The Elements of MATISM MATIS

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making distinctions in an ever-renewable process of assertion and reassertion. Can you think of situations that encourage us to avoid making distinctions? What are the consequences of not making distinctions?

- maintain the lines of power in society. Burke suggests there is We find many examples of "congealed" distinctions in the systems and stereotypes that govern social behavior, where categories of race, gender, and class often encourage attitudes and motivate action that preserve the status quo and value in returning these congealed distinctions to their "alchemic center" and allowing them to be thrown forth as new distinctions. Can you think of any current examples of people seeking actively to reorganize our "distinctions"?
- For pragmatists like William James, the measure of an idea is whether and how it "works" in the world. What aspects of tion than he is in explaining the ultimate ground of existence not its inherent truth-value, but the action it performs, Burke's dramatism or rhetoric seem pragmatic? Why? What or transcendental ideas (one traditional aim of philosophy). Burke has been called a pragmatist because he is ultimately more concerned with the dynamics and effects of verbal acaspects are not pragmatic?

The Pentad

of meaning, or privileges one over all others, we see the resources of of literature or a philosophy fails to account for one of these "nodes" many kinds of discourse, especially poetry and philosophy. He also Pentad or hexad, the point is that "well-rounded statements" about scene, agent, agency, purpose, and attitude. To the extent that a work pentad is a strategic method for analyzing discourse by focusing on now it attributes motivation to human action. Simple statements about why people do things, even what they did, are thus potential naterial for dramatistic analysis. Burke himself used the pentad on later added a sixth term, attitude, making the pentad into a hexad. numan motivation will make some reference (explicitly or not) to act, As Burke discusses in his introduction to A Grammar of Motives, the ambiguity at work.

Burke intended the pentad to be a form of rhetorical analysis, a method readers can use to identify the rhetorical nature of any text, group of texts, or statements that explain or represent human motivation. He found that particular texts tended to highlight one of the elements of the pentad as the "titular" or privileged term. (For instance, Marxism and Marxist texts tend to privilege scene as the ultimate ground of human motivation and of corresponding class distinctions.) Burke also used the pentad to "open" a text to multiple perspectives. We can identify an "act" in a text, then investigate how the other terms are related. As the "act" is described we may find an author noting aspects of scene, purpose, and so forth, but not mentioning "agency." It is Burke's some reference to the five (or six) elements of the pentad. Writers have point that any "well-rounded" account of human action must include also found that the pentad is a useful method of generating ideas.

ples of how the pentad can be applied to situations or discourse as a means of rhetorical and dramatistic analysis. You should discover that In this chapter, and in each subsequent chapter, you will find examwhile the elements of dramatism may be challenging to learn initially, the insight they can help you generate can be profound and revelatory, times perhaps fundamentally changing the way that you view the expeencouraging you to see the world in new and interesting ways, someriences you share with others and the words you use to talk about them.

To begin, then, here is a breakdown of the elements of the pentad, with a brief explanation and question next to each term: Names what took place, in thought or deed. What was Act:

The background of the act, the situation in which it oc-Scene:

Names what person or kind of person or people percurred. Where and when was the act performed? Agent:

Names what means or instruments the agent used. How formed the act. Who did it? Agency:

Suggests why the agent performed the act. What motiand with what was the act performed? Purpose:

Names the state of mind that predisposes the agent to vated the act? Attitude:

act or that substitutes for an act. What is the agent's attitude toward the act?

It also is possible to discuss the ratios between terms of the pentad by asking, for example, "How does the scene influence the act?" Here are all the possible ratios and the question:

How does the		influence the	~-
act-scene	scene-agent	agent-agency	agency-purpose
act-agent	scene-agency	agent-purpose	
act-agency	scene-purpose		
act-purpose			

Each of the ratios can be reversed also. For instance, rather than asking how the act influenced the scene, we can ask how the scene influenced

with emphasis on the scene-act ratio, Burke found a way to "muddle and Change in the early 1930s, the United States was in the throes of the sonal scene crumbling around him. Remember that Permanence and but how it also influenced his writing of his only novel, Towards a Better Life. In turning the elements of dramatism to his personal situation, our sophisticated trout. Burke analyzed his own situation as a text and in fact "textualized" it. For instance, at the time he wrote Permanence Depression, fascism had a stronghold in Europe and appeared to be influencing politics in the United States, and Burke himself found his per-Change, and in fact much of his later work, is an attempt not just to understand how the social and historical scene influences political action, People observe the signs around them to make interpretive statements Burke's contention is that we should study these interpretations lest we become victimized by our trained incapacity, our inability to interpret such signs in any other way but the familiar or comfortable, much like Burke used the pentad to conduct textual analysis, but it is useful as that explain or rationalize their own actions or the actions of others. well for analyzing situations, especially when we consider events or actions as "texts" capable of interpretation and provoking response. through" the "wrangling in the marketplace," as he liked to put it.

The Pentadic Ratios: Scene-Act

tions and thus to teach the basic principles of dramatism, we turn now to a problem that many people have grappled to understand but for which To further illustrate how the pentad can help us analyze complex situa-

tion, you will also see how the pentadic ratios help us multiply the perspectives from which we view motives and thereby expose the resources no easy explanations or solutions come readily to mind. In this next secof ambiguity people might exploit to interpret complex problems.

The Scene-Act Ratio: School Violence

tively. A massive and controversial report released by the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office on CD-ROM details the shooting and offers drawings, an hour of audiotape, and two hours of videotape. Analysis of this and other data, including the writings of Harris and Klebold, have utes. The Columbine Massacre, as it has come to be known, was the much-publicized shootings in Kentucky, Arkansas, and Oregon. Since April 1999, the incident and the shooters have been studied exhausnundreds of pages of text, timelines, crime-scene photographs, maps, suicide. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold used two shotguns, a rifle, and a handgun to fire 188 rounds of ammunition in a span of about 45 mindeadliest school shooting in U.S. history, occurring not long after other failed to provide clear or easy answers to the question of why the ram-On the morning of April 20, 1999, two students of Columbine High School, in Littleton, Colorado, an affluent suburb of Denver, killed 12 of their classmates and a teacher, wounded 21 others, and then committed page killings took place.

that we can understand our choices and the reasons behind them. We interpret our interpretations, in other words, to avoid falling into the place, the act. People will disagree about how to name an act because the ture of the act itself. For Burke, the ambiguity is inescapable. The point of pentadic analysis is to make our ways of naming the act explicit so self-made traps that our customary ways of interpreting experience cre-The first problem of interpretation is to determine what has taken ambiguity of the act makes alternative perspectives possible. Naming an act reduces uncertainty by making particular assumptions about the na-

scribed it as a rampage or a massacre, as another incident of school violence in what has been widely perceived to be a national crisis. This first interpretation places the act alongside similar acts of school violence, marking it as symptomatic of a widespread social malaise that persuades young people through media representations of violence The first newspaper reports of the incident at Columbine de-

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that the way to solve problems or to garner attention is to shoot first and ask questions later:

Pentad 1—Massacre

Students massacre classmates in a rampage school Act:

shooting

The late 1990s, when incidents of school violence are Scene:

becoming more frequent

Harris and Klebold Agent: Guns (and home-made bombs that failed to detonate) Agency:

1. To gain attention or notoriety Purpose:

2. To seek revenge

3. Imitation

criminate use of guns. News reports immediately marked the suring its place in these ongoing narratives and invoking all the previous interpretations as to the causes of such school violence, which people will now bring to bear on this incident. Constructing the pentad in this cidents and especially in the early days after a shooting, there is a frantic effort to determine purpose as 24-hour news feeds extend coverage of the event. The purpose remains unknown initially (and perhaps much longer). Still, by calling it a massacre or "rampage" and by citing other incidents of school violence, media accounts implicitly suggest a purpose. The purpose is initially defined by what may be called its discursive context: previous generic explanations about why young people "act out" in such a horrible way. It is seen as yet another tragic symptom of our glorification of violence in the entertainment industry or our indis-Columbine shooting as "the worst school shooting in U.S. history," asway focuses our attention on answering key questions, such as the pretween this incident and others, the types of weapons used, the nature of The use of terms like "massacre," "rampage," and "school shooting" mark the incident historically by placing it in a larger narrative depicting random acts of violence as common in the United States. In such incise details of the act and how it was carried out, the similarities bethe two killers, and the inexplicable reasons for their actions.

It is an interpretation that is validated by casting the agents as inated with "The Trenchcoat Mafia," a clique of students at Columbine scrutably evil. It was quickly reported that Harris and Klebold associ-

who adopted Nazi symbols to "worship." Their association with this group thus became a focus of great scrutiny, as did the date of the inciwho wore black trenchcoats as a symbol of solidarity and difference and dent itself. The foreword to the Jefferson County Sheriff's report even notes the following:

marijuana day." April 20, 1999, also marked the 110th anniversary of with, 4/20 carries the same numerals as 420, the California criminal Perhaps there is a connection with the history of this date. To begin numbers in popular drug culture, some students were absent from code for possession of marijuana. Due to the significance of these school that day in recognition of what they termed "national Adolph Hitler's birth.

I mentioned earlier that news media accounts (in print, on the The act takes on the characteristics of ritualized and ceremonial violence by two students under the influence of drugs and misplaced hero worship.

Internet, and on television) initially reported the act as a massacre, linking it to other school shootings. Interesting questions, and a paradox, rise to the surface when we focus attention on the news media as the agent for the act of reporting the incident.

Pentad 2—Reporting News

Reporting news of yet another school massacre Act:

1. The Information Age, when news is more accessible, immediate, interactive (as in news chat rooms), and Scene:

widely disseminated

2. A time when images of violence are common in entertainment media, such as film and TV shows

The news organization, the reporter(s) Agent:

Print newspapers, the Internet, television Agency:

1. To report the news Purpose:

2. To increase readership or viewership and thus advertising revenue

sources on television, in print, and on the Internet make it likely that a and purpose as they affect the act. For example, the prevalence of news Several questions come to mind, especially ones relating scene, agency,

sciousness of the culture and dangerously, in the minds of people who see such acts as ways to express their discontent, to solve problems, to gain notoriety, or to be a "star" in such a drama themselves. Imitation or the incident quickly and often. It becomes "news in the making" or a "breaking story" that has an inherently dramatic quality to it and thus will draw a sizable audience. The speed with which the news becomes unintended by-product becomes its appeal as entertainment. Television news reports also share agency with other forms of entertainment (movies, for example), so one response to such coverage, especially when it is dramatized to such a degree, is to view it as "like" a movie. It may be a "real" event, but it has many of the characteristics of a film, with a narrator, plot, characters, heroes, villains, and so on. Each school shooting thus becomes a highly dramatized event in the historical contypical citizen nowhere near Columbine High School will learn about available adds to the tension, as does the presence of live cameras at the scene of the incident. While the purpose may be to report the news, an "copy-cat" shootings become a real threat.

motivated by racial and class stereotypes. If the act is defined as an act of Very early in the process of interpreting an event such as the pose. Early reports from witnesses suggested that Harris and Klebold targeted specific people, that the violence was in fact not random but revenge, the pentad looks very different, with more stress placed on the Columbine shooting, the people directly involved will provide different accounts of not just the act, but of its scene, agency, agents, and purscene as a motivating factor.

Pentad 3—Revenge

Seek revenge for perceived wrongs Act:

A school in an affluent suburb where success is mea-Scene:

sured by material gain, popularity, and privilege

Disillusioned students victimized by rigid hierarchies of success; loners; outcasts Agent:

Guns (and home-made bombs that failed to detonate) Agency:

The focus here shifts from the motives of the killers themselves to the To punish those who have unfairly reaped the rewards of their status

culpability of those responsible for creating the hierarchical system that

tives as well, perhaps an expression of Harris's and Klebold's attitude that they had been denied privileges others unjustly received, even if those others had themselves been oppressed minorities. (In Chapter 2 we will consider in greater depth the problem of conceiving victimage as an expression of power, a rhetorical tactic that Hitler himself relied on oppresses some students, that is, to school administrators, parents, the community, and even to the philosophy of capitalism and the American Dream. That African-Americans were also targeted suggests racist moto effect his program for Nazi Germany.)

Over time, some people seized upon this expanation by noting that phasized success and popularity as signs of achievement, which creates even more rigid social hierarchies. Of course, the ethic of success in U.S. society has for quite a long time been tied to fame and notoriety. "In the future everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes," wrote Andy Warhol in his diaries. If we say that Harris's and Klebold's act was seeking fame the social climate of Columbine High School in particular had overemand the recognition that it brings, the pentad looks like this:

Pentad 4—Fame

Seeking fame and recognition

A society that associates success with fame or notoriety Scene:

rather than accomplishment, quality, or virtue

Disenfranchised students with low self-esteem Agent:

Actions that people (and the media) will notice and dis-Agency:

seminate widely

To gain attention Purpose:

plain ways that people can spot potential killers. Others have used such a they find unfair and that arise in competitive, high-stress environments. So one "option" can be to publicize their oppression by drawing attention to it (EEOC) publishes strongly worded guidelines for ensuring that people are not discriminated against in the workplace. Psychologists suggest that young people need access to similar measures that would give them a voice profile to suggest a solution or cure. Some people have noted that young people are not provided sufficient ways to seek redress in situations that in dramatic ways. The Equal Opportunity Employment Commission and a means of redress as an alternative to acting out publicly and violently. Psychologists and FBI profilers have generally used such an account to ex-

The problem of school violence also directs our attention to issues of gun control. For gun-control advocates, the act might remain the same (murder), but the agent of school violence shifts from a person to guns themselves, with the person becoming the agency with which a

Pentad 5—Gun Control

gun acts:

Act: Using a gun to commit murder

Scene: A society in which guns are readily available to anyone

who wants them, including children, and where vio-

lence is widely perceived to be a solution to problems

Agent:Guns and their ready availability, soft gun-control lawsAgency:People with easy access to guns who may be ignorant of

their power for harm

Purpose: To settle disputes

Conversely, from the perspective of gun-control opponents, the agency for gun violence is not guns themselves, but people, as in the slogan, "Guns don't kill, people do." So from this perspective, the pentad might look like this:

Pentad 6—Murder and the Law

Act: Committing murder

Scene: A society in which the right to bear arms is guaranteed,

even when it means some will exercise that right illegally

Agent: Criminals

Agency: A "soft" legal system that is too lenient on criminals and

that does not enforce existing laws against the misuse of

suns

Purpose: Evil

In this case, the explanation of motive centers on the agent and purpose, with the agency (soft laws against crime) being the factor that enables criminals to carry out their actions. As with Pentad 5 (Gun Control), the controversy focuses on how the legal system, as an agency, either enables or can prevent such incidents from occurring.

As you can see, alternative interpretations of an act rest on an associated set of contextual and motivational assumptions. Our interpretations of an act are motivated symbolically, ideologically, and psychologically,

such that any one interpretation may tell only one side of a complex story. One purpose of the pentad is to reveal the implicit assumptions people make when they say what people are doing and why they are doing it. As Burke sees it, dramatism enables us to see not only the grounds of these interpretations, but to enable alternative ones by forcing categorical expectations to shift and thus generate new ways of seeing.

is designed to reveal the strategic spots at which ambiguities arise, he has Because the conceptual categories of the pentad exert influence on each other, it is possible to generate further perspectives with pentadic ratios. We might ask, for example, how the scene influences the act in the case of the shooting at Columbine. If, as in Pentad 3 (Revenge), we place stress on the influence of the social scene on Harris's and Klebold's act, we are forced to ask questions about the character of our culture, the reasons why, for example, we seem drawn to expressions of violence in popular media. We have to consider the more local circumstances of the scene as well, such as the culture of success and hierarchy at Columbine, or the quality and character of Harris's and Klebold's family life, about the failure of school administrators or law enforcement agencies to notice the many warning signs that have now been cited. More generally, we would want to consider the penchant for violence in the United States, whether violence is a product of the system itself or of the lack of restraint by the entertainment industry in glorifying violence, or if it has some other source. We would have to address the objections of those who would note that the scene does not have the motivating influence that some attribute to it because a great majority of people do not resort to gun violence to solve their problems. Each pentadic ratio raises as many questions about our manner of attributing motives. What, for example, might be the influence of drug culture (as an agency) on the agents? Or what are the implications of suggesting that evil (as a purpose) is the primary motive for acts of school violence? As any good analytical method should, the pentad generates further questions about its subject, showing us what we ought to know, need to know, or do not know. When Burke says that the pentad in mind this sort of open-ended questioning of the subject.

Summary

Dramatism analyzes language and thought as modes of action rather than as means of conveying information. Developed by Kenneth Burke, dramatism is a systematic method for analyzing human communication

Summary

form of rhetorical analysis that can help us understand the presence of tives. The pentad—Act, Scene, Agent, Agency, Purpose—functions as a in all its complexity. It thus shares with rhetoric a focus on human symbol-use as a social process of both describing and influencing moambiguity and persuasion in any interpretation that guides action.

derstanding possible of the basis of our disagreements, our wars of Identification, or an alignment of interests and motive, is the aim Dramatism helps us understand the resources of ambiguity that make part, division, as a dialectic between competing and cooperating identification possible. It also helps us study identification's counterof rhetoric, with consubstantiality (shared substance) being its ideal. forces. For Burke, human relations should be guided by the fullest unwords (logomachy).

pentad and the pentadic ratios can help us understand the wide range of bolic motives, helps us develop well-rounded accounts of the patterns analysis of the Columbine shooting, we saw how the elements of the explanations people have offered as motives for the tragedy, which themselves extend to the agents, Harris and Klebold, to the society that and reasons behind our disagreements and our explanations. In an nurtures violent behavior, to the influence of fascistic and racist think-The dramatistic pentad, Burke's "engine" for the analysis of syming in America.

Research and Writing Activities

- tions. You could, for instance, think about the value and purpose of Practice using the pentad. Begin with a topic, issue, or text that is unsettled or ambiguous, or that lends itself to multiple interpretawriting: Why do people write? Once you have a topic in mind, follow these steps to develop it:
- a. Supply yourself with several pieces of scratch paper. List the pentad terms across the top of one page (Act, Scene, Agent, Agency, Purpose).
- can. For instance, if your topic is writing, you might define the mind you of what writing to persuade involves, such as argumen-Under "act" begin by defining an important act associated with your topic. Beneath this, list all the associated details that you act as "Writing to Persuade" and list associated details that retation, evidence, opinion, logic, feeling, or character. At this þ.

stage, it is only critical that you generate details without worrying too much about how they interrelate.

- tails as you can under each column. For our example, under scene stances of the World Wide Web as a site of contesting viewpoints and opinion, with the possibility of reaching millions of readers holding vastly different opinions. You could specify the agent as the college-level writer, someone who has grown up in a media age in ics, as well as the various tactics of writing to persuade, such as you might specify "The Internet" and then the particular circumwhich so much writing now takes place online. The agency would be the means, such as Web pages, HTML, e-mail, and even graphproblem-solution, thesis-proof, arguing from experience, even repetition (as in advertising). The purpose could be to change minds, to Do the same for each of the five terms, each time listing as many deexpose injustices, or to make contact with like-minded people.
- fine our act as "Writing to Entertain," in which case the scene Once you have generated a page of details on your topic, redefine your act, then repeat steps a-c. For instance, we could redemight become not simply the World Wide Web, but the wider entertainment culture that has made the Internet more like a media outlet than a repository of information. The agent would be someone who aims to please rather than convert. Agency might expand to include such things as electronic books or digital video. The purpose might now be understandable as e-commerce (to make money) by somehow charging people for the entertainment delivered. (Stephen King, for example, has used the Internet to deliver chapters of a novel in serial form.) ö
- which is part of its power. You may find that you need to do very good answers to some of the questions you ask of it. Or you might find that you don't know as much about your subject as You will notice as you work that the pentad helps you discover those areas of your topic that you need to know more about, some research. For instance, the text you analyze may not supply you previously thought.
- Act-scene is often a good one, as is agent-purpose. Investigating the ratios will lead you to intriguing new insights. In our example, we could ask how the scene (The Internet) influences the act (Writing to Persuade). Web authors have learned that their readers Generate even more perspectives by trying some of the ratios.