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C.S. Lewis' "The Weight of Glory" through Kenneth Burke's Dramatism

There are few modern Christian rhetors with the grasp of classical rhetoric, historical Christianity, and the English language as C.S. Lewis. His passion for Christianity as well as the liberal arts is an infrequent combination, especially in modern academia, when lines between disciplines and discourses can be rigid and unyielding. Approaching Lewis through the work of Kenneth Burke, then, seems most appropriate. Burke himself was not confined to one discipline but approached rhetoric through literary and linguistic disciplines; this multi-disciplinary approach led to the development of a theory known as "dramatism." In applying Burke's theory of dramatism to Lewis' sermon and essay "The Weight of Glory," one can gain a layered and complete picture of both Lewis' argument and its context.

Dramatism, as defined by Burke, is a system of analysis based on the structure of a play or fictional work that can be applied to any given text in order to further understand it. Specifically, dramatism is concerned with *motive* over method of persuasion; through a series of questions and defining terms, one peels away at a text to understand the motives of the text—what it is saying, and why it is saying it. Those questions and terms are known as the *pentad*, and are as follows: the act, the scene, the agent, the agency, and the purpose. The act is what happened in a situation; the scene is where the act occurred; the agent is the individual carrying out the act; the agency is the instruments and/or techniques used in the execution of the act, and the purpose is the reason the act occurred. Burke says that "Any complete statement about

motives will offer *some kind of* answers to these five questions” (*A Grammar of Motive*, xv). All of these exist in relation to one another, and all of the questions are designed to help us understand the motive behind the act. Asking each of these questions, and isolating each of these factors, provides a framework based on literary analysis that helps the reader to unpack and understand the text. In asking all of these questions, and in identifying each of the terms of the pentad in “The Weight of Glory,” we will be able to answer the question “what is the motive of the text?” What is Lewis’ “The Weight of Glory” trying to accomplish?

Another important factor in symbolism is Burke’s understanding of language as symbolic, and—importantly—individually symbolic. He says that “the whole overall 'picture' [of reality] ... is but a construct of our symbol systems” (*Language as Symbolic Action*, 5). Each person’s perception of reality is influenced and constructed by his or her own language, as language is the symbol system through which we perceive the world (and, arguably, shape that perception). This understanding echoes the Sapir-Wharf hypothesis and provides a unique understanding of language within the framework of dramatism.

Before analyzing, it is important to provide a brief summary of the work. “The Weight of Glory” is a sermon delivered by C.S. Lewis in 1941. It begins with a discussion of Christian desire, in which Lewis expresses the sentiment that most Christians do not desire too much. In fact, he argues, they desire too little. Their desires are limited to things in this world, when they should be desiring Heaven and the rewards therein. From there, Lewis discusses the glory that a Christian receives in Heaven, and what the nature of this glory is. He speaks of two kinds of glory—first, in the sense of accolades, and second in the sense of splendor. For both of these, his aim is to provide a biblical understanding of what this looks like for the Christian in Heaven, and to encourage the desire of it in the listener. Last, he finishes with an encouragement to remain

faithful in everyday life, not being consumed by anticipation for things to come. He encourages the believer to love his neighbor and to love his God, and to do all of this with the hope of Heaven in mind.

Applying dramatism to “The Weight of Glory,” then, begins with the pentad: what is the act, the scene, the agent, the agency, and the purpose? First the act: “The Weight of Glory” is an essay, yes, but before that it is a sermon. It was a speech, delivered to a group of people on a specific occasion. Specifically, as a sermon, it was intended to teach, admonish, and edify churchgoers in regard to a particular part of Christian life. In this case, that was the relationship between the present and eternity, and the qualities of “glory.”

Second, what was the scene? Well, as a sermon, we understand that the address was given in a church to parishioners or church attendees. “The Weight of Glory” was given in the Church of St. Mary the Virgin in Oxford, England on June 8, 1941. The church is a part of the campus of Oxford University, and one at which Lewis had preached before (Taylor). Understanding the immediate setting is of course, important to understanding the work, but also important is the larger context. England had, at this point in history, been engaged in what we now call World War II for two years; Lewis was speaking to an audience weighed down by the cares of violence and strife. It is entirely possible that some of those listening were students, waiting to be drafted into the war, or the families of those who were fighting on the Continent. Lewis’s argument for a future hope and for present perseverance is even more poignant and needed when one understands this larger context he was speaking in.

On to the third term of the pentad—the agent. The sermon was given, as might be inferred from prior information in this paper, by Oxford professor C.S. (Clive Staples) Lewis. He

was, at the time, Fellow and Tutor of English Literature at Oxford University, as well as a well-known scholar and Christian rhetor.

The fourth term is the agency—what were the instruments and techniques used in the execution of the act? And while most of the other terms are fairly straightforward to define, this is more complex, because this involves some analysis of the text itself and not the circumstances surrounding it. First, Lewis uses deductive reasoning to make his argument. He goes through several steps to arrive at his main argument: first, he argues that we are created for something other than this world, specifically, we are created for the eternal. He supports this argument with observation, namely that we have a desire for something beyond this world. Of course, it is his own beliefs which term this longing as for the eternal, something Burke would see as Lewis' personal linguistic symbolism shaping his perception of the world. Lewis himself acknowledges this, and says “But surely a man's hunger does prove that he comes of a race which repairs its body by eating and inhabits a world where eatable substances exist. In the same way, though I do not believe (I wish I did) that my desire for Paradise proves that I shall enjoy it, I think it a pretty good indication that such a thing exists and that some men will” (Lewis).x

Second, having established a longing for something other, and understanding that (given a like-minded audience) this ‘other’ is the Christian eternity, Heaven, he moves to an argument defining what Heaven is like. For this, his argument is grounded in Scripture, pulling descriptions of eternity to support his conclusion. Specifically, he reaches the conclusion that the primary quality of eternity that must be considered by the Christian is that of the Christian's own “glory” in Heaven.

This brings us to his main argument: what is glory? Lewis here moves to inductive reasoning: he points out specific facts about glory and uses them to draw a broad conclusion

about what it is. He isolates first glory in the sense of fame and uses examples and information from scripture in order to demonstrate the true, Christian perception of this sort of glory—specifically, the joy of being known, seen, and understood by God. Second, he isolates glory in the sense of luminosity, and uses evidence in the same way to demonstrate how glory in eternity will be the ability for the Christian to be a part of the glory of nature, of true beauty, and not just experiencing it from the outside.

So, after analyzing the text argumentatively, the agency can be better identified—“The Weight of Glory” makes use of narrowing deductive arguments in order to arrive at the main argument, which is structured as a series of inductive arguments.

Last in the pentad, we look at the purpose: why did this act occur? And this act, as a sermon, occurred because Lewis was called upon to give a spoken address in order to encourage, admonish, and instruct a Christian congregation in regard to some aspect of Christian life from scripture.

Before moving on, it is interesting to note one other aspect that can be analyzed using the framework that dramatism provides. Like Burke, the text has an understanding of the world being primarily symbolic. Lewis’ understanding of symbolism, however, is distinct from Burke’s. Burke sees symbols, especially language, as the result of humans being “symbol-using animals.” The symbols shape our perception of the world and are a reflection of reality as we perceive it. Lewis also sees the world as symbolic and reflective of reality, but instead of a perceived reality he sees symbols as reflections of an eternal reality. Beauty on this earth is, to Burke, a symbolic word informed by the user’s perceptions and experiences. To Lewis Beauty is also a symbol, but instead he would argue that beauty and the word beauty on this earth are intended to symbolize a perfected, heavenly beauty. In this way his understanding of symbolism

differs from Burke's: Burke sees language as symbolic, representing individual experiences and perspectives. In essence, Burke's symbols are subjective. Lewis, conversely, sees language as symbolic of an eternal, objective reality. While both see language as reflective, one sees it as reflective of the subjective and the other of the objective.

Having isolated each of these members of the pentad, we come to Burke's real purpose: what is the motive of "The Weight of Glory?" We know that, according to Burke, any effective statement of motive will answer every question of the pentad. It will detail what it is, where it occurred, who executed it, how it was executed, and why it was executed. Understanding this, we can formulate a statement of motive for "The Weight of Glory:" "The Weight of Glory" is a sermon, given by theologian and scholar C.S. Lewis at the University Church of St. Mary in Oxford England in order to bring to the listeners attention the importance of understanding Heaven, and to inform the listeners what heaven is like. Specifically, it is to give them a correct, biblical understanding of the glory they will experience in heaven. Not only this, it is to provide a future hope and a present encouragement in the context of a distressing war. This is accomplished through a combination of deductive and inductive reasoning, and through layered arguments. All of this together accomplishes the purpose of a sermon, which is to inform and encourage the listener in some area or aspect of Christian life. Given the purpose of the address and the effective method in which the content is structured and argued, "The Weight of Glory" can be understood to be an effective text from the perspective of dramatism.

In analyzing "The Weight of Glory" through Burke's dramatism, not only do you analyze it in a manner that would be appreciable to its author as an rhetorician and English professor, but also in a way that is careful and accurate with the text itself. It takes into account not only the text, but the context, as well as the symbolic language used within the text. It allows the reader to

view the text through the framework of literary and dramatic devices, and to better understand it through that framework. While Burke's terminology may not be traditional, it still provides the necessary terms and questions to analyze a text. It allows the reader to understand the motive of the text, and to judge based on the techniques used to accomplish the purpose, whether or not it is an effective text.

"The Weight of Glory," then, as analyzed through dramatism, is intended to inform its listeners of the realities of eternal glory, and it does so in a manner consistent with its purpose and with its format. These facts about it, however, can only be understood because of the unique perspective that dramatism provides on a text. Lewis and Burke may have had different understandings of language, but they shared an approach to rhetoric that was interdisciplinary and heavily linguistic, meaning that when one is used to analyze the other, they inform each other well. Burke's dramatism provides a layered, careful approach to analysis of motive that allows Lewis' work to be understood in a way consistent with both how it was written, and how it was presented in its original context.

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