

A Read-Through of Kenneth Burke's "The Rhetoric of Hitler's Battle"

Kenneth Duva Burke was an American literary theorist, poet, and novelist. He was born in 1897 and died in 1993. Although he was an autodidact, he was a respected lecturer in the university circuit (Rueckert, 2003).

Burke's influential work in the area of rhetoric includes *A Grammar of Motives* (1945), *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950), and *Language as Symbolic Action* (1966).

Burke also developed the "dramatistic pentad," that consists of act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose, which individuals can use to analyze the motives of others.

Through the application of dramatism, individuals can use the three phases, which include Guilt/Pollution, Purification, and Redemption, known collectively as Burke's "Rebirth Cycle."

Burke's concept of a "terministic screen," a "reflection of reality," which is comprised of symbols that act as a comprehensible "screen" individuals use to make sense of their world.

In Burke's essay, "Definition of Man" in *Language as Symbolic Action*, he describes people as "symbol using animals" (Burke, p. 3).

In this sense, reality is "built up through" a system of symbols, which is portrayed in the artifacts people create and the language they use to name them.

Burke defines "rhetoric" as "[t]he use of words by human agents to form attitudes or induce actions in other human agents" (Foss, Foss, and Trapp, 1991).

Kenneth Burke has a society and a journal (*The Journal of the Kenneth Burke Society*) dedicated to his ideas and work. The group also has a triennial (occurring every three years) conference.

Burke wrote and published "The Rhetoric of Hitler's Battle" in 1939. This is important because The Munich Agreement occurred a year prior.

The Munich Agreement was signed by Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and Italy, which allowed Nazi Germany to annex certain areas along the Czechoslovakian border where there were German-speaking people living. With this annexation, the newly acquired area was renamed "Sudetenland."

Because of this action, along with Hitler's rise to power in Germany, many started to wonder what Hitler's next move in Europe was.

"The Rhetoric of Hitler's Battle" was written in response to the two translations of *Mein Kampf* that came out in 1939, and, more specifically, the reviews he called "vandalistic" (Pauley, 2009).

Burke took issue with the reviewers approach to the two translations of *Mein Kampf*, claiming, "[T]hat the reviewers *only* engaged in denigration and denouncement [of Hitler and his book]" (Pauley, 2009).

In doing this, the "book reviewers provided the public with what they wanted to hear about *Mein Kampf* rather than what they needed to hear" (Pauley, 2009).

Burke analyzes the seven main tropes Hitler uses in his book, *Mein Kampf*. The seven main tropes include establishing a "common enemy," creating Munich as the new geographical point that followers look to as

a source of spiritual and physical strength, providing unity through a sense of community, projection, inborn dignity among the Aryan race, symbolic rebirth by identifying with a new lineage and ancestry, and finally a commercial aspect in the form of taking control of their finances.

Hitler starts with the idea of establishing a “common enemy.” He does this by presenting a Germany divided and in need of a strong, male voice (to which he became) to “woo” and ultimately “command” the masses under the common threat of the “Jewish plot” (Burke, p. 167).

In essence, Hitler uses a speaking pattern that pits the Aryans’ actions against the Jews,’ attributing the ills in Germany following World War 1 to the Jews and their influence within society (pp. 166-69).

Burke describes Hitler’s frustration with politicians in a “tottering Habsburg Empire,” describing the various voices in government as “parliamentary babel.” Hitler treats it as being “symptomatic” brought on by “business conflicts” (pp. 171-72).

Hitler sought a “cause” to this symptom, in which he applied his “corrupt use of religious patterns [strategies largely adopted from the Catholic Church]” as a sort of “medicine” (p. 164-172).

Burke also claims that Hitler was seeking to establish Munich as the new seat of power and influence in Germany.

According to Burke, Hitler sought to make Munich a “Mecca,” not only as a “hub of *ideas* but a mecca geographically located, towards which all eyes could turn at the appointed hours of prayers [or vituperation]” (p. 165).

Hitler’s goal was to create a “unifying” voice among “Aryans” through “inborn dignity,” in which he gave “this ennobling attitude an ominous twist by his theories of race and nation, whereby the ‘Aryan’ is elevated above all others by the innate endowment of his blood, while other ‘races,’ in particular Jews and Negroes, are innately inferior” (p. 173).

Burke also described how Hitler used “projection” to appeal to individuals, particularly the “middle class,” so that “one can hand over his infirmities to a vessel, or cause,’ outside the self, one can battle an external enemy instead of battling an enemy within” (p. 174).

Hitler provides a “symbolic rebirth,” in which he offers “a symbolic change of lineage” from the “Hebrew prophets” as the “spiritual ancestors of Christianity” (p. 174).

In doing so, “He renounces this ‘ancestry’ in a ‘materialistic’ way by voting himself and the members of his lodge a different ‘blood stream’ from that of the Jews” (p. 174).

Burke states that Hitler presented a “commercial” aspect as well in his book. “[B]y attacking ‘Jew finance’ instead of *finance*, it could stimulate an enthusiastic movement that left ‘Aryan’ finance in control” (pp. 174-75).

Hitler does this by presenting the “‘true’ cause, which is centered on ‘race.’ The ‘Aryan’ is ‘constructive;’ the Jew is ‘destructive;’ and the ‘Aryan,’ to continue his *construction*, must *destroy* the Jewish *destruction*. The Aryan, as a vessel of *love*, must *hate* the Jewish *hate*” (p. 175).

Burke describes how Hitler blamed Germany’s defeat in World War 1 and the economic hardships following it as “‘a deserved punishment by eternal retribution” (p. 175).

Germany's military collapse was a "consequence of moral poisoning," originating from "a sin against the blood and the degradation of the race," thus coming from an outside source, which was "the Jew, who thereupon gets saddled with a vast amalgamation of evils, among them being capitalism, democracy, pacifism, journalism, poor housing, modernism, big cities, loss of religion, half measures, ill health, and weakness of the monarch" (p. 175).

Burke says, "[T]he two keystones of these opposite equations were Aryan 'heroism' and 'sacrifice' vs. Jewish 'cunning' and 'arrogance'" (p. 178).

Burke states, "Similarly, the Aryan doctrine is a doctrine of resignation, hence of humility. It is in accordance with the laws of nature that the 'Aryan blood' is superior to all other bloods" (pp. 178-79).

He continues, "Hence, if the Aryan blood has been vested with the awful responsibility of its inborn superiority, the bearers of this 'culture-creating' blood must resign themselves to struggle in behalf of its triumph. Otherwise, the laws of God have been disobeyed, with human decadence as a result" (p. 179).

The model Hitler presents in his book, according to Burke, is based on a twisted interpretation of the Church's proclamation of "an integral relationship between Divine Law and Natural Law. Natural Law was the expression of the Will of God" (p. 178).

In this aspect, individuals in the Middle Ages that were considered a "good member of the Church was 'obedient' to this law. Everybody resigned himself to it" (p. 178).

Burke says, "The major virtue of the Aryan race was its instinct for self-preservation (in obedience to natural law). But the major vice of the Jew was his instinct for self-preservation; for, if he did not have this instinct to a maximum degree, he would not be the 'perfect' enemy—that is, he wouldn't be strong enough to account for the ubiquitousness and omnipotence of his conspiracy in destroying the world to become its master" (p. 179).

Burke discusses how Hitler distinguishes between Aryan self-preservation and Jewish self-preservation. He says, "Aryan self-preservation is based upon sacrifice, the sacrifice of the individuals to the group, hence militarism, army discipline, and one big company union" (p. 179).

"Jewish self-preservation is based upon individualism, which attains its cunning ends by the exploitation of peace," Burke states (p. 179).

Thus, Hitler's chapter "The Strong Man is Mightier Alone" distinguishes the Jew as a representation of "individualism" and the Aryan as representative of "super-individualism" (pp. 179-80).

In this sense, "the Strong Man's 'aloneness' is presented as a *public* attribute, in terms of tactics for the struggle against the *Party's* dismemberment under the pressure of rival saviors" (p. 180).

Burke claims that Hitler portrays "the power of endless repetition" in slogans that espouse pro-Aryan and anti-Jew rhetoric with the intent to divide among the lines of blood and race (pp. 186-87).

In closing, Burke states, "Our job, then, our anti-Hitler Battle, is to find all available ways of making the Hitlerite distortions of religion apparent, in order that politicians of this kind in America be unable to perform a similar swindle. The desire for national unity, in the present state of the world, is genuine and admirable. But this unity, if attained on a deceptive basis, by emotional trickeries that shift our criticism from the accurate locus of our trouble, is no unity at all" (p. 188).

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