Villains or Fools: Narrative Constructions of the Political Self

Introduction

Discussions of our “broken government” and dysfunctional political system are a staple of political reporting, and as a result the belief that things now are worse than ever before is nearly aphoristic in its ubiquity. However, such discussions are often linked to calls for people to simply “set aside their differences and work things out.” Ignoring the fact that these calls often contain some partisan motivation, they are also problematic insofar as they tend to be rooted in a modernist epistemology that assumes political identity—and thus the very nature of political governance in our party-based system—is simply a set of rational choices about specific issues. However, Burke tells us that the formation of any community is a complex process involving identification through consubstantiality. He writes that “a doctrine of consubstantiality, either explicit or implicit, may be necessary to any way of life. For substance, in the old philosophies, was an act, and a way of life is an acting-together; and in acting together, men have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes that make them consubstantial” (A Rhetoric of Motives 21). From such a perspective, then, the adherence to particular stances on issues becomes merely one aspect of consubstantiality among many, and may in some cases be more an effect of identification with a community—an identification that may be based on something as non-rational as a shared regional or social background—than the cause of that identification. In essence, the community identification, once formed, extends to all the connected elements, whether or not these connections are rationally formed. As Burke states, “when an average compatriot expresses his allegiance to capitalism, he is not considering merely the things that make it different from other economic systems. The symbol also includes for him such notions as family, friendship, neighborliness, education, medicine, golf, sunlight, future, and endless other sundries” (Attitudes Toward History 99).

The reference to attitudes as a key element of consubstantiality is of particular interest, as Burke spends considerable time discussing the ways in which attitudes arise from one’s narrative frame. He states:

To act wisely, in concert, we must use many words. If we use the wrong words, words that divide up the field inadequately, we obey false cues. We must name the friendly and unfriendly functions and relationships in such a way that we are able to do something about them. In naming them, we form our characters, since the names embody attitudes; and implicit in the attitudes there are the cues of behavior. (Attitudes Toward History 4)

This naming process, he argues, is narrative in nature, involving the fitting of events, people, relationships, and so forth into a narrative form that offers structure and allows us to formulate our stance in relation to the world.

Political rhetoric in particular is well-suited to narrative constructions, as the forms of narrative offer not only a compelling structure, but a powerful rhetorical tool, allowing politicians and pundits alike the opportunity to draw moral and/or functional distinctions between competing political communities simply by the role to which political actors are assigned. Importantly, though, critics have long argued
that the form of the narrative is closely associated not only with the effectiveness of the rhetoric, but with the social worth and even the human danger that may arise from it. Perhaps the hallmark of such thought is Burke’s “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle,’” in which he suggests the tragic form of the Hitler’s writing enabled—and even made inevitable—the horror of the Holocaust. Recent scholarship has had the luxury of focusing on more benign politics, but has maintained a focus on the use of narrative. For example, Lewis used Fisher’s narrative paradigm to study Reagan’s speeches, concluding that he created a broadly coherent mythical narrative: “a story with great heroes…with great villains…and with a great theme” (316). Similarly, Dobkin argued that in an attempt to gain audience commercial news networks end up promoting military action by structuring events into romantic quests, which she described as “two-minute morality plays with heroes and villains and a tidy moral to be summed up at the end” (146). Likewise, West & Carey noted a mythical form in George W. Bush’s post 9/11 political narratives, which echoed Nossek and Berkowitz’s assertion that all news structures events into “mythic quests” (691). Simons describes Bush’s use of melodramatic narratives involving “two-dimensional characters,” representing a ‘valorized ‘us’ and a dehumanized or demonized ‘them’” (338). And Anker, in her study of FOX News programming, notes the extensive use of melodrama in the reporting on the 9/11 attacks.

Of particular note in the preceding review of scholarship, however, are three details. First, a disproportionate amount of critical energy has been focused on the political right. Certainly there is no mandate that all political communities receive the same level of attention, and indeed it may be that the rhetoric of the right is of particular critical interest. However, any theoretical approach that hopes to offer a more generalized statement about the construction of political identity, rather than simply the construction of a particular community’s identity, must address the political rhetoric of all sides.¹

Second, it is clear that, as Appel suggests in his review of scholarship on melodrama, “taxonomic disorder is currently rather plainly the rule, not the exception” (187). Even in the brief list above we see authors describing largely similar narrative forms as *tragic, mythical, romantic,* and *melodramatic*. Furthermore, even long-used terms, such as tragedy, lack a consistent theoretical construction over time (Appel 190). This would seem to place current scholars in narrative theory in the awkward position of needing not merely to conduct studies, but to offer what may be article-length justifications of the methodological foundations and associated nomenclature of the study. However, the works of Appel and of McClure suggest a contemporary theoretical convergence on Burke that mitigates this difficulty. McClure, in his analysis of creationist narratives, argues that Fisher’s narrative paradigm is effectively a subset of Burkean identification. Likewise, Appel integrates a broad range of work on melodrama into Burkean dramatism and the formal classifications presented in *Attitudes Toward History*. As a result, I will support Appel’s attempt to “bring order out of partial chaos” (191), and will adhere to the dramatistic classification he presents, with only minor exceptions that will be clarified in the next section.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly for this paper, essentially all existing research has focused either on the speeches of widely known political figures, or on the reporting of major media outlets. No doubt this is largely a result of both theoretical and practical concerns. From a practical perspective, such speech acts are particularly accessible for analysis, being widely disseminated and accurately recorded. This same wide dissemination also suggests they occupy a central place in the construction of a community’s political identity, with both media and key political figures serving as iconic standard-

¹ Lakoff certainly deserves great credit for offering just such a broad analysis. However, addressing Lakoff’s metaphorical approach, or indeed offering any means of beginning to reconcile this approach with Burkean narrative criticism, is beyond the scope of this article.
bearers for their political communities, communicating and shaping the narratives that help to define the historical identity of the community and to regulate its interaction with current events. However, despite the obvious power of politicians and media, I would suggest that the failure to study the individuals who constitute the political communities is a profound omission. A modernist epistemological approach might accept the current top-down focus insofar as it implies the formation of political identity, and the power inherent in such an act, to be concentrated in the hands of key decision makers and presented wholesale, and without substantial change, to an essentially powerless public who merely consumes and then professes the identities handed to them. However, a post-modern understanding of political identity demands the addition of new methodologies, and thus new methods. As Foucault’s rule of double conditioning states, “power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations” (94). Furthermore, he argues there is no position of exteriority in relation to power (95). As a result, those who modernists would see as subject to the power of the political elite, are in fact exercising power themselves, and thus the identity of the community is formed not by the decisions at the top, but rather by the totality of power interactions between all those who claim a stance in relation to the community.

Thus it becomes clear that old approach to understanding the construction of political identity by the study of “political insiders”—or indeed the very notion that the categories of insider and outsider exist at all—is both problematic and archaic insofar as it falsely positions the average person as largely powerless. I certainly do not mean to suggest that any theorist I cite above merits a rebuke for a failure to accept post-modern distributions of power and agency, and indeed it seems clear that these critics make great strides toward allowing such a vital and contemporary critical approach. McClure, in particular, offers a decidedly postmodern view of narrative identification, describing it as “a symbolic process of association that provides for consubstantiality with preexistent narratives via the process of analogy, allusion, and metaphor, and provides a potential theoretical account for the stretching and reshaping done by auditors of polysemic, polyvalent, and multivalent narrative via all of the subtleties and processes of identification as discussed by Burke” (201). However, allowing for such exceptions, I would argue that the body of existing research as a whole—likely as a result of simple convenience—has not sufficiently explored the ways in which individuals take ownership of and personally define the narratives that constitute their individual political identities, and thus implicitly offers a modernist approach that is at odds with its own postmodern proclamations. It is thus the goal of this paper to make an opening attempt in this direction—an attempt that will likely be useful as much (or perhaps far more) for its failings as for its successes, but nonetheless an attempt that hopefully serves to hint at a means of bringing the voice of individuals back into the discussion of identity formation.

Before turning to a discussion of methods it is first necessary to address several underlying methodological issues, the first of which is the decision to use only the tragic and the comic forms. In prefacing his discussion of forms in Attitudes Toward History, Burke writes that “our philosophers, poets, and scientists act in the code of names by which they simplify of interpret reality. These names shape our relations with our fellows. They prepare us for some functions and against others… Call a man a villain, and you have the choice of either attacking or cringing. Call him mistaken, and you invite yourself to attempt setting him right” (4). Thus, while he goes on to discuss a variety of forms, his use of only the tragic term “villain” and the comic term “mistaken” suggests an acknowledgement of the foundational formal dichotomy that traces its roots to Aristotle. Furthermore, a great deal of Burke’s work explores the relative virtues of these two forms. He writes that “contemporary exasperations make us prefer the tragic (sometimes melodramatic) names of ‘villain’ and ‘hero’ to the comic names of ‘tricked’ and intelligent” (Attitudes Toward History 4-5). Of course such comments are preludes to his goal of moving political and social discourse toward the comic, and he ultimately argues that:
The progress of humane enlightenment can go no further than in picturing people not as *vicious*, but as *mistaken*... [and] when you add that people are *necessarily* mistaken, that all people are exposed to situations in which they must act as fools, that *every* insight contains its own special kind of blindness, you complete the comic circle, returning again to the lesson of humility that underlies great tragedy. (41)

These linguistic dichotomies—vicious vs. mistaken, villain and hero vs. tricked and intelligent—all point toward the formal dichotomy of tragic vs. comic.

A second point of concern in the development of a formal classification scheme is the “taxonomic disorder” referred to by Appel (187). Writing in response to an implicit consensus on the danger of melodrama, Schwarze attempts to reclaim the form as a legitimate and socially productive form of rhetorical discourse, and suggests that it might be considered a factional2 subset of Burkean tragedy. Appel builds on this tentative integration of melodrama and tragedy, ultimately arguing that while melodrama does indeed operate to some degree as “tragedy-lite,” it actually merits a formal category of its own, which he supports by offering a dramatistic description of the characteristics of four forms. Though I rely heavily on this classification, the distinction it offers between tragedy and melodrama—while likely of great theoretical value—is largely based on differences of degree that are simply too fine for the comparatively low resolution of this study. It must likewise be noted that as a result, this study, in concluding even tentatively that there exists some formal preference among the community it studies, cannot offer any social reassurance or condemnation. A preference for the tragic in this study might, upon closer examination than is possible here, be revealed as a preference for the much less toxic melodramatic form. Likewise, a preference for the comic cannot be seen as a clear indication that this political community operates according to Burke’s comic ideal. With this caveat in mind, I offer the final classification scheme below, which combines Appel’s tragic and melodramatic forms, and omits his burlesque.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Morally Disordered Scene</th>
<th>Tragedy (melodrama)</th>
<th>Comedy</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>crimes &amp; evils</td>
<td>mistakes or impediments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Binary polarization of good &amp; evil)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guilt-Obsessed Agent</td>
<td>God-like mythic hero (Hero, but not so god-like)</td>
<td>competent leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guilty Counteragents</td>
<td>diabolical total enemies (villains, but not devils)</td>
<td>mistake-prone klutzes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sacrificial Act</td>
<td>severe punishment, banishment, or death (categorical legislative or electoral defeat, expressed in idiom of moral outrage)</td>
<td>slap-on-the-wrist instruction and correction; temporary social distance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redemptive Purposes and Means</td>
<td>utopian goals and strategies, total salvation (triumph of transcendentally virtuous values—more than merely pragmatic—materially embodied)</td>
<td>imperfect improvement, or mere restoration of the status quo; better not best</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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2 The factional/universal distinction is an interesting and potentially productive one, but isn’t a central concern of this paper, and indeed is only sparsely discussed by Burke, primarily in an extended footnote on pages 188-190 of *Attitudes Toward History*. 
Methods

With the methodology in place, I turn to a brief discussion of methods. In order to move beyond the traditional examination of the rhetoric of political figures and the media, as well as the tendency to focus on the right, I opted to conduct two surveys, one quantitative and the other qualitative, to an audience of readers of the left-wing website DailyKos—a site that allows members to create and post articles (“diaries” in the terminology of the site). Both surveys began with the same ten questions covering demography and political identity (see Appendix A: Demographic Survey Questions). The quantitative survey, to which there were eighty-nine responses, then asked participants to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement on a Likert scale graduated from -3 (strongly disagree) to 3 (strongly agree)—with the zero option omitted—to a series of statements designed to represent either a tragic or a comic perspective on a recent aspect of politics representing one dramatistic category. As a means of internal triangulation I presented two questions for each formal and dramatistic category (thus twenty such questions in all: five categories × two forms × two questions for each). The qualitative survey, designed to offer further triangulation, asked ten open-ended questions on the same ten topics as the quantitative survey (two topics for each of the five dramatistic categories defined by Appel), and had fifty-three responses. The text of dramatistic/formal survey questions can be seen in the results section to follow.

The results from both surveys were then analyzed. First, the demographic questions were examined to verify that the audience of both surveys met the essential criteria of being both highly politically active and strongly left-wing. To examine the reliability of the questions in the quantitative survey I looked for the degree of consistency between questions purporting to measure the same category and form by examining correlation, mean, standard deviation, and a frequency graph of answer distribution. However, for reasons that will be discussed in the next section, it became clear that correlation was not a useful metric, and thus was abandoned. Next, I looked for the degree of consistency between answers purporting to measure different narrative forms in the same category. Finally, I used Appel’s dramatistic formal descriptions to code the answers to the qualitative survey as tragic, comic, or none/other, and used this as a second means of triangulation serving to support or to challenge the quantitative survey. The net effect, then, was a two part study, looking on one hand at individual’s reactions to different narrative constructions of political statements, and on the other at the use of narrative form in their own construction of political statements. Taken together, these two parts were intended to offer insight into the relationship between political identity and formal preference.

The expectation was that a preference for a particular form in any dramatistic category should manifest in the quantitative survey in a significant difference (greater than +/- one standard deviation) in the mean between questions in the quantitative survey measuring the same category and topic, but different forms. A similar difference in mean should ideally be noted in the second of questions for each category as well. Furthermore, answers to the qualitative survey covering the related category should reflect the same preferences seen in the quantitative survey. Additionally, I felt a high level of agreement between the two forms might in some senses be the most promising result, as it would begin to validate the quantitative survey method itself, and in turn offer the best means of capturing the narrative preferences of a very large number of “average” political community members. Finally, given the pilot nature of this survey, I was also focused on findings that might enhance future research.
Results and Analysis

In all cases the results of the quantitative survey fail to achieve statistical significance by the measure of +/- one standard deviation. However, because my primary goal was to explore the application of the survey method to this issue, the results do offer some preliminary hints not only about means by which future surveys might be made more effective, but also about the dramatistic methodology itself. A discussion of results for each dramatistic category follows.

Scene

Quantitative Questions
11. The problems in the United States today are largely a product of people who may mean well but have foolish ideas.
12. The problems in the United States today are largely a product of evil people with wicked ideas.

Qualitative Question
11. How would you describe the condition of the United States today?

The first quantitative question pair (#11 & 12), as well as associated qualitative question (#11), seem to indicate that no formal preference exists in this category. The quantitative means are close to zero and the standard deviation is quite large, and the qualitative results are undermined by a high number of none/other responses. The latter issue is simply a product of many answers being too short to classify, but it nonetheless weakens the value of the qualitative results to the point that they cannot serve as accurate triangulation. The second set of questions seems to suggest a similar situation, though two differences exist. First, the mean of the tragic question (14) is the lowest of the group, and an examination of the frequency graph indicates a substantial majority of people disagreeing with this statement. However, this apparent hint of opposition to a tragic frame is not paired with a corresponding preference for a comic frame, and furthermore, the associated qualitative question actually suggests a preference for the tragic.
Taken together, this suggests the most appropriate analysis would be a wholesale dismissal of all the results in this category as statistically insignificant. Again, though, given the nature of the study it is necessary to consider data patterns that do not achieve such significance, and so I offer three tentative hypotheses. First, it may be that the questions or the qualitative coding have problems with validity, and thus one or both are not measuring what they purport to measure. Second, it may be that the participants simply did not have a formal preference in this category. Finally, it is also possible that what is happening here is actually a result of categorical confusion—in particular the bleeding of the counteragent category into these questions intended to measure scene. This is quite possible first because Appel’s descriptions of the scenic characteristics are themselves bound up in the issue of purpose, and thus of agency. For example, he identifies a tragic scene with “crimes and evils” and “good and evil,” and a comic scene as involving “mistakes and impediments.” However, the primary distinction between a crime and a mistake is not merely human versus natural causation, but rather intent. It is impossible to talk of crimes without implicitly talking of criminals, and criminals are certainly a subset of the “villains” described in the counteragent category. From this perspective the tragic preference in the second qualitative question, but not the first, becomes much more understandable, as the first asks only about “problems in the United States,” while the second specifically refers to struggles in politics, with the implied reference to specific politicians with whom one might struggle.

The results for this category suggest that respondents express a moderate preference for the comic form, which is certainly born out in the qualitative questions, showing a roughly 3:1 preference for the
comic over the tragic. These results might at first seem to be undermined by the quantitative survey which shows very small differences between the means of the tragic and comic questions, but there is some possibility that even these minor differences are more meaningful than they appear, and may hint at an important systemic distortion, what I call member bias, arising from the strongly partisan/ideological nature of the community. That is, given the liberal/progressive position of the *Daily Kos* community, it may be that participants are unwilling to overtly disagree with positive statements about Obama, even those representing a less desirable form, and instead register their formal preference only by the level of agreement. Such a position is supported by the fact that all four quantitative questions in this category have almost no “disagree” (-1 to -3) responses. The effect of such a distortion would be to essentially cut in half the functional range of responses, and thus both dramatically reduce the resolution of the study and also make more meaningful the small differences in mean that indicate a slight preference for the comic.

It is also worth considering the degree to which a tragic frame is inevitably undermined by the use of real and familiar individuals as characters. In this case, the tragic question referring to Obama (16) had a mean of .67, while the tragic question referring to the less specific “liberals/progressives” had a mean of 1.40. Certainly this difference is not substantial, but in coding the qualitative results, I noted that 26 of the 53 respondents made specific note of their disappointment in Obama, and while this alone does not indicate any particular formal preference (it is possible to be disappointed with a comic agent as well as a tragic agent), such disappointment seems far more likely when beginning with the extraordinarily lofty ideal of the tragic frame. As such, it may be that questions involving abstract terms (“liberals,” “conservatives”), or specific figures whose inevitable humanity is obscured, either by their new arrival on the political scene or by the favorable haze of history, will yield markedly different results than do those using references to figures enmeshed in the messiness of the now.
The counteragent category presents the clearest result, showing a strong preference for a tragic frame that nearly (though not quite) meets the +/- one standard deviation confidence interval. This should perhaps not be surprising given the earlier discussion of categorical overlap and the role of agency in politics. However, the data here are likely affected by the inverse of the member-bias mentioned in the agent category: participants may have been somewhat unwilling to outright disagree with any negative comment about the political opposition. Indeed, some evidence of this is apparent when comparing answers to the two quantitative questions referring to Mitt Romney (21 and 22), which show a substantial number of people agreeing both that his famous “47%” comment mostly indicates he is a poor speaker prone to foolish mistakes, and that it mostly indicates he is “genuinely hostile to the less fortunate in our society.” To some extent these two questions should be seen as mutually exclusive (and indeed were intended to be so) as a result of the word “mostly” in the first. However, many participants were likely just agreeing that he was a poor speaker and that he was genuinely hostile to the poor, and certainly these two characteristics are not at all mutually exclusive.

One other point that merits discussion in this area is that while the quantitative results showed a strong tendency to disagree with the comic view of Romney—indeed a much stronger level of disagreement than was seen in response to the comic view of the more generic “Republicans”—the associated qualitative question on Romney shows a roughly even comic/tragic preference. Given the high number of none/other answers here, as well as the relatively small number of responses, this is most likely an anomaly of little importance. However, some of the responses to the qualitative survey hint at a problem with kairos akin to the issue of real and familiar individuals discussed earlier. Namely, several
participants offered hints that Romney’s position as a losing candidate had already, just four months after the election, begun to change the frame through which he was perceived. One participant specifically stated that he was “probably not as evil as we made him out to be.” Another wrote “who? He’s so yesterday.” And yet another simply wrote “?”. Though the last two comments were coded as none/other, taken together with the first there may be some indication that the narrative form of the community may be variable to some degree, moving toward the tragic at moments of intense conflict (such as presidential elections), and shifting toward the comic at times of low-conflict (away from elections or major legislative fights). Again, the data here are certainly too weak to support such a claim on their own, but may at least suggest the potential use of future research along these lines.

The internal inconsistency of the results in this category likely indicates problems in question design. First, participants in the quantitative survey offer strong support for both the tragic and the comic perspective on the first question (what should happen to George W. Bush as a result of his role in the Iraq war), which again suggests an issue with member-bias, but hints at a mild preference for the comic given the higher mean. This mild comic preference is undermined, though, by the qualitative survey, which suggests instead a tragic preference. More problematic is the comparison of these results with those relating to the second issue, how to deal with countries who threaten the U.S. Here we see the previous preferences reversed as participants reject the tragic frame even more strongly than they accepted it in the first case. Such a reversal is not innately proof of poor question design, but in this case
it seems the most likely cause. While it might be argued that formal preferences are tied to issues, and indeed I believe this is a possibility that merits further investigation, there is no such reversal in any other survey category. Additionally, the fact that both questions address foreign policy to some degree undermines inter-question triangulation. It is also possible that the first questions, with their reference to the Iraq war, unduly influenced responses to the second questions. What seems most likely, though, is once again an issue of Kairos, with the opposition to the Iraq war still operating as a sort of litmus test for membership in this political community. From this perspective one might view the vigorous rejection of the tragic frame in the second set of questions not so much as a powerful endorsement of the comic, but rather as a partisan rejection of any foreign policy like that of George W. Bush. I would add that the failure of these questions to adequately address the topic is particularly disappointing in that Appel singles out this category as especially important in determining the difference between the very dangerous tragic form and the similar but fundamentally “safe” melodramatic.

**Redemptive Purpose & Means**

**Quantitative Questions**
27. Obama’s election in 2008 was a chance to undo some of the damage done by Bush.

**Qualitative Question**

The pattern of results in this category very nearly mirrors those in the Agent category, and given the similar question topics, reinforces the tentative findings of a comic preference, as well as the possibility of member-bias. Once again the quantitative survey shows answers almost exclusively grouped in the positive range, but with a mean for the comic approximately one point higher than that shown by the tragic. The qualitative survey likewise reinforces the possibility of a comic preference, though once again one survey is undermined by a high number of answers that are too short to categorize. However, it must also be considered that this alignment of results may also be a product of categorical overlap, and
indeed an examination of Appel’s descriptions for this category and the questions posed in the survey suggests strong topical connections to the Agent category.

Conclusions

It is useful at this point to recall the twofold goals of the study. On one hand, I sought to examine participants’ reactions to statements aligned with tragic or comic formal preferences, as well as their use of tragic or comic form in their own statements, in order to see if the community exhibits any formal preference. However, a second, and perhaps more important purpose of this study, was to examine the potential effectiveness of the survey method in the study of narrative form. In particular, I sought to evaluate the possibility of using comparatively easily-analyzed quantitative surveys, whose simplified data analysis might eventually allow very widespread distribution. The results on this last question remain mixed, but do, I believe, suggest that further research into the application of the survey method as a means of enhancing traditional rhetorical criticism is merited. As such, I will begin here with a discussion of findings that, while they do not in themselves help identify the narrative preferences of the community, do offer potential methodological insights that should improve future studies.

First, as discussed in the Agent and the Redemptive Purpose and Means categories, it is likely that member bias influenced the results. Given that the primary effect of this on quantitative data is to reduce resolution by causing all the answers to cluster in the agree or disagree half of the scale, the most obvious solution would be to begin with much broader range of answers than was present in this study. However, while this may be an effective approach, it must be acknowledged that it may also introduce new difficulties. For example, participants may shy away from the extreme ends of a wide scale, and thus will self-select what amounts to a lower resolution. More importantly, it may become difficult to move accurately from a linguistic continuum to a numerical continuum. The hierarchy of a simple three-point verbal continuum (somewhat agree, agree, strongly agree) such as used here may be numerically represented with little debate, but a +/- 10 point scale, for example, would likely be impossible to linguistically label with any degree of accuracy. The lack of such labels may be acceptable, but may also reduce the likelihood of participants having a common understanding of the meaning of each numerical answer.

Next, future studies along these lines will have to carefully consider the impact both of the current political situation, as well as the degree to which the questions focus on current and known figures (Obama) versus abstract or idealized figures (Republicans, Reagan). Until the impact of such differences on a community’s formal preference is known, future surveys will need to consistently situate questions to the greatest extent possible, maintaining constant structure across changes in the political situation or in the communities being studied. It may be that surveys addressing current issues or figures will have extremely brief life spans, while those less temporally situated may be more effective at showing long-term consistency or change (though of course only as relates to such non-situated dramatistic elements).

It must also be considered that, as discussed earlier, Burke’s dramatistic categories are not totally distinct. Burke himself admits that “none of these poetic categories can be isolated in its chemical purity. They overlap upon one another, involving the qualitative matter of emphasis. One could with justice divide the field differently” (Attitudes Toward History 57). No simple solution to this issue presents itself. Perhaps the contemporary critical approach of studying ratios rather than absolutes
might begin to address this problem, but even this demands some ability to isolate one dramatistic category from another. Alternatively, it may be acceptable to narrow the range of applicable categories, arguing, for instance, that political narratives are most fundamentally concerned with Agent and Counteragent. Such an approach, however, would demand a substantial revision of the theoretical foundations of dramatism itself—a profound undertaking, to say the least. Despite this, it seems that the survey method has the potential to enrich and expand the study of narrative formal preferences, offering a tool that, with time, may be an effective complement to traditional rhetorical analysis.

Despite these limits, the study can offer at least one tentative conclusion: It appears that the highly political and strongly left-wing individuals in this community tend toward a tragic view of the counteragent, but simultaneously prefer a comic view of the agent and the redemptive purpose and means. Thus, to the extent to which this can be generalized, it might be suggested this group views the opposition as villainous, but does not view the political “self”—either as manifest in specific figures like Obama, or even as in abstract groups like “liberals” or “progressives”—as comparably heroic. Such a mismatch of narrative lenses would be a provocative finding in itself, and might also offer insight into the behavior of this group, and into the problems of communicating between groups. For example, such a finding would help explain the much debated effectiveness of negative advertising as compared to positive advertising. If the audience is more willing to see the counteragent as a villain, negative ads that feature vicious intent rather than foolish mistakes (seemingly most negative ads) would essentially play to the innate tendencies of the audience. Likewise, positive ads, which tend to cast a heroic light on candidates, might run against the formal predilections of the audience, and thus be less effective.

However, while an understanding of the narrative preferences of a community may well prove useful for campaign advertising designed to “motivate the base,” and indeed in a democratic society one cannot entirely dismiss the value of such ads no matter how jaded we have become, it is my hope that such an understanding also leads to more effective communication across the partisan divide. This is not merely a call for less political dysfunction in Washington, but rather a call for more effective communication about the many vital issues, such as climate change, that have unfortunately become coupled with partisan identity to such an extent that no productive political debate on the topic seems possible anywhere in the country. It is vital to remember, though, that the obstacles to this debate do not lie in Washington any more than political identity itself comes from Washington. Thus any transformation of our political discourse must be a transformation of all levels of discourse, and one that acknowledges the nature and inherent sense of individual formal perspectives.
Works Cited


Burke, Kenneth. “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle.’”


Appendix A: Demographic Survey Questions

1. Are you 18 or older? (yes; no) (“no” ends survey)
2. Are you (male; female; transgendered; prefer not to answer)
4. How would you describe your political views? (Liberal; Progressive; Moderate; Independent; Conservative; Other [fill in blank])
5. Which of the two major parties do you more closely identify with? (Republican; Democratic)
6. How frequently have you voted for a member of the [party with which they did not identify] party? (never; only once or twice; occasionally; frequently)
7. How would you identify your political views on the following scale? (five radio boxes: “Very Left-Wing,” “Left-Wing,” “Centrist,” “Moderately Right-Wing,” and “Very Right-Wing.”) (“Moderately Right-Wing” or “Very Right-Wing” ends survey)
8. How strongly do you feel about your political views? (five radio boxes, left-most identified as not strongly at all, right most identified as “extremely strongly”)
9. How often do you read or view political news from any of the following sources? (Check all that apply) (TV, political internet sites, general news internet sites, print newspapers/magazines, talk radio) (daily; several times per week; several times per month; rarely) (question presented as a grid of radio buttons)
10. Please check all of the following activities in which you have participated: (donated money to a political campaign; volunteered time for a political campaign; commented on a political news article, written your own post for Kos, signed an online political petition; put a bumper sticker on your vehicle)