Kenneth Burke (1945) introduced his theory of “dramatism” in his book *A Grammar of Motives*, saying, “[I]t invites one to consider the matter of motives in a perspective that, being developed from the analysis of drama, treats language and thought primarily as modes of action” (p. xxii). Burke (1978) later explains that the term “dramatism” stems from the idea that language is viewed “primarily as a mode of action rather than as a mode of knowledge, though the two emphases are by no means mutually exclusive” (p. 330). His belief that humans are symbol-users and that symbolic action is both public and unavoidable (Burke, 1978; Kneupper, 1979) led to the creation of dramatism.

Dramatistic theory takes into account the nature of language and symbolism. The theory expands on ideas of “identification,” guilt, tropes and figures, and Burke’s “pentad” of terms for analysis, in addition to much more throughout his work. Burke’s theories emerged as a fusion of Freudian psychology and Marxist ideologies (Smith, 2009). Dramatism acts as a method and meta-method, in that the questions raised by a dramatistic inquiry question both the action and analyze the effect of the explanation of action (Overington, 1977). Dramatism, therefore, is a “logic of inquiry” for examining rhetoric, with a fundamental emphasis on motive: “the language of motives, motives in language, language as motive” (Overington, 1977, p. 133).

The various aspects of dramatism offer ways to view the world generally and analyze public discourse and action specifically. “Identification,” for example, postulates that within our societal hierarchies we find those like us and identify with them (Smith, 2009). The guilt, purification, and redemption cycle highlights the “powerful motivator of human action within and between hierarchies in the social drama” (Smith, 2009, p. 278-279). Another aspect of dramatism, the pentad, codifies the inquiry and it provides general rules for an explanation of
action. Michael A. Overington (1977) explains, “The pentad retains both the ‘inner symposium’ and the etymological approach at the same time as it offers the final reconstruction of the dialectic” (p. 141). This pentad and its five terms are simultaneously simple and complex, providing a basic guideline for analysis.

**The Dramatistic Pentad and Ratios**

Five terms make up the components of Burke’s (1945) pentad: Act, Scene, Agent, Agency, and Purpose. Each element of the pentad corresponds to a question (what, when/where, who, how, why) and allows for an examination of the motive of the rhetor (Burke, 1945, p. xv). The straightforwardness of terms and ideas are not so simply applied, however. Nor are they meant for application without an inspection of the rhetorical situation in its entirety (Crable & Makay, 1972). In addition, each term within the pentad features a corresponding philosophical term and ideology. Burke (1945) explains that scene corresponds with materialism; agent corresponds with idealism; agency corresponds with pragmatism; purpose corresponds with mysticism; and act corresponds with realism (p. 128). Each ideology that corresponds with a pentad component is indicative of motive. The corresponding philosophical ideology is intrinsically linked to the presentation of the rhetoric, both through the terminology used within the rhetoric as well as in performing a discourse adaptation based on audience (Burke, 1945; Kneupper, 1979).

The power of the pentad is not within each individual element; rather its power is derived from what Burke called “ratios,” or, “principles of determination” (Burke, 1945, p.15). Burke (1978) states that though he explicitly defines the pentad and its elements, his “stress is less upon the terms themselves than upon…the ‘ratios’ among the terms” (p. 332). These ratios evaluate the relationship between two elements, particularly the causal relationship that exists between
them. Ultimately, a pentadic ratio is a heuristic function that observes that interrelationship and their correlation, thus assigning motive (Kneupper, 1979).

The pentad is useful in determining how rhetoric works because of the clear terminology, easily understood by most. Burke (1945) explains that the terms “need never to be abandoned, since all statements that assign motives can be shown to arise out of them and to terminate in them” (p. xv-xvi). The simplicity of structure gives way to the layout of ratios; the application of these ratios applied to any rhetorical situation allows the rhetorician to narrow an analysis from a big picture to a more precise one, focusing on two of the five elements of the rhetoric.

However, the analysis presents complexity. The elements are not single elements in and of themselves; each part may overlap or be applied to another part (Crable & Makay, 1972). Therefore, something labeled act may also be part of agency or scene. Additionally, a ratio may also be flipped, as Burke (1945) explains: “[T]he scene-act ratio either calls for acts in keeping with scenes or scenes in keeping with acts” (p. 9). When utilizing a ratio, the analysis keeps all of this in mind, for the rhetorician’s ability to apply, flip, and dismiss ratios aligns with Burke’s theory of the symbolic nature of language. How we apply the ratio is based on our own conceptions and place in the world, our own understanding of the symbols the language creates. Viewing one ratio does not ignore the other parts of the pentad, nor does it ignore the motive within those other parts. Rather, the ratio isolates one particular part and examines motive—each part of the rhetorical process retains motive (Crable & Makay, 1972).

The pentad and ratios are often best understood through example. Applying a single ratio to a piece of rhetoric can illustrate how it is done, which is inherently more important than what each term means. The reason for this may lie in the nature of the pentad and the elements themselves. Overington (1977) explains that, “as terms, they are neither positive nor dialectical,
defined neither lexically nor oppositionally; rather they are collapsed questions” (p. 141). In this way, a pentadic examination encompasses the questions raised by the elements. For example, why was this done? Who did it? These types of questions cover the range of the pentadic parts and show “how” to apply this theory to rhetoric.

**“Requiem” as Rhetoric**

Burke created his theory and its parts during his time as a literary critic (Smith, 2009). His examples of rhetorical analysis frequently utilized poetry to illustrate his points. As the design of dramatism is well suited to the analysis of poetry, using a poem to illustrate a ratio seems logical, and Anna Akhmatova’s “Requiem” fits well. Not only is this a poem, but it is a poem that features decidedly political implications. Written in the years between 1935 to 1940 (with an epigraph added in 1957), “Requiem” documents Akhmatova’s time spent under Stalin’s Reign of Terror and the imprisonment of her son (Akhmatova, 1967; Hayward, 1967).

Akhmatova was a Russian poet known early in her career for her short, lyrical poems, situated in the Acmeist movement. Acmeism was a revolt against the Symbolist movement, which was popular in pre-World War I Russia (and throughout Europe). Acmeism emphasized remaining in reality, as opposed to the Symbolist dogma of escapism and apocalyptic romanticism (Hayward, 1967). Akhmatova lived a life of frequent isolation and hardship, mostly due to the political circumstances of Stalinist Russia. In 1935, her only son Lev Gumilev was arrested. Lev’s arrest stemmed from his name alone: his father, Nikolai Gumilev, faced accusations of conspiracy and died at the hands of the Bolsheviks in 1921 (Hayward, 1967).

“Requiem” is a cylindrical poem comprised of three cycles and ten parts. Her epigraph explains her reason for creating the poem: “In the terrible years of the Yezhov terror I spent seventeen months waiting in line outside the prison in Leningrad. One day somebody in the
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crowd identified me…and asked me in a whisper… ‘Can you describe this?’ And I said: ‘I can’” (Akhmatova, 1967, p.99). Max Hayward (1967) explains that, in her later work, Akhmatova “became increasingly preoccupied with her ‘mission’ to endure and bear witness” (p. 14). “Requiem” is a prime example of this, as the work cycles through bearing witness to the horrors of the terror, providing her own feelings (and in turn, universalizing those feelings), and condemning the Stalinist regime.

Scene-Purpose in “Requiem”

Overington (1977) notes that Scene-Act and Scene-Agent are the most common ratios used by Burke to engage in dramatistic study. Crable & Makay (1972) note that, in the Scene-Act ratio, an appropriate act is required in response to a particular scene. In a ratio illustration, Kneupper (1979) provides the example for Scene-Act as “Given the circumstances, what else could we do?” (p. 133). In “Requiem,” the larger scene is Russia during Stalin’s Great Terror. Akhmatova (1967) describes this as “…Russia, guiltless, beloved, writhed / under the crunch of bloodstained boots” (p. 103). The more specific scene is outside a prison in Leningrad, with “ponderous bolts / that block us from the prison cells” (Akhmatova, 1940, p. 101). Family members wait for their incarcerated loved ones—to find out their fate, catch a glimpse of them, or to find solace among those who share their pain. For Akhmatova, the appropriate act to this particular scene is a poem. However, Akhmatova ultimately privileges the purpose over the act.

In this instance, the act itself is situated as a response to the scene, but at the time, while perhaps the appropriate act of rhetoric, the act itself could not have an effect on the scene. Akhmatova’s work suffered censorship by the Central Committee of the Party beginning in 1925 and was still in effect during her time writing “Requiem” (Hayward, 1967). Based on her knowledge of this censorship and of the content of “Requiem,” Akhmatova undoubtedly would
have known what would happen should this piece become available to the public. In fact, following her son’s third arrest in 1949, Akhmatova destroyed most of her work (presumably including “Requiem”) out of fear of delayed search (Hayward, 1967). Therefore, her purpose serves as a higher motivator than the act performed in response to the scene.

Akhmatova’s perceived “mission” to bear witness likely included visions of the future. After Stalin’s death in 1953, Akhmatova recreated from memory the work that she had destroyed (Hayward, 1967). Perhaps, then, Akhmatova intended her poem to serve as a historical artifact, representing the horrors of Stalinist Russia. This “scene” should not be forgotten—Akhmatova would ensure that future generations would read her work and know what she and her “nameless friends” endured (Akhmatova, 1967, p. 101).

The specific scene—Akhmatova and others outside a prison—provides an automatic motive: documenting the horrors they faced. However, viewing the act—the poem created in response to this scene—in its entirety provides clues to deeper, more complex motives. Akhmatova spends much of “Requiem” documenting her own pain and experiences, while seemingly extending this pain to a universal level by implicating the shared feelings among those who suffered at the hands of the Stalinist regime. Yet because of the focused nature of her words—her own pain—Akhmatova’s motive appears to be simultaneously a political reaction, release of personal emotion, artistic expression, and documentation of events.

Several factors complicate an examination of scene and purpose in “Requiem.” There is an unavoidable link to both act and agent due to the nature of the rhetorical situation. However, a basic ratio analysis based on Burke’s pentad illustrates the usefulness of the theory and begins to provide insight into the motive (or some of the motive) of Akhmatova as the rhetor. Burke (1978) sums up the pentad’s intended usage: “[T]he logic (or logologic) of the hexed pentad
(with its many twists and corresponding functions in terms of ratios and circumference) affords a serviceably over-all structure for the analysis of both literary texts in particular and human relations in general” (p. 334). In this way, the pentad in general and the ratios specifically simply exist as a tool. Burke (1978) encourages users to begin with a direct analysis of the text before moving to ratios. The pentadic ratios are a more specific tool in a rhetorician’s toolbox. Burke’s intent is not to provide a systematic guide to analysis. Rather, he intends of the rhetorician to look at the piece of rhetoric within the context of the rhetorical situation and after the initial thorough examination.

If *purpose* is the primary element under which “Requiem” fundamentally operates, based on Burke’s theory, the corresponding philosophical ideology is mysticism. According to Kneupper (1977), this aligns Akhmatova’s motive with idealism. Based on Akhmatova’s background and the content of the poem, idealism seems to be the last ideology from which Akhmatova would be arguing. Nevertheless, if her ultimate *purpose* stems from a foundation of idealism, then it would make sense that Akhmatova seeks to employ her idealism—about her art, about her country, about her position of witness—in the creation of her poem. Using the pentad and the ratios within allows us to examine anything from poetry to action. Assuming that virtually anything can be viewed as rhetoric, Burke’s dramatism helps us position the symbolic nature of these acts in terms of motive and fitting responses. This, in turn, allows us to both understand the world, as well as understand how we might create fitting rhetoric.
References


