

Grace Davis

Professor Gammill

English 3050

2 May 2019

As presented in chapter 10 of James Herrick's *The History and Theory of Rhetoric*, rhetoric is more than how we form arguments: it is a daily experience of how we interact with the world around us. Kenneth Burke of the 1900s rhetorical theories and critiques poses rhetoric as a means by which humans can find unity and eliminate what separates us. Through language, we can unify, and through identification, we can try to understand each other despite our terministic screens. My rhetorical analysis of how I convinced my parents to adopt a puppy angles to reveal how the rhetorical situation is a symbolic action, as Burke asserts.

When I was in the eleventh grade, I volunteered at a local animal shelter, and I fell in love with the idea of adopting my own puppy. I immediately went home and spoke with my parents about that idea, but I showed too much excitement. I revealed too much of the emotional component in my initial argument and not enough of the logic they wanted to hear. "We should get a dog because I want one" was not enough. It was a short conversation, and I walked away dejected. I had failed to convince those in charge. I still wanted a dog, but after the conversation with my parents, I realized I would have to shift my thinking. For the following month, I brought my parents to every Sunday afternoon adoption fair, "just to look." The conversation of adoption was casual and did not carry the intensity of our first conversation. I no longer canvased for a pet, but instead I put my efforts towards appearing responsible. As I took my parents to

these fairs, I also began taking more initiative in household chores and expressing my worthiness of and readiness for a puppy. All of my efforts came to a head at the end of the month, when my dad bonded with a dog with a relaxed but playful personality. Only then did we, as a family, consider adopting. It was my parents' idea. A week later, we took home that puppy, and my dad named her Murphy.

Kenneth Burke spends a great deal of time speaking of the symbolic world and symbolic actions. James Herrick writes extensively in *The History and Theory of Rhetoric: an Introduction*, wherein he explains what Burke means by symbolic action: "rhetoric makes human unity possible, that language use is symbolic action, and that rhetoric is symbolic inducement" (Chapter 10, "Kenneth Burke and Rhetoric as Symbolic Action"). By symbols, Burke means the intangible parts of human life: language and experiences. These symbols are what it means to be a person. In his essay, "Terministic Screens," Social Constructionism, and the Language of Experience: Kenneth Burke's Utilization of William James," Paul Stob writes that Burke's theory "suggests that symbols, terms, and language form the building blocks, the bricks and mortar, of the structures of our collective life. We employ symbols that construct our social realities." Therefore, rhetoric is the trade of symbols between people, and that trade can either lead to separation and conflict.

I did not have the words for my actions at that time, but I now recognize my strategy as what Kenneth Burke explains as identification and terministic screens. These terms are a part of his "Definition of Man" essay, in which he delineates what exactly it means to be human. James Herrick demonstrates the concept of the terministic screen as such: "Every set of terms or symbols, thus, becomes a kind of

screen through which we experience the world." I understood my parents as rational and responsible to a fault. They saw the idea of a dog as just another thing for which they would be physically and financially responsible- just as any adult would. However, I was still essentially a child in my perspective of the world. I saw a pet as another emotional connection to be made. At first, our terministic screens prevented us from finding common ground. Our motivations were different, so my shift from argumentative, spoken language to demonstrative language was necessary. Burke himself writes in "Definition of Man" that "the terministic fact that, as Aristotle observes in his Rhetoric, antithesis is an exceptionally effective rhetorical device," meaning that opposition is a powerful way to communicate. Our screens opposed, so in order for us to understand each other's screens, we needed to trade symbols. I needed to facilitate some identification.

If terministic screens are the means by which we individually experience life and are the origin of separation, identification is the means by which we form bridges. The strategy of identification within the context of this situation allowed my parents and me to understand each other without the conflict. Through my switch from childish to responsible, I understood why my parents were not initially excited by the option of getting a puppy. By putting them in my shoes every Sunday, they began to see puppies as I did: my emotional points were not as unrelated as they had originally thought. It came as no surprise to me that my dad wanted to adopt Murphy because I had spent weeks getting my dad to change his thinking subconsciously -this strategy is called reverse psychology, but it is also founded in identification. To change his perspective, I had first to understand it. In a book called *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender,*

Whiteness, Krista Ratcliffe examines the work of Burke and its effects on inclusion and cross-cultural communication, saying, “Burke further argues that if such persuasive functions are to succeed, identification must proceed persuasion” (1). Although I failed to identify with my parents before starting the conversation, I realized my mistake and quickly adjusted my plans.

Analyzing the context and mechanics of this argument through the lens of Burke’s Symbolic Action carries limitations. My approach only accounts for intentions and action. Unlike the Five Cannons of Rhetoric, which analyzes rhetorical events from five angles, Symbolic Action is based in Burke’s philosophical take on what it means to be human and how that meaning affects communication.

It was clear to me that my parents would shoot down any argument I could make in favor of adoption because I was too young, and they knew better. Although I spent the majority of that month in action instead of in conversation, my rhetoric was still present in my silence and actions. My rhetoric was implicit because I had to play to my audience and their terministic screens of adulthood. In order to achieve my goal of pet adoption, I had to help us understand each other’s perspectives and break down the barriers of our respective terministic screens.

Works Cited

Burke, Kenneth. *Definition of Man*. 4th ed., vol. 16, Hudson Review, 1964.

Herrick, James A. *The History and Theory of Rhetoric: an Introduction*. 5th ed., Routledge, 2018.

Ratcliffe, Krista. *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2005.

Stob, Paul. “‘Terministic Screens,’ Social Constructionism, and the Language of Experience: Kenneth Burke’s Utilization of William James.” *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2008, p. 130.