

English 793: Kenneth Burke's Ethical Universe

Preliminary Syllabus. Subject to change.

Kenneth Burke's dramatism is usually characterized in terms of motives, and is usually seen as a mechanism for interrogating literature or other manifestations of rhetoric. But rhetoric, he says, especially in literary structures, provides us with "equipment for living." Burke is concerned with how we speak and write and hear and read primarily as forms of action and belief. Burke's framework, in turn, is a machinery for ethical universe building.

We will channel Burke, allowing the methodology to inhabit us, and disassemble the ethical universes of specific object texts, taken from such discourses as politics, literature, professional communication, and marketing, examine their structure and their implications. We will assemble our own ethical universes in the critiques we conduct of these texts. We will become better readers, better thinkers, better people.

Required texts

Primary Texts

- Burke, Kenneth. *Counter-Statement*. New York: Harcourt, 1931.
Burke, Kenneth. *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1941.
Burke, Kenneth. *A Grammar of Motives*. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1945.
Burke, Kenneth. *A Rhetoric of Motives*. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1953.
Burke, Kenneth. *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966.

Object Texts

Frank Capra, *Meet John Doe*; ee cummings, "yglUduh;" Charles Dickens, "The Noble Savage;" Sergei Eisenstein, *Battleship Potemkin*; GM Country corn flakes 1957 commercial; Lady Gaga, "Bad Romance;" Jack Layton, "Dear Friends;" Barack Obama (2009), "A New Beginning;" Old Spice 1960, 2010 commercials; TMZ.com; Hunter S. Thompson, "He was a crook;" Tom Waits, "Gun Street Girl"

The ethical is ... linked with the communicative, particularly when we consider communication its broadest sense, not merely as the purveying of information, but also as the sharing of sympathies and purposes, the doing of acts in common as with the leveling process of communicating vessels

Recommended texts

Blakesley, David. *The Elements of Dramatism*. New York: Longman, 2001.
 Brummett, Barry, ed. *Landmark Essays on Kenneth Burke*. Davis, CA: Hermagoras P, 1993.
 Burke, Kenneth. *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*. 1935.
 Burke, Kenneth. *Attitudes Toward History*, 2 vols. New York: New Republic, Inc., 1937.

A note about the texts: For the Burke essays, It does not matter which edition of the book you use, or whether you use another source altogether (e.g., journal publication). For the object texts, all of them are easily accessible for download (both movies are public domain, for instance, and available from InternetArchive.com, among other sources)

Requirements

Essay (30 July)	40 %
Course participation	60 %
Group presentations	30 %
Class discussion	15 %
Weekly posts	15 %

Discussing

Please keep in mind that this is a seminar: you are expected to take an active role in the development of the course. Come to class prepared, contribute to discussions, participate in our collective growth in understanding Burke and ourselves. In particular, think reflectively about all the readings, and think publicly.

I will use a merit/demerit policy to evaluate your participation. Merit will be awarded primarily on the *quality* of participation: asking relevant questions; making relevant observations; complementing or advancing someone else's contribution; and generally being a constructive rhetor. Quantity of participation is a positive factor to the extent that more quality contributions is preferable to fewer quality contributions, but talking for the sake of talking is not a good idea.

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Demerit will be assessed reluctantly, and only on the basis of repeated instances. The grounds for the demerit system are:

- absenteeism (you can't participate if you're not there)
- whispering or chatting while other people are talking
- making lengthy, unfocused comments that draw away from the general thread of discussion (verbal wanking)

Weekly posting (8 required)

The posts are 300-to-500-word opinionated summaries: synopses of the week's theoretical readings (*not* the object texts), inter-larded with some evaluation of their cogency, relevance, and value. I want to see (1) that you have read them, and (2) that you have thought about them; and (3) I want to the discussion started before we get into the classroom. They should be posted on the D2L course page by 6:00 PM on the Sunday before the class. Everyone is expected to read all the posts before coming to class; I also encourage commenting on one another's posts, as I will be doing occasionally myself, but it is not required.

The discussion papers will not be graded: you will get the full 15% simply for doing them all and submitting them on time, 10% if you miss one deadline, 0% if you miss more than one--yes, you read that correctly: 0%. I consider the discussion papers integral to the life of the course.

Note: You need to complete **8 posts over 11 weeks**. Which 8 you submit are solely up to you, but they must be submitted on time.

Essaying

The research essay is not only your major project of the term (40%), it should be your major learning instrument of the term. In many ways, all the rest of the course is a support system for the essay, and everyone else in the class, the professor and the students, are resources for the development of the essay. The research and the way you explore, marshal, and extend that research in the writing process, is what defines your understanding of the course. You should start thinking from very early on about which texts, which aspects of Burke's framework, and which other theorists you might want to

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develop arguments around and about, and test drive some of those arguments in class, or in discussion with us and each other outside of class, in person, by email, or by phone.

In case this does not go without saying: While your work will rest on the foundations we build up throughout the course, do not rely solely on the course readings and the presentations. You will need to do more research both on any object texts you are considering and on the relevant aspects of Burke's approach you will deploy, as well as on any related literary theory.

Word counts are not an especially good measure of when you should stop writing your essay, or how far you should prune back your ramblings. Let the matter determine the vessel. But if it's under 3000 words, you probably haven't developed enough matter for an appropriate graduate research essay; over 6000 and you've probably been either too ambitious or too undisciplined, or both.

You also need to target a publication with this essay: find a journal, write the paper with that journal in mind, and submit a memo with the essay outlining why your essay fits the journal. (Journals often have word-count criteria, by the way, and you will be graded in part on how well your essay suits the journal you target.)

Grading will accord with the following rubric:

Articulation of your claim: 5%

Suitability of the essay to the selected journal: 5%

Quality of argument (coherence, soundness): 30%

Use of evidence, 25%

Summary of relevant research: 10%

Grammar and style (sentence and paragraph structure, diction, spelling, punctuation, agreement, ...) 25%

Note: all submissions **must include a digital copy.**

Presenting

There will be two presentations, a theoretical summary and a critical application. The theoretical summary will outline a given essay by Burke, relate it to essays we have already discussed, and pass judgment on its value. The critical application will examine a given

object text from a Burkean perspective, situate the text and the criticism culturally, and pass judgment on the text.

Grading will accord with the following rubric:

Articulation of your judgement: 20%

Defence of your judgement: 20%

Quality of argument (coherence, soundness): 20%

Use of evidence: 20%

Style and performance (clarity, ethos, aids): 20%

Note: all presentations **must include digital copies of any notes and/or aids**

Schedule

<i>Date</i>	<i>Burke texts</i>	<i>Object texts</i>
1 May		
8 May	<i>Counterstatement</i> : "Three adepts of 'pure' literature," "Psychology and form"	Tom Waits, "Gun Street Girl" ee cummings, "ygUduh"
15 May	<i>Counterstatement</i> : "The poetic process," "Lexicon rhetoricae"	Jack Layton, "Dear Friends"
29 May	<i>The philosophy of literary form</i> : "Literature as equipment for living," "The Negro's pattern of life," "Intelligence as a good"	Sergei Eisenstein, <i>Battleship Potemkin</i>
5 June	<i>The philosophy of literary form</i> : "Rhetoric of Hitler's battle"	Charles Dickens, "The Noble Savage"
12 June	<i>A grammar of motives</i> : "The five key terms," "Container & thing contained," "Scope & Reduction"	GM Country corn flakes (1957) and Old Spice commercials (1960, 2010)
19 June	<i>A grammar of motives</i> : "On Dialectic"	Barack Obama (2009), "A New Beginning" (video & transcript)
26 June	<i>A rhetoric of motives</i> : "The Range of Rhetoric"	Frank Capra, <i>Meet John Doe</i>
3 July	Please note: there will be no class meeting this week, but you are still required to do the reading, and to post your response.	
	<i>A rhetoric of motives</i> : "Traditional Principles of Rhetoric"	
10 July	<i>Language as symbolic action</i> : "Five Summarizing Essays"	TMZ.com
17 July	<i>Language as symbolic action</i> : "Rhetoric and Poetics," "Myth, Poetry, & Philosophy," "Medium as Message"	Lady Gaga, "Bad Romance"

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24 July	"Logology and Theology"	Hunter S. Thompson's Eulogy for Richard Nixon ("He was a crook")
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