Everything after that is added detail.

Burke's pentad is similar, but rather than facts, he is interested in motives. His set of terms is designed to help us think about what motivates the things that people do. Here are Burke's terms:

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?

Note that Burke collapses "when" and "where" into "scene" and "how" becomes "agency."

The terms "act" and "scene" may remind you of a play and you would not be entirely wrong, although in a play an "act" is a major section of the play and not an individual action. Burke calls his system, "dramatism" in part because it treats real life as if it were a drama. In Shakespeare's play *As You Like It,* a character says "All the world's a stage,/And all the men and women merely players." Burke would agree. Burke says,

> Dramatism centers on observations of this sort: for there to be an *act*, there must be an *agent*. Similarly, there must be a *scene* in the the agent acts. To act in a scene, the agent must employ some means, or *agency*. And it can be called an act in the full sense of the term only if it involves a *purpose* (that is, if a support happens to give way and one falls, such motion on the agent's part is not an act, but an accident). These five terms (act, scene agent, agency, purpose) have been labeled the dramatistic pentad; the aim of calling attention to them in this way is to show how the functions which they designate operate in the imputing of motives (*A Grammar of Motives and a Rhetoric of Motives* 1962, Introduction). (Gusfield 135)

Shifting Points of View

Each term represents a perspective or point of view. There is no right way to answer the questions posed by the terms in a particular situation. Rather than a tool for finding right answers, the pentad is a tool for shifting your point of view around to see new possible arguments and ways of thinking about a situation. It can be used to

discover the gaps, ambiguities, and contradictions in an opponent's arguments, plus find ways to counter them by taking on a completely different perspective yourself.

Though newcomers to this system often start by looking at a situation and trying to answer all of the questions as a sort of checklist, the most useful way to use the terms is to combine two of the terms into what Burke calls "ratios." The most important question is almost always, "What caused or motivated the act?" A lot of the most useful combinations will have "act" on the right side and another term on the left side, representing the source of the motivation you want to emphasize.

Some Examples

We often think that when people do something, they do it either because of their own personal nature (**agent→act**) or because of their purpose (**purpose→act**). (Here I am using an arrow to show that the motivation for the act comes from the term on the left. You could think of the arrow as representing something like "leads to.")

However, there are many other useful combinations. Let's imagine a neighborhood that has a lot of graffiti. Young people are painting slogans, gang signs, four-letter words, and other messages on buildings, bridges, billboards, and even garage doors. Homeowners and businesses are upset about it. The people doing this are **agents**. Painting the graffiti is an **act**. What motivates this act?

In this example, some people in the community argue that the young people have no respect for the property of others, so they commit this vandalism. Burke would call that an **agent→act** ratio. Bad people commit bad acts. The solution to the problem, defined by this combination, might be to punish or re-educate the agents. However, others argue that the bad neighborhood creates bad people who do this. That would be a **scene→agent** ratio (We could actually think of this as a three term combination, scene→agent→act.) Here the solution might be to improve the neighborhood through addressing root causes, such as poverty or homelessness. On the other hand, perhaps young people see all of the graffiti in the neighborhood and want to imitate the behavior. That would be a **scene→act** ratio which might imply a graffiti removal campaign to clean up the city. Finally, someone else might argue that the graffiti is legitimate political or artistic expression. That would be a **purpose→act** ratio. In that case, the solution might be to engage with the community and address the issues that the perpetrators are talking about. Each of these ratios defines the problem in a different way and implies a different kind of solution. Each implies different kinds of arguments. It is not clear that any one of these perspectives is "correct," but they are all possible positions. The pentad has opened up a lot of possibilities for discussing the situation.

Defining the Terms

In the example above, the "act" was consistently defined as painting graffiti. Also as noted above, because we are talking about motivation, the act tends to be central no matter what other terms are put into play. How you define the act may totally change the argument. Perhaps one side says the act was murder, while the other says it was self-defense. Similarly, what you call the agent can have important rhetorical effects. One man's terrorist, is another man's freedom fighter. Notice also how the scene often defines an act. If a soldier in the scene of war kills an enemy, we don't call it murder. However, if the same man kills someone in his hometown in a bar fight, we define the act in a different way.

Often we are using the pentad to analyze a speech or a text that someone has written. Beginners often make the mistake of defining the writing of the text as the "act." That makes the author the "agent," the computer or other writing tool the "agency," the society or the audience the "scene," and the author's point the "purpose." This is not the most interesting way to use the pentad because each analysis tends to be exactly the same.

The Pentad in Action

Let's say that a writer in an online newspaper has written an editorial arguing that graffiti artists are criminals who should be caught and given jail time. The writer is arguing that there should be increased enforcement and punishment. You recognize this as an **agent→act** combination. However, you think that at least some of the graffiti expresses real issues that are important in the community. You think that problems in the neighborhood are causing the inhabitants to express their voices in the only way they know. You see this not as a (bad) **agent→act** combination, but as **scene→act**. And instead of defining the act as vandalism, you want to define it as political expression.

Of course, when you write your response, you don't mention **agent→act** or **scene→act** (unless you are writing for your teacher). Your readers would not know these terms. The pentad is your own secret tool. However, you describe the neighborhood problems and the ways in which the graffiti addresses them. You use this to build a case for addressing the real problems. Your readers do not need to know that you have used Burke's pentad to think clearly about the issue and to plan your response. They just see the results of your analysis.

Burke's pentad can be used in almost any rhetorical situation. For example, recently in the news there was a controversy about an alleged sexual assault that happened at a high school party long ago. Much of the discussion was about how much beer underage high school students were accustomed to drinking at the time. At one point, the accused said something like, "Everybody was doing it." This is a clear **scene→act** combination. He is saying, "Everybody drank beer, so I drank beer too." Alcohol can also be an instrument or "agency" of assault. Some people who were part of that scene said that they observed young men spiking the punch with grain alcohol or drugs to make girls more vulnerable to assault and to reduce their ability to consent to a sexual act. In this case we have an **agency→act** combination, quite a horrifying one. We could also turn this around and ask, "What kind of agent would commit this act?" or "What does this act tell us about the agent?" That would be an **act→agent** combination, in this case with the "act" on the left side.

Literary Criticism

Believe it or not, Burke's pentad can also be used for literary criticism. For example, in *The Great Gatsby*, the narrator, Nick Carraway describes West Egg, the place he has rented a house as "one of the strangest communities in North America" (4). Across the bay "the white palaces of fashionable East Egg glittered across the water" (5). The newly rich and the not-so-rich live in West Egg, while the truly rich who have inherited their wealth and prestige live in East Egg. Gatsby lives in West Egg while Daisy, his love, lives in East Egg, making Gatsby immediately suspicious to the truly wealthy. Burke would call this a **scene→agent** ratio. In this combination, the "scene," which can be a place, a culture, or a historical moment, forms the nature and character of the "agent," the person who acts. At one point, Tom Buchanan calls Gatsby "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere" (130). For Tom, if you are from nowhere, you are nobody, and for him that is the ultimate insult.

When Tom and Daisy attend one of Gatsby's parties, Gatsby points out various famous people including an actress and her director. He identifies people by what they do, an **act→agent** combination. He introduces Tom to people as "Mr. Buchanan . . . the polo player" (105). Tom rejects this act→agent ratio.

"I'd rather not be the polo player," said Tom pleasantly, I'd rather look at all these famous people in—in oblivion." (105)

Tom does not need fame to feel important. He's too rich. If we think of wealth as a tool for doing things, in Burke's terms an "agency," we could say that instead of his actions, Tom is defined by his wealth, an **agency→agent** ratio.

It is also possible for the scene in which the act takes place to motivate the act, a **scene→act** ratio. In this novel, the action moves from East Egg to West Egg, and from East Egg to New York, passing through "the Valley of Ashes." The Valley of Ashes is where Wilson, the gas station owner, and his wife Myrtle, with whom Tom is having an affair, live. Myrtle wants to marry Tom to get out of this place, a scene-act ratio.

Conclusions

The pentad is especially useful if you are trying to respond to an article that you think you disagree with. How does the writer define the act? If the writer is emphasizing the agent, what happens if you look at it from the point of view of the scene? If the writer is emphasizing a tool, such as some kind of new technology (agency), what if you emphasize the purpose?   The pentad is a way of shifting perspectives that just might lead you to some winning arguments.

<p align="center">Works Cited</p>

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