

## AN UNORTHODOX INTRODUCTION TO BURKEAN FRAMES

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Devised by Kenneth Burke (1897-1993), the Burkean frames are abstract concepts that can be used in a very interesting form of rhetorical analysis. However, even though many modern scholars admire and use Burke's frames, the frames appear to be defined and used differently by different people. Burke himself, with his highly abstract writing and nonlinear thinking, didn't really define most of his own frames. Therefore, for the purposes of this class, I present you with the following synopsis of my own personal definitions of the Burkean frames, based loosely on Burke's own writings about those frames in his book *Attitudes Toward History* (1937).

**Key Concept #1:** Burke's "Poetic Frames," as he calls them, are based on literary genres. His essential argument is that we tend to classify and describe events in the real world as though they were works of fiction—and so we can look at the stories we tell of the real world and identify tragedies, comedies, epics, satires, and so on. In his words: "The poetic forms are symbolic structures designed to equip us for confronting given historical or personal situations" (p. 57).

**Key Concept #2:** Burke's frames are broadly categorized as "frames of acceptance," which are meant to get people to accept the situation that is being framed, and "frames of rejection," which are meant to get people to reject (i.e., change) the situation.

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### FRAMES OF ACCEPTANCE

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#### HEROIC FRAME (ALSO CALLED THE EPIC FRAME)

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This frame features a noble person or group struggling against great odds. The general roles of "good guy" and "bad guy" are usually easy to recognize in this frame. Burke claims the heroic frame accomplishes two goals:

- 1) it builds courage and promotes individual sacrifice for group advantage (p. 35);
- 2) it makes the humble feel good: the hero "risks himself and dies that others may be *vicariously* heroic" (p. 36).

The hero doesn't have to die in the heroic frame; nor do the roles of "good guy" and "bad guy" have to be filled by humans; one or both could be filled by organizations (like Exxon Mobil) or abstract concepts (like communism or democracy).

Examples:

- *Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, Star Wars*
- most war movies and popular narratives about WWII, including *Saving Private Ryan* (but *not* most war movies or popular narratives about Vietnam)

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## TRAGIC FRAME

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The tragedy argues that people are flawed, and that they will come to grief as a result. Burke calls it a “frame of acceptance [that] admonish[es] one to ‘resign’ himself to a sense of his limitations,” and says that tragedy considers pride the basic sin for which people are to be punished (p. 39). Note, thus, that tragedy and comedy are very similar; the main difference is one of attitude/mood. However, sadness does not necessarily indicate a tragic frame. Tragedy is considered a frame of acceptance because in a tragedy, people get what they deserve and deserve what they get.

- *Macbeth, Othello, King Lear, Death of a Salesman, The Great Gatsby*

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## COMIC FRAME

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The comic frame, like the burlesque frame, portrays people as fools, but unlike the burlesque, it does not reject them for their foolishness; it considers them simply mistaken and therefore harmless. Burke says that comedy always ignores something significant, to focus on the happy.

Today, many people think of comedy as the opposite of tragedy, but Burke argues, “Humor is the opposite of the heroic. The heroic promotes acceptance by magnification, making the hero’s character as great as the situation he confronts... but humor reverses the process: it takes up the slack between the momentousness of the situation and the feebleness of those in the situation by dwarfing the situation” (p. 43). It is crucial to note that not all humor is in a comic frame, and not everything in a comic frame is funny. Humor occurs frequently in satire and burlesque, and less frequently in other frames.

- puns, wordplay, and silly humor, from “Why did the chicken cross the road?” to “Knock knock” jokes
- websites like Failblog, DamnYouAutocorrect, and FMyLife
- much of what Jon Stewart does on The Daily Show (though he also employs burlesque, some satire, and occasionally other, non-humorous frames)

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## LYRIC FRAME

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This frame gushes about how great or beautiful the subject is, usually without qualification. It’s also known as “the Ode.”

Examples:

- almost every straight-up love song you’ve ever heard
- most “About the Author” or “About Us” sections of websites
- the blog post “Why Ronald Reagan was the Greatest President of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century” (<http://biggovernment.com/bfolsom/2010/02/06/why-was-ronald-reagan-the-greatest-president-of-the-20th-century/>)

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## FRAMES OF REJECTION

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### ELEGIAC FRAME (PLAINT)

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This frame laments human suffering in an uncaring world. It supposedly rejects the terrible (tragic) situation in front of us, but may not go far towards rejecting it (p. 44), perhaps because it tends to make the assumption that nothing can be done. In this it is mistaken, as Burke points out: “Like humor, it is a frame that does not properly gauge the situation” (p. 44)—instead it tends to make people even smaller and the unfortunate situation even larger than they really are.

Examples:

- “O Captain, My Captain” by Walt Whitman

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### SATIRICAL FRAME

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In a satire, the author takes a position and exaggerates it in order to ridicule and/or discredit it. The deep message is always the opposite of the surface message, and we recognize the difference as sarcasm. Humor is common in satire, but it does not have to be present. Irony, on the other hand, is crucial.

Note that this is a much narrower and more precise definition of satire than the one many people use; frequently, I find things labeled as “satire” that are simply jokes on political topics, or humor with a serious message. For our purposes, it’s only satire if it pretends to be the thing it’s ridiculing.

Examples:

- Stephen Colbert
- “A Modest Proposal” by Jonathan Swift

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### BURLESQUE FRAME

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A burlesque depicts its subject as a fool, or a situation as foolish, in order to get people to reject him/her/it. Burlesque describes “very despicable, forlorn, and dissipated people...[by taking] a purely external approach” (p. 53), as opposed to the “internal” approach of satire, in which the author pretends to identify with his subject. Burke includes polemic and caricature in this frame.

Examples:

- Bushisms (<http://politicalhumor.about.com/cs/georgewbush/a/top10bushisms.htm>)
- Any time Jon Stewart makes fun of someone on The Daily Show
- Most political cartoons

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## GROTESQUE FRAME

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The grotesque frame depicts its subject as a freak, to be pitied, marveled at, or disgusted by. By Burke's original definition, anything is grotesque that points out great oxymorons or contradictions in the world without laughing at them or minimizing them. People whose beliefs are completely outside the mainstream may be perceived as grotesque. "The grotesque is the cult of incongruity without the laughter. The grotesque is not funny unless you are out of sympathy with it (whereby it serves as unintentional burlesque)" (p. 58).

examples:

- Old-style freak shows, with bearded ladies, dwarves, etcetera
- Lots of modern horror films /serial killer films, like *Saw*, *Seven*, *Silence of the Lambs*, etc.
- The Westboro Baptist Church, when profiled by people outside the church
- Gross-out humor (too many examples to mention, but *South Park* comes to mind)

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## DIDACTIC FRAME (PROPAGANDA)

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This frame attempts overtly to convert the reader to a set of beliefs. It is dead serious, and it usually takes the position that opposing viewpoints are wrong (even wicked or evil).

Examples:

- college textbooks
- political debates
- the Westboro Baptist Church (example: <http://blogs.sparenot.com/>)