

## A Response to Ashley K. Allen

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Ashley K. Allen's essay "Murderers as Victims: Reassigning Guilt in Al Gore's 'Columbine Memorial Address'" claims that in his speech at the April 25, 1999 memorial service for the victims of the Columbine High School shooting, Al Gore absolves perpetrators Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold of guilt by rhetorically reassigning responsibility to adults in society. Allen deconstructs this transference of guilt by way of Kenneth Burke's dramatic pentad, which characterizes situations according to their acts, scenes, agents, agency, and purpose. She analyzes Gore's "Columbine Memorial Address" according to genre theory, categorizing it as "an epideictic speech in the form of a eulogy" (Allen 56) and argues that Gore's framing of the perpetrators as victims of the tragedy is justified by the particular generic demands of a eulogy. Allen's analysis, while insightful, falls short of a full treatment of what William L. Benoit calls a "complex rhetorical event" (178). Genre conventions are among the many influences on rhetorical invention. In order to more fully understand the complex interactions shaping Gore's discourse, we must look beyond genre to the speaker's purpose, nature, character, and available means of argument (Benoit 180).

Allen strongly supports her claim that Gore uses the perpetrator-as-victim narrative to transfer guilt from the Columbine shooters to adults in society. Indeed, Gore never explicitly condemns Harris and Klebold. Instead he assigns society the responsibility for the nation's youth, implying that Harris and Klebold cannot ultimately be responsible for the shooting. Accepting, then, that Gore employs the perpetrator-as-victim narrative in his address, the question remains, What justifies his doing so? Allen's answer seems to be, "the generic nature of a eulogy" (57), which according to traditional genre theory is singularly determined by the rhetorical situation (Benoit 179). That the substance of rhetoric is always derived from a particular occasion has long been a precept of rhetorical theory (Wallace 239). As Lloyd F. Bitzer explains, "The presence of rhetorical discourse obviously indicates the presence of a rhetorical situation" (2). For Bitzer, the situation is the sole factor influencing rhetorical invention (5). A similar privileging of the situation is evident in Allen's analysis. For example, she sets up Gore's address entirely in terms of situational demands when she writes that he responded "to a situation in which a community is ruptured by death" (Campbell and Jameison quoted in Allen 57).

The situation was likely the primary if not the sole influence over Gore's decision to speak. Without the shooting, Gore would not have given the address, but as Richard E. Vatz points out in a critique of Bitzer, responding to situations involves making sense of them, a process of meaning-making that is an "interpretative act" (157) on the part of the rhetor. By Vatz's logic, the shooting may have served as the catalyst for discourse, but it did not dictate the way in which Gore made sense of it. The perpetrator-as-victim narrative was one of several rhetorical strategies for interpreting the shooters' actions. Thus, the shooting itself, meaningless without an interpreter, cannot fully account for Gore's decision to absolve Harris and Klebold of guilt.

So, what other influences or justifications could Allen have considered? Benoit considers each of four sources of rhetorical substance—the *situation*, the speaker's *purpose*, his or her *nature*, and his or her available *means*—in relation to his theory of the genesis of rhetorical action, which views

the pentadic ratios outlined by Burke's theory of Dramatism as holistically showing the relationships that give rise to rhetorical action (180). Allen uses Burke's dramatic pentad to analyze the way in which Gore develops the perpetrator-as-victim narrative in his address, and she notes the importance of thinking about the pentad's elements in relation to one another: "In analyzing a rhetorical act, it is not enough to simply examine how these terms are defined; one must analyze how they interact with each other" (58). Despite this recognition, Allen ultimately reverts back to genre theory to answer the question of what justifies Gore's use of the perpetrator-as-victim narrative, favoring the situation or, in Burke's and Benoit's models, the scene above all else.

Having established different theoretical grounds on which Gore's use of the perpetrator-as-victim narrative might be justified, let me now put Benoit's theory to practical use by applying it to a substantive element of Gore's speech: his prolific quotation of scripture and use of spiritual imagery. Allen writes, "Gore's heavy use of scripture demonstrates the apparent assumption he makes that his audience needs to address this tragedy from a spiritual standpoint, specifically a Christian one" (59). Thus, she attributes Gore's use of scripture to a perceived situational demand, the influence on invention encapsulated by Burke's scene-act ratio.

Gore's use of scripture might also have been influenced by his own background as a Southern Baptist. His Christian upbringing undoubtedly had a role in shaping his character and worldview, aspects of self that necessarily help shape a speaker's discourse. Accordingly, Gore's use of scripture might be attributed to what Burke would identify as an agent-act interaction, or an influence on the rhetorical act by the speaker's nature and character. Likewise, because of Gore's familiarity with the scripture he engages, it was likely his most accessible text. Hence, Gore's use of scripture might also be attributed to an agency-act interaction, or an influence on the rhetorical act by the speaker's available means of argument.

Alternatively, Gore might have acted in response to a particular sense of purpose. The guilt transference motif in his speech suggests that Gore considers reinforcing strong moral values and re-emphasizing the importance of positive role models for the nation's youth to be at least part of his purpose. Indeed, Gore said, "We must replace a culture of violence and mayhem with one of values and meaning." Biblical scripture espouses the same values, such as that of "love over indifference," (Gore) and is therefore useful as supporting texts for his message. His use of scripture, then, might be due to a purpose-act interaction.

My effort is to show that no singular interaction—be it scene-act as Allen claims, purpose-act, agent-act, agency-act or others—can fully account for Gore's use of the perpetrator-as-victim narrative. Rather, his use of the narrative is a rhetorical invention influenced to varying degrees by *all* these interactions. Certainly, the generic demands of a eulogy do guide and constrain Gore's discourse, but in order to fully comprehend the influences at work in Gore's "Columbine Memorial Address," we must take a broader analytical approach and consider factors beyond those of the situation alone.

## Works Cited

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