

A Response to Ashley K. Allen

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In the essay, “Murderers as Victims: Reassigning Guilt in Al Gore’s ‘Columbine Memorial Address,’” Ashley K. Allen analyzes Gore’s eulogy through the lens of Kenneth Burke’s dramatic pentad. Burke’s model is based on five questions, which allow Gore to define and justly cast the young Columbine killers as victims of a negligent society. Allen claims that although Gore does not invent the “perpetrators-as-victim” frame, he uniquely absolves a third party and reassigns guilt in a “single rhetorical act . . . within the context of a eulogy” (60). After recalling the details of the Columbine massacre, Allen weaves Gore’s speech through Burke’s pentad: What was the act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose? Allen, while noting the drawbacks of Burke’s pentad, asserts her intention to “[address] genre from a standpoint of motive instead of . . . form” (57).

However, motive and form cannot be so simply divorced. As Burke indicates in *Counter-Statement*, “Form would be the psychology of the audience . . . [it] is the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite” (31). Though Gore’s motive might be found in Burke’s pentad, his speech takes the form of a jeremiad. In biblical texts the jeremiad is a lament over a society’s moral decay combined with prophecy of subsequent demise. As a rhetorical device in the political realm, the jeremiad works to communicate an ideal, such as American decency and goodness, from which a society has fallen short. In his book, *The American Jeremiad*, Sacvan Bercovitch defines this form of rhetoric as “a mode of public exhortation that originated in the European pulpit, was transformed in both form and content by the New England Puritans . . . and helped sustain a national dream through two hundred years of turbulence and change” (xi). The Columbine massacre was exactly this kind of turbulence, severely threatening the national dream. I will extend Allen’s argument by considering Gore’s use of the jeremiad form to not only hold society responsible for failing the youth of America, but also to comfort them with this responsibility.

Gore’s use of the jeremiad is suitable because it allows him to lament with and for a society in which such an atrocity can occur. Allen argues that Gore’s speech “construes the audience as perpetrators, and the act that led to the death of fifteen people was society’s failure to value ‘love over indifference’” (58). While this redefinition of the agent certainly works, it does not explain why the audience accepts Gore’s blame. Why did no one out of the seventy thousand mourners in attendance at the memorial object to being blamed? (Cullen qtd. in Allen 56) When Gore refers to the “spirit of America” as an “America [that] is a good and decent place,” he is preparing the audience for the guilt he will issue. In order to accept blame, we must understand the pedestal of American ideals from which we have fallen from or and have been “brought to our knees” (Gore).

With Americans on their knees, in a position of humility, Gore begins to distribute responsibility: “We must teach [children] right from wrong. We must protect them from violence and cruelty.” Gore gives direct instruction to the audience. He states, “More than ever I realize that every one of us is responsible for the children of our culture.” A sense of responsibility for the Columbine massacre offers the semblance of control in the midst of confusion and chaos, yet without extending Allen’s argument to include the jeremiad form, we are, as scholars, left with an incomplete account of Gore’s eulogy. Gore does not leave the audience in the shame of their shortcomings; he

invites them to claim responsibility and have a sense of duty to honor the memory of those who lost their lives.

Gore recasts responsibility and blame by presenting a causal relationship. Because parents and society did not properly love and model goodness to “the young killers,” they committed murder. However, the inverse—because parents and society love and model goodness, murder will not be committed—does not necessarily stand. Gore gives the people a sense of control over something, which in reality they may be unable to control, yet the speech is not dependent upon the truthfulness of this cause-and-effect relationship. Instead, Gore’s instruction transcends the causal relationship by offering what Bercovitch calls a “litany of hope”(11). Gore recognizes that “no society will ever be perfect. But we know the way things should be.” Even after blaming society for the tragedy, Gore issues resounding hope for a “community of goodness, of reason, of moral strength.” In this way the speech achieves the traditional goal of the jeremiad in Bercovitch’s terms: to “join lament and celebration in reaffirming America’s mission” (11).

Without connecting the audience’s sense of hope that comes after blame, Allen’s analysis stops short of what Gore’s speech actually accomplishes. Burke’s pentad alone does not provide hope; it only analyzes. As Allen claims, it is true that with a fuller understanding of Gore’s speech “we can gain a better understanding of the perpetrator-as-victim narrative and how we react to and contend with current and future tragedies” (60). However, more than providing understanding, Gore accomplishes his duty as the eulogist: to comfort. Despite his claim that “nothing that I say to you can bring comfort,” Gore *does* comfort and provide hope to the audience. Hope is not an automatic by-product of his eulogy; Gore provides hope through the jeremiad. Issuing blame is the creation of an appetite, and in the spirit of America, hope is the satisfaction of that appetite.

Like Gore’s impossible task as a eulogist, American society is impossibly tasked to prevent future killings by being better role models. Because we cannot know the positive or negative consequences of our actions, acting righteously becomes our only means of decreasing a culture of violence. Adults and parents must choose “love over indifference” (Gore) even if we cannot prevent another massacre. However, without the form of the jeremiad, Gore’s call to action cannot satisfy the audience’s need for hope. Burke’s pentad explains the drive behind Gore’s speech, but the form of the jeremiad is the vehicle. The jeremiad allows us to see that we have a responsibility to live up to American and Christian ideals of love and compassion.

Works Cited

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