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Burke, Dewey, and the Experience of the Epideictic:

An Examination of Rhetorical Elements

Found in Presidential Funerals

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

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This article examines the role of epideictic rhetoric as a tool for promoting civic virtue in the public realm through the application of Kenneth Burke's theory of identification and John Dewey's explanation of an aesthetic experience. Long the jurisdiction of Aristotle's logical arguments, civic discussion usually works within the realm of forensic or deliberative persuasion. However, scholarship in the last fifty years suggests there is an unexplored dimension of Aristotle's discussion of epideictic and emotion that needs to be examined in an attempt to identify its usefulness as a tool for examining human experience and practical behavior in the political realm. I attempt to add to the discussion by exploring the presidential funerals of Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, and Ronald Reagan as opportunities for a nation to display a hero's virtues as extensions of society's virtues. Virtues often define what a nation considers *good* which, in turn, influences the nature of the discussion and often determines political action.

Keywords: Aristotle, Kenneth Burke, John Dewey, Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, emotion, funerals, epideictic, aesthetics, identification

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Burke, Dewey, and the Experience of Aristotle's Epideictic: An Examination of Rhetorical
Elements Found in the Funerals of Lincoln, Kennedy, and Reagan

It is a book of grief, and there are good reasons why this is so. Hard-hearted, cynical audiences are usually smart. You can't tell them anything they haven't thought about before. Critique, clever inventions, intriguing arguments, and brilliant analyses are the bread and butter hard-hearted people chew up and spit out without stopping to breathe. The chink in the armour of cynics, however, is sorrow.

—Daniel Coleman, *In Bed with the Word*

Introduction

Given that most of what we have of Aristotle's writings are probably lecture notes, it is no surprise that Aristotle's conception of epideictic rhetoric is better explained by contemporary theorists than by Aristotle himself. Epideictic, for the most part, as Aristotle defines it, has been confined to "the ceremonial oratory of display" (1358b 32) to promote civic virtue; only in the late half of the twentieth century has epideictic rhetoric been investigated as a tool for examining human experience and practical behavior in the public realm. The assumption that epideictic rhetoric is confined to the ceremonial minimized its influence in public discourse for centuries. As Gerard Hauser points out, the academic discussion "has focused almost exclusively on the deliberate arenas in which public issues are open to discussion and debate, giving scant, if any attention to the relationship between epideictic and the quality of political discussion" (6). Lloyd Bitzer also recognizes this as a problem in his discussion of the relationship between rhetoric and publics. Bitzer observes in "Rhetoric and Public Knowledge" that we have a "habit of regarding as true—as knowledge—those propositions which issue from accepted scientific procedures of investigation and confirmation" (92)—in other words, knowledge produced out of the Platonic philosophy considers "the ideal [to be] a mathematical language abstracted from objects, above contingency; number, not words," which is the language, according to Susan Handelman, that has influenced all of western metaphysics (5). One consequence of scientific language, Bitzer

observes, is that the “principles of moral conduct and maxims of political and social life—indeed all of humane wisdom that may guide civilization—have been regarded as opinion found wanting when put to the tests of confirmation” (92). Beginning in the last fifty years, scholarship has attempted to remedy the situation by reexamining Aristotle’s rhetoric and his treatment of epideictic. This paper seeks to add to that attempt by exploring the funerals of Lincoln, Kennedy, and Reagan, arguably our nation’s most influential presidential funerals, as opportunities to display on a national stage the president’s virtues as extensions of society’s virtues. Virtues often define what a nation considers *good* and influence the nature of the political discussion. Although *good* is a relative term, I am using *good* as explained by Paul Woodruff’s discussion of virtue ethics in *Reverence*: “According to virtue ethics, a good person is one who feels like doing what is right. . . . Virtue is the source of the feelings that prompt us to behave well” (6); it is “a kind of vaccine against moral decay” (108–09). Woodruff explains that virtues can be cultivated through families and communities working together, a process that strengthens the individual who, in turn, strengthens their community (7). *Good*, then, becomes a community affair that helps define “how we should live our lives” to benefit and strengthen each other and our communities (12), and presidential funerals portray the virtues necessary to encourage responsible citizenship within those communities.

I aim to use Kenneth Burke’s definition of identification and John Dewey’s of *an* experience to show that epideictic rhetoric uses aesthetic forms to create public experiences that become the foundation for civic identity. First, I will situate my argument within Aristotle’s conception of epideictic and its power for persuasion; second, I will show how Burke extends Aristotle’s theory of persuasion to include identification, and third I use Dewey’s explanation of an aesthetic experience to explain how experiences of identification work within epideictic—

how they have the power to influence an audience in addition to displaying virtue. I use the funerals of Lincoln, Kennedy, and Reagan as examples of aesthetic experiences working within an epideictic situation to show the practical power epideictic has to present a moment for an aesthetic identification to take place, an identification that is essential for the internalization of appropriate attitudes, which can then lead to appropriate actions that contribute to a successful democracy. Presidential funerals can be especially powerful examples because they bring a national audience face-to-face with the reality that death happens to everyone: the President of the United States is arguably the most powerful person in the world, and if the president can die, then so can anyone. As Barry Schwartz in *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of Public Memory* suggests, “it is not the crisis itself that explains extraordinary reactions to a president’s sudden death; it is the effect of the crisis on the salience and visibility of the presidency,” (61) an effect that “transcends ideological preferences” and demonstrates “a commitment whose real object is the nation itself” (63). During a presidential funeral, death is on public display, and the inevitability of death gives everyone pause and provides at least a moment for the power of an aesthetic experience contained within Aristotle’s conception of epideictic rhetoric to influence the tender-hearted and the cynic alike.

Aristotle on Epideictic

Historically, epideictic rhetoric provided an opportunity for praising or blaming, and it was in the act of praising or blaming that particular values were transmitted. For example, a funeral eulogy in Athens celebrated the hero’s virtues that demonstrated the values of the community. Although it may have been an unintended consequence from Aristotle’s perspective (at least according to what writing we have of his), many contemporary theorists collectively recognize the influence epideictic discourse has on political action within a democracy (Hauser

5). One of the problems Athenian democracy had was teaching the virtues necessary to ensure responsible citizenship within the social community and justice within the judicial domain. One way they solved this was through performative rhetoric or dramatic theater. Athens covered the cost of the theater for any citizen who couldn't afford to attend in order to provide everyone a continuing education on the dilemmas faced in their civic life. As Woodruff notes in *First Democracy*, Athenians watched either tragic or comedic dramatizations of democratic ideas and practices that portrayed desirable public values or that warned of practices that would endanger the democratic process (229). The Athenians used theater to educate themselves for citizenship within the Athenian democracy and “[t]his theater could take on any issue, however explosive, and try out any idea (223–24). In this sense, Athenian theater can be considered an epideictic performance that influenced the political process in the same way presidential funerals can be said to be a ceremonial performance that displays the nation’s values on a public stage, which then influences American politics.

Ceremonial performance or dramatic theater implies emotion, an implication Aristotle acknowledges when he identifies epideictic discourse as “the emotional proof” (Corbett xvii) when compared to the logical proofs, which are used by forensic and deliberative discourses. Emotion, as Aristotle describes it, is not as desirable as logic for persuasive purposes because it may interfere with rhetoric’s primary function of managing civic discourse with honesty and virtue, an attitude which influenced early scholars to suggest that emotion does not belong in public discourse. Current scholars disagree. As Edward Corbett notes, “Aristotle recognizes that if speakers do not responsibly arouse emotions, they will frequently not be able to persuade people to change their minds or be able to move them to action, even though the audience has been won over logically” (xviii). And although Aristotle prefers that people always make choices

and decisions on rational grounds, he reluctantly acknowledges that there is another way of knowing not based on demonstration; thus, he acknowledges emotion's persuasive power and then connects emotion to reason as Gisela Striker notes in "Emotions in Context": "just because emotions are not the result of rational decision does not mean that they are mere reflexes . . . Emotions are not based on reasoning, but, as Aristotle puts it, they (that is, the 'part of the soul' to which they belong) can be persuaded by reason" (299). Like Corbett and Striker, Hauser also recognizes the possibilities epideictic's emotions can have in the public realm. He observes in "Aristotle on Epideictic" that there is an unexplored dimension of Aristotle's discussion of epideictic which suggests that epideictic discourse provides an opportunity for discussing possibilities of collective political action in the form of a nation's fundamental values and beliefs (5). His observation takes into account scholarship by Nicole Loraux, John Poulakos, and others who maintain that epideictic discourse plays "an important role in the public realm beyond simple commemoration" (5).

Scholars now look at Aristotle's explanation of epideictic as a reaction to the execution of the Athenian naval commanders responsible for the victory at Arginoussai in 406 B.C.E. Although victorious in battle, they were unable to rescue a small contingent of sailors and were put to death in Athens after a particularly emotional trial (Hauser 8). Athenians recognized that teaching virtue was necessary to ensure responsible citizenship within the social community and justice within the judicial domain, and for Aristotle, the trial was a concrete example of passions gone awry. Commenting on the ruling, Aristotle cautioned his audience against misusing the power of emotion in epideictic performances because it might "warp the jury by leading them into anger or pity: [which] is the same as if someone made a straight-edge ruler crooked before

using it” (Aristotle 1354a 15–17). Nevertheless, he recognized that epideictic had a persuasive power that was needed to transmit a community’s values, a perspective that Hauser points out:

Aristotle advocated rhetorical means for resolving public issues because he envisioned the artistic practice of persuasion in concert with the person of his ideal rhetor and the teaching function such a person exercised. This teaching function is nowhere more evident than in Aristotle’s treatment of epideictic. . . . when juxtaposed with the requirements for an audience competent to understand Aristotle’s model rhetor, epideictic subject matter suggests that this genre served an important educative function. (9–10)

In addition to theater, Athens also used public funerals to educate the public to ensure responsible citizenship. While Aristotle classifies epideictic as “ceremonial” and an “oratory of display” (1358b 32), a seemingly frivolous form of rhetoric, he also “recognizes the ceremonial occasion as a time for celebrating deeds that transcend partisan factions and selfish interests. By valorizing heroes who are emblematic of a society’s best qualities, encomia provide concrete guidance on how to live in harmony with noble ideals” (Hauser 15). Another scholar, John C. Adams, in “Epideictic and Its Cultured Reception” agrees, noting that “Once commemorated, the actions are established as paradigms of virtue and may be summoned as precedents to future cases of moral reasoning” (293). Adams also recognizes that for epideictic experiences to serve an educative function, the audience must be predisposed to accept the virtuous qualities as “incontestable,” and as such, the presentations “are not an argument per se, but paradigmatic examples designed to *amplify* in narrative form the qualities being exhibited for public commemoration and celebration” (295). Using that foundation then, my claim is that public

funerals are opportunities to display a hero's virtues as extensions of society's virtues, virtues which often define what a nation considers *good* or what influences the way they live their lives.

By examining the unique rhetorical elements inherent in presidential funerals, I argue that focusing attention on the relationship between epideictic performance and the quality of political discussion can provide a connection between people, an opportunity for productive discussion, or a place of common ground to begin discovering workable solutions. Yet funerals are usually private family affairs, but funerals of public figures, presidents in particular, contain all the elements to serve the educative function for, as Aristotle suggests, promoting civic virtues. Still, this connection between emotion, reason, and persuasion defines emotion as the common thread running through Aristotle's forms of human communication and lends support to the observation that epideictic performances, such as presidential funerals, can serve an educative function within the community. Nevertheless, emotional appeals should not be viewed as merely manipulative (a charge often leveled at rhetoric) because it may be that the right kind of emotion allows us to "see things in their right moral perspective," which suggests a rational, moral judgment that might not come about without a virtuous character (Striker 298–99). Elements of a virtuous character can often be found in a nation's leaders, and a presidential funeral provides the virtues of the fallen leader as a model of the *right* perspective for that particular nation. Take Lincoln for example, those arranging the funeral chose to display out of his life story "his decision to wage war and abolish slavery"; this particular incident is "commemorated, that is, invested with extraordinary moral significance and assigned a distinct place in society's conception of him" (Schwartz 12).

Lincoln as a Model of American Virtue

Although it can be argued that contention and controversy followed Lincoln throughout his political career, his assassination and funeral reconstructed his status from “a controversial president into an emblem of Northern society” (23). Lincoln’s first term in office was marked by discord between supporters and opponents of the war, with neither side approving his handling of the situation. In fact, public opinion against him was running so high that three months before the November 1864 elections he wrote “a farewell letter, whose envelope his cabinet signed, urging his successor to preserve the Union” (23). His eventual reelection by a slim margin did not diminish the animosities swirling around him. However, on April 9, 1865, Robert E. Lee surrendered and the North began celebrating. It was four days later, on Good Friday, at the peak of the celebration that Lincoln was shot (34). The nation reacted with shocked outrage, becoming at once Lincoln sympathizers “sensitive to the slightest nuance of disrespect. . . . Lincoln’s memory, now intertwined with the offended dignity of his office, was more sacred than Lincoln himself” (36–37). Schwarz notes that “The funeral attached Lincoln to the people’s enlarged sense of themselves, transcending particulars on which few could agree and converting him into a symbol on whose significance all could agree” (58). The sudden shock of assassination contrasted sharply with the nation’s euphoria upon Lee’s surrender, resulting in a nation willing to engage in the emotional rituals of mourning and commemoration despite previous feelings of antipathy. Emotion dominated reaction to Lincoln’s death, creating an emotional context for the funeral rites to generate not a reconstruction of Lincoln, but a new perspective of him that allowed people to feel differently about what they knew of him (30). The funeral and the emotion associated with it transformed Lincoln’s reputation and allowed history to be less

critical of the man and more generous toward his statesmanship, making him a model of American virtue and democratic values for future generations.

Although emotion is often discounted when contrasted with reason, most would agree that all sane humans experience some type of emotion, a fact that must be considered not only in presidential funerals but also in politics in general. “Politics is about moving people,” Daniel Gross writes in *The Secret History of Emotion*, as he explores Aristotle’s theory of persuasion: “It is in certain respects a science . . . But as early modern political theorists would reiterate, politics is also a matter of art” (61). Civic discourse, then, from an Aristotelian view, requires a form of persuasion that can lead an audience to see emotion as central to human communication, a view that extends Aristotle’s theory into Burke’s idea that we communicate with each other through experiences of identification and into Dewey’s theory that emotional experiences, when deliberately ordered and organized, can provide a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment. As David Kertzer observes in *Ritual, Politics, and Power*, “what often underlies people’s political allegiances is their social identification with a group rather than their sharing of beliefs with other members” (67), an observation that supports my claim that presidential funerals provide an opportunity to influence the nature of political discussions and that influence happens through the process of identification as explained by Burke.

Burke Extends Aristotle’s Epideictic

Burke defines identification from the view that humans are different from the animals in one important aspect: they have the ability to use symbols. And he defines symbols in his early work as “the verbal parallel to a pattern of experience” (*Counter-Statement* 152), which he would classify as action; but, he also recognizes that our bodies still participate in the non-symbolic physical realm of motion (Woodcock 709). It is in the realm of symbolic action that

Burke examines human experience and practical behavior and suggests that humans use symbolic action in both deliberate ways and for its own sake (*Language* 301-03). In fact, within symbolic action we also find Burke's theory of dramatism, which examines motives or the deliberate use of action through the tools of agent, act, scene, agency, and purpose, terms that identify who did what, when and where they did it, how they did it, and why they did it; more importantly, Burke's pentad allows us to consider how one tool influences the other (*Grammar of Motives* xv). It is the influence or the deliberate use of symbolic action that Burke recognizes as Aristotelian and persuasive; however, he feels that defining rhetoric as "the means of persuasion available for any given situation," as Aristotle does, fails to establish that persuasion requires "the audience to identify itself with the speaker's interests" (*A Rhetoric of Motives* 46). By extending Aristotle's theory of persuasion to include the idea of identification, Burke increases the scope and power of rhetoric, allowing it to participate in aesthetic identification. However, for an explanation of how the theory of identification works, it is helpful to engage Dewey's theory of aesthetics and the role emotion plays in the process. Although Dewey does not reference Burke, Dewey explains more fully how the process of identification works through his definition of aesthetics. Aesthetics, for Dewey and for this paper, refers to experiences composed from the resources of thought and events in forms that emotionally satisfy, or, in his word, are "consummated" through "internal integration and fulfillment reached through ordered and organized movement" (39–40).

Dewey Explains Burke

While aesthetics or art for Burke creates a shared identification, art for Dewey creates a shared experience, a rhetorical situation open to establishing common ground. Dewey's theory works within an aesthetic experience to explain how the emotional appeals of epideictic work—

how they have power to influence an audience in addition to displaying virtue. For Dewey, the rhetorical and the aesthetic work together to create order out of disorder; they mirror the satisfaction one often gets through consciously ordering one's life. Dewey defines these composed expressions of emotionally satisfying experiences as *an* experience, which, for Dewey, are both an individual encounter and an interdependent relationship with an aesthetic object or an event. The aesthetic events in this case are presidential funerals. The event contains qualities of completeness and unity that can be called emotional, but whose emotional qualities are attached to an event as experienced by the general public during Lincoln's funeral.

For Dewey, emotional qualities are different than sensations or passing moods, and emotional experiences are different than automatic reflexes; they are encounters and interactions with, and perceptions of, art that purposely have patterns and structure and hierarchy—they exist on a spectrum of aesthetic effectiveness (43–46). Emotion provides the qualitative coherence for *an* experience: it is “the moving and cementing force” that orders the pieces of human communication (44), and hopefully it is human communication that can influence individuals to participate in productive human discourse. However, emotion is not complete in and of itself. Emotion must be given a material form and then carried forward to be considered an aesthetic experience (66-73).

Although *an* experience must have emotion, “[i]t is not just what registers on our consciousness as we make our way through the world but includes the objects and events that compose that world. The objects and events are as much a part of experience as we are ourselves” (Jackson 3). When we have what Dewey considers an aesthetic experience, we or the world have to be transformed in some manner. We can identify Lincoln's assassination and funeral as a moment of national transformation. Those planning the funeral chose to focus on

Lincoln's morally significant decision to abolish slavery instead of highlighting the more mundane elements of his life "such as his work as a railroad attorney" (Schwartz 12). Thus, the decision to abolish slavery was invested with such extraordinary moral significance that the nation was transformed. And as Adams observes, "Once commemorated, the actions are established as paradigms of virtue and may be summoned as precedents to future cases of moral reasoning" (293), a precedent which is continually summoned by various civic groups, individual politicians, and political parties to support civil rights and promote democratic practices. In this particular instance, both the rhetorical event and the aesthetic object worked communicatively and enabled those addressed to experience that integration of disparate elements—that feeling of satisfaction and fulfillment that follows when things come together, when they make sense. That feeling was an emotion. Both Aristotle's conception of rhetoric, particularly in the case of his category of epideictic rhetoric, and Dewey's conception of the aesthetic work upon those addressed by providing, when they are effective, a coherent emotional experience. That emotional experience is prompted by elements of experience, as Dewey describes it, in congruent terms, by the experience of putting together the pieces of experience that Burke describes in his definition of identification and its forms. These theories suggest that effective epideictic rhetoric uses aesthetics to display and promote proper civic virtues, virtues that explain, validate, educate, and perpetuate desirable community values, transcend partisan factions and self-interest, counteract cynicism caused by constant public scandal, provide a national identity, and form attitudes that may influence the democratic process (Hauser 5–20).

An example of an aesthetic display educating the public in proper civic virtue was found in Lincoln's funeral, but it can also be found in other presidential funerals. Generally speaking, funerals contain all the necessary elements of an aesthetic experience of identification as outlined

by Burke's pentad: agent, act, scene, agency, and purpose. The audience and the speakers have a common purpose—they act together to commemorate the dead through music, eulogy, and ceremony; and, while emotional displays of bereavement are considered acceptable during funerals, decorum prevents any expressions of hostility (at least in public). And as Dewey's definition requires *an* experience to have coherence, the funeral service can be considered coherent because it moves in an orderly manner with a beginning, a middle, and an end: the viewing, the eulogies, and the ceremony at the grave site. A presidential funeral follows the same pattern but on a public level with a higher degree of ethos and influence. The event and the speaker display the nation's virtues. Hauser claims they educate the public, and Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca in *The New Rhetoric* support Hauser's observation that the speaker is close to being an educator because what the speaker "is going to say does not arouse controversy, since no immediate practical interest is ever involved, and there is no question of attacking or defending, but simply promoting values that are shared in the community" (52). Thus, the funeral becomes an opportunity to display, promote, explain, and praise the president's virtues as extensions of the community's virtues because "it is not [the rhetor's] own cause or viewpoint that he is defending, but that of his entire audience" (52). Aristotle considers these opportunities to be epideictic situations and because of the emotion involved, they have the potential to persuade an audience to identify with the virtues on display and to eventually enact the virtues when participating in the civic community, an epideictic situation Burke would explain as an experience of identification.

Burke on Identification

Burke recognizes the role of emotion in the art of persuasion and extends persuasion's role when he recognizes that it requires "the audience to identify itself with the speaker's

interests” (*A Rhetoric of Motives* 46). Burke suggests we are influenced more when we identify with another body through experience than when we are persuaded through argumentation. Burke’s theory of identification increases the scope and power of rhetoric and allows it to participate in the “realm of transcendence” and in the “realm of transformation or dialectic” (“Rhetoric—Old and New” 203). Burke uses the ideas of transcendence and transformation to explain the artistic mechanism of emotion and eloquence, eloquence being defined as the transcendent form of emotion that most often provokes a universal experience that “contributes to the formation of attitudes, and thus to the determining of conduct” (*Counter-Statement* 163). In fact, through aesthetics we find shared patterns of experience that transcend our individuality and allow us to connect with other bodies. Burke suggests these connections produce influences—we influence and are influenced—which may not always lead to action but which always communicate and which always have a more “permanent” effect on the public conscious than “everyday business talk” (Walker 11). Jeffrey Walker states that “the felt ‘permanence’ and memorability of epideictic . . . give it a cultural presence, or prominence, that the more ephemeral, pragmatic genres lack. It abides through time, and in people’s minds, repeating its ‘timeless’ rhythmic words” (11–12). In the realm of aesthetics and of rhetoric, influence that communicates through emotion produces attitude, and as demonstrated by Lincoln’s funeral, long-lasting attitudes can lead to action.

Aesthetic experiences that influence attitudes begin with an artist’s emotions: “he translates this emotion into a mechanism for arousing emotion in others, and thus his interest in his own emotion transcends into his interest in the treatment” of the medium (Burke, *Counter-Statement* 55). Through the artistic mechanism, the artist manipulates our “blood, brains, heart, and bowels” (Burke, *Counter-Statement* 36) along a spectrum of emotion and eloquence.

Attitude, then, comes before action. Gregory Clark explains it this way in *Rhetorical Landscapes in America*:

When individuals identify themselves with a particular enactment of a belief or commitment that symbolizes the common ground of their community, they engage privately in the public ritual of rhetorical interaction that Burke called *identification*. In Burke's own description, epideictic rhetoric persuades people "to attitude" before it persuades them to action. And the notion of persuasion to attitude would permit the application of rhetorical terms to purely "poetic structures." (20)

Clark's explanation indicates that Burke's theory of identification contains three elements: a commonly held belief, a public ritual demonstrating that belief, and the individual's participation. Combining these elements into one event, such as a presidential funeral, make it possible for an individual or a community to have a transcendent or transforming experience.

Although the aesthetic and rhetorical structures Burke most often refers to are forms and functions of literature, there are instances when he demonstrates his theory of identification using music or drama. In fact, Burke also left the door open for the examination of other forms of expression in *Language as Symbolic Action*. In his discussion about the "elaborate terminology required" for naming different kinds of purposes, he states that "besides such verbalization, or talk, 'symbolicity' would also include all other human symbol systems, such as mathematics, music, sculpture, painting, dance, architectural styles, and so on" (28). Thus, the conception of rhetoric as an experience of "all other human symbols" allows an examination of the forms and functions of visual and performed rhetoric, as Aristotle classifies it, as exhibited in the shared

patterns of experience. National identity, then, can be on display in works of art at a museum, at the national ballet, or through visual symbols presented at an official funeral.

Visual Form in John F. Kennedy's Funeral

Consider the visual form provided by television and its influence in the funeral of President John F. Kennedy as described by the historian William L. O'Neill:

Television made the funeral unbearably poignant. To sit before the screen [the television] day after day exposed Americans to such images as no people had ever seen. Films of the President's life punctuated the chronicle of somber events. The terrible moments were shown again and again, so were the great ones, and most touching of all, the merely happy. Shots of his lovely wife Jacqueline, radiant at some public event, alternated with ghastly pictures of her stricken face and bloodstained clothes. John F. Kennedy was alive and vigorous on some film clip in one instant, and lying in state the next. The drums rolled, the bells tolled, the Heads of State marched in grim procession, and all the while his familiar voice and figure filled the air. . . . The cumulative effect of countless hours spent watching such memories and events as followed the assassination was indescribably powerful. In that short time President Kennedy passed from history to legend. What had taken decades in Abraham Lincoln's case required only days in his. (64)

Television provided a collective visual experience for the whole nation even though most watched the four-day proceedings in the privacy of their own homes. ABC, NBC, and CBS (the only major networks at the time) cancelled regular programming and broadcast around-the-clock news coverage. Everyone watched because it was the only program being broadcast and because,

as a whole, the nation was stunned by the implications of this monumental tragedy. Partisan identity, public scandal, self interest, and cynicism disappeared while the nation experienced a form of emotion that transcended individual differences and enacted a moment of national identity—we mourned together, and we identified with each other’s emotions; we shared the common bond of tragedy, and even today if you ask someone who was about grade-school age on November 22, 1963, they can tell you where they were when they heard the news that President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated. I remember, as Burke and Walker theorized I would, and I was only seven. The funeral, and the days leading up to the funeral, commemorated the fallen president’s virtues in terms of the American ideal and provided an educational moment that created an iconic figure embodying a national identity, and a shared experience still recalled as a moment of common ground after more than forty years.

Michael Halloran and Gregory Clark use Benedict Anderson’s concept of an imagined community to explain the experience: “A nation is necessarily an imagined community realized in shared symbols. What those symbols display is an ideal human identity that encompasses values and beliefs, desires and commitments of the people that community comprises” (145). Death and tragedy and the broadcast images helped transform Kennedy from a fallible human being to a figure belonging to a mythical legend, a transformation that was conceived in part by Mrs. Kennedy. In fact, Theodore H. White, journalist for *LIFE* magazine, revealed that he created the Kennedy legacy, the heroic myth, and the magic era at Mrs. Kennedy’s request: Tell the world that he was a “man of magic” that his presidency was “one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot,” Mrs. Kennedy instructed White (Jacqueline).

Although history exposed many of President Kennedy’s failings as a president and as a person, our collective memory still seems to identify him as an embodiment of the American

Dream. The reason for that may be found in the funeral experience. For example, when asked twenty-five years later to reflect on the day Kennedy was shot, Isaac Stern said, “He was the embodiment of so much that so many of us felt and hoped for and had been looking for” (*JFK*). Coretta King commented that “the whole world grieved, and it was just so, so senseless” (*JFK*). John Galbraith, Kennedy’s Ambassador to India, when asked what should be remembered of Kennedy, replied, “It was the image that he conveyed of a government of the United States, which was a good, a benign, a constructive, and a compassionate influence” (*JFK*). Although these comments seem like selective memory for Americans remembering that time, their memory can be partially explained through exploring Kennedy’s assassination and funeral as a “public ritual of rhetorical interaction that Burke called *identification*” (Clark 20). Another contributing factor to the rhetorical interaction can be partially accounted for by what Thomas C. Reeves in *A Question of Character* and the JFK Library identifies as “the movie star looks of the President and First Lady” (unnumbered picture section). The JFK Library further notes that “Americans link physical attractiveness to good character, high intelligence, competence, and other positive qualities” (unnumbered picture section), a fact that increased the emotional connection between the audience and the experience. Four days of continual television coverage showed Kennedy as more than just the president: he was shown as a son, a brother, a husband, and a father, providing more familial ways for the American people to identify with him. These images created an iconic figure of what an American male should be. And it seems that, despite his failings, the tragic manner of his death and the emotional and symbolic presentation of his life after his death will keep him living on in the minds of the American people as handsome, virtuous, and full of life—the American ideal.

The images of his life, which so quickly became iconic symbols of Americanism, also contributed to the high level of emotion felt by the American people as they watched on television or participated in the funeral services. The language of emotion is not found in the practical details of everyday business deliberations but more often found in visual symbols that transcend language and communicate through association, and Kennedy's funeral is most often recalled through the symbolic images presented at the funeral. The funeral service consisted largely of artistically arranged symbolic images displayed on America's most patriotic stage—Washington D.C., with an arrangement that was so full of emotion that Mary McGrory, then a columnist for the *Washington Star*, wrote, “It was a day of such endless fitness, with so much pathos and panoply, so much grief nobly borne” (qtd. in O'Brien 905). The funeral arrangements moved through the necessary elements of ordered progression required for Dewey's conception of an aesthetic experience, while the level of emotion and pageantry in Kennedy's funeral met the level of eloquence Burke requires for an experience of identification—in this case incorporating the visual elements of agent, act, scene, agency, and purpose to work in concert, influencing each other to provide a cohesive experience for the American people.

From the following account of the funeral described by the biographer, Michael O'Brien, we can identify the agents as the Kennedy family, marching troops, bands, foreign dignitaries, the millions of people watching on television, those attending the service, the millions lining the processional routes, and a riderless horse (coincidentally named Black Jack). The act, or what actually happened, includes not only the funeral service, but the procession from Capitol Hill to St. Matthew's Cathedral and from the Cathedral to Arlington National Cemetery, three-year-old John's salute, the fifty jets and Air Force One flying overhead, the playing of the National Anthem, the lighting of the eternal flame, and the lowering of the coffin into the ground. The

scene takes place in Washington D.C. and in Virginia, but more specifically at buildings, streets, and places the nation associates with the birth of our nation and that contain iconic symbols of patriotism. Agency answers *how* the action was accomplished and although not specified, one can assume it relied on the latest technology to broadcast and communicate, the cooperation of thousands of workers, federal money, and Mrs. Kennedy's orchestration of the event that would "uphold [President Kennedy's] sense of pageantry" (Smith 511). The purpose, of course, was to commemorate a fallen president, but it turned into much more than that—it became an aesthetic experience of national identification, a ceremony that publicly displayed the nation's values.

From *John F. Kennedy: A Biography*, O'Brien gives us this description:

The Kennedy family, marching troops, and bands escorted the caisson from Capitol Hill to funeral services at St. Matthew's Cathedral, and from there to Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia. In the long processional came foreign dignitaries, including crowned heads of state and the magisterial Charles de Gaulle of France. The cadence of muffled drums throbbed throughout the march. Black Jack, a riderless horse, symbolizing a lost leader, was led behind the casket.

When the funeral service at St. Matthew's was completed, the casket team carried the coffin slowly down the church steps. As the band struck up "Hail to the Chief," soldiers snapped from parade rest to present arms. Mrs. Kennedy leaned down and whispered to her son, 'John, you can salute Daddy now and say good-bye to him.'

'Of all Monday's images, nothing approached the force of John's salute,' wrote Manchester [author of *Death of a President*]. 'His elbow cocked at precisely the right angle, his hand touching his shock of hair, his left arm rigidly

at his side, his shoulders were [sic] squared and his chin in.' It was heart-wrenching.

After the church service the mourners journeyed down Constitution Avenue, around Lincoln Memorial, over Memorial Bridge, to Arlington Cemetery. A million people gathered to watch the procession.

During the playing of the national anthem at Arlington, fifty jet planes, one for each state, screamed over the cemetery in salute, followed by *Air Force One*. After the lighting of the perpetual flame, at 3:34 P.M. John Kennedy's body was lowered into the ground. (905)

Identification and Assent

Burke indicates that during the process of identification, a process which is found in the presentation method of Kennedy's funeral, that the audience does not merely receive the message or assertion, but they participate and become "exalted by the assertion because it has the feel of collaborating in the assertion," a feel created by "the trend of the form" (*A Rhetoric of Motives* 58). As Burke points out, this happens even when an individual may not agree with the message. This is important to mention because it conflicts with Adams' claim that for an epideictic display to have an educative function, the audience and speaker must share "a 'linguistic predisposition,' an 'open' inclination toward the potential of speech to console, commemorate, inspire, or otherwise lend meaning to events of importance in the life of a political community" (293). Burke disagrees with this premise at some level because he theorizes that some forms of presentation contain a universal appeal beyond a "linguistic disposition" that in and of themselves encourages collaboration with or participation in the form. Burke suggests an individual's participation in the form, which in this case would be a presidential funeral,

weakens the resistance to the message and prepares the individual to consider and even agree with the message. Burke argued that “this attitude of assent may then be transferred to the matter which happens to be associated with the form” (*A Rhetoric of Motives* 58), as seems to have happened to the nation during the ordering and presenting of Kennedy’s funeral—even for those in conflict with Kennedy during his life. This observation means that while a “linguistic predisposition” may create the ideal situation, Burke’s explanation of the “trend of the form” implies that sometimes form can create a universal appeal that overcomes resistance to the message. This seems to be the case during Kennedy’s funeral.

In the case of Kennedy’s funeral, the elements of agent, act, scene, agency, and purpose work in concert to influence each other: the performers, the ceremony, the context, the procedure, and the meaning created the universal appeal only partly related to a shared linguistic disposition: it also contained the “trend of the form,” which may have resulted in what Burke terms “the psychosis of nationalism . . . [where] assent on the formal level invites assent to the proposition as doctrine” (*A Rhetoric of Motives* 59). Although Burke does not use the phrase “psychosis of nationalism” as a positive term, the process of creating a universal appeal to overcome resistance is amoral: it can work either end of the moral spectrum and demonstrates the need for celebrating and commemorating democratic virtues that have a positive effect on the attitudes and actions of the public in the public sphere as opposed to celebrating demagoguery. Thus, in Kennedy’s funeral one can see the power the form, the disposition, and the presentation of the visual images had in creating a national identity through a shared experience.

As the public ritual of identification contributes to the formation of attitudes, the attitudes can then influence society’s conduct. However, if society or those in power fail to publicly

acknowledge or commemorate civic virtues, then the proper conduct, as identified by the community's values, for participation in the public sphere may be at risk. Hauser explains:

[T]he didactic function of epideictic suggests that as a public sphere ceases to celebrate public morality and, instead, substitutes a scientific or a bureaucratic model of public relations for political relations, the public that inhabits this sphere is denied the very instruction on which its survival as a politically relevant body depends. . . . A public illiterate in models of proper conduct and inarticulate in expressing the moral bases for its beliefs soon becomes moribund and relinquishes the discursive basis for its political actions to authority or force. (10)

A national identity “reveals notable risks and dangers” to the function of democracy (Burke “Responsibilities” 47) when the nation’s conduct is improper, a conduct that teaching civic virtue may prevent. Woodruff lays the responsibility of modeling proper conduct and teaching civic virtue directly on the leaders, stating that “the power of leaders derives from character, and their authority is essentially moral” (*Reverence* 114). In other words, as Hauser and Woodruff observe, the absence of models of proper conduct can leave a nation floundering for a sense of identity that may leave it vulnerable to negative influences. This assertion may be demonstrated by Nazi Germany. I mention Nazi Germany as a counter-example to show the practical power epideictic has to create a moment for an aesthetic identification and also to persuade us that it is essential to use epideictic opportunities to internalize *good* attitudes, which can then lead to appropriate actions that contribute to a successful democracy and show us how to live our lives. The process of identification and assent can transform the individual or the community, but it is essential that the right kind of conduct be portrayed to allow us to “see things in their right moral

perspective,” a portrayal that requires a virtuous character to produce rational and moral judgments that might not come about without a virtuous character (Striker 298–99).

Transformation within the process of identification marks the difference between emotional reactions and an aesthetic experience. Emotional reactions such as “a gush of tears may bring relief . . . But where there is no administration of objective conditions, no shaping of materials in the interest of embodying excitement . . . [then it] is only a spewing forth” (Dewey 64). Dewey describes the difference between spewing forth and *an* experience in terms of “consummation,” a term which can be pictured as the continual and onward motion of the waves of the sea (179), and as a process that describes the separate events that make up a presidential funeral. At every point in the aesthetic process, order is formed from disorder in a rhythm that sums up and fulfills what preceded it: “it is recurrent” (143). “Consummation,” then, for Dewey, is an “internal integration and fulfillment reached through ordered and organized movement” (39–40), which also appears to coincide with Burke’s idea of communion: “The merger of subject and object” (*Philosophy* 93). In these two theories then, we see Aristotle’s conception of epideictic better explained than Aristotle explained it himself, and we see how Burke’s theory of identification is enacted through Dewey’s composition of *an* experience. Emotion informs the aesthetic process and can bring order to the soul, and funerals are one event designed to restore order to the soul. Presidential funerals have the opportunity to restore order on a national scale, and Mrs. Kennedy demonstrated the ideas of communion and consummation through the visual imagery and pageantry on display during President Kennedy’s funeral. Interestingly, evidence that she created an aesthetically successful event of communion and consummation was demonstrated at her own funeral.

When Mrs. Kennedy Onassis died, some of the same people that attended the President's funeral attended hers and explained their attendance in terms that can be described as the fulfillment of the experience of President Kennedy's funeral. Her funeral completed his. Mrs. Kennedy's biography on the Arlington National Cemetery Website records:

Beth Alexiou dabbed at hers [tears] with a tissue and talked of how it was her 'respect' for Jackie that brought her to the burial. The funeral procession had been a black blur of hearse and limousines speeding past.

Alexiou would see nothing more than that. Still, she had to come. Like many others, she too had been at JFK's funeral. This brought the mourning full circle for both the slain president and his widow.

"They gave us what we needed at the time," said Alexiou, who is now 55.

"They woke us up to politics, to humanity."

Alexiou's words refer to her transformation, her waking up and changing, but she does it using the word *us*, referring to the nation as a whole. She viewed her experience as a collective experience, not as an individual experience, thereby, demonstrating the power of Dewey's idea of consummation and Burke's of communion. Emotion transforms physical material to create a new emotional response. Whether through verbal expressions or paint on a canvas, emotions threaded through the presidential funeral experience transformed President Kennedy from man to myth in four days. Although Kennedy's transformation took place after his death, President Ronald Reagan began creating his legacy before his death.

Reagan as the Ideal American

Dewey maintains that every experience, at whatever level, "is the result of interaction between a live creature and some aspect of the world in which he lives, . . . [but] *an* experience

has pattern and structure” (45, italics added). So, Dewey continues, “Art is not nature, but is nature transformed by entering into a new relationship where it evokes a new emotional response” (82). The artist interacts with the physical material and constructs an object, which in turn may have the emotional content to influence the individual either inwardly or outwardly. That is rhetoric. A rhetorical example of patterns and structures assembled into *an* experience that expressed the creator’s emotions and helped identify and solidify American values was Ronald Reagan’s funeral. Although Reagan did not die in office as Lincoln and Kennedy did, his funeral was a carefully orchestrated celebration of his life that, according to Amos Kiewe, began even before his death. Kiewe writes in “Ronald Reagan’s Long Goodbye” that Reagan “consciously sought rhetorical opportunities to condition his own legacy by crafting the very words he hoped others would utter after his ultimate departure” (249). And they did. Senator Ted Stevens, Representative J. Dennis Hastert, and Vice President Richard B. Cheney all used Reagan’s own words to, as Burke says, merge subject and object. Senator Stevens stated, “President Reagan put it best when he said, ‘The greatest leader is not necessarily the one who does the greatest things. He is the one that gets [the] people to do the greatest things’” (United States xvii). Representative Hastert spoke of Reagan standing on the beaches of Normandy honoring those who gave their lives and quoted what he said: “We make a living by what we get; we make a life by what we give” (xix). And from then Vice President Cheney, whose speech contained many of Reagan’s quotes, “There’s no question I am an idealist, which is another way of saying I am an American” (xx). Each quote either merges Reagan with an ideal, with another historically significant moment, or with a virtue. Cementing the subject and the object together, in this case, was the occasion and the place: those comments were made during the Rotunda

Service at the Capitol on June 9, 2004, before Reagan's body was taken to the Washington National Cathedral for the actual funeral service on June 11, 2004.

Reagan's funeral, like Kennedy's, was replete with patriotic trappings: representatives from every branch of the US military, a twenty-one gun salute, patriotic and religious music, speeches by recognizable American political and religious leaders, and the former Prime Ministers of Canada and the United Kingdom. After the funeral, the casket was taken from the cathedral to the presidential aircraft where it was flown to Simi Valley, California. The funeral procession from the airport to the grave site was unexpectedly punctuated by mourners waving white handkerchiefs as the hearse passed and by six o'clock that same night Ronald Reagan was laid to rest with his own words inscribed on the program:

Whatever else history may say about me when I'm gone, I hope it will record that I appealed to your best hopes, not your worst fears; to your confidence rather than your doubts. My dream is that you will travel the road ahead with liberty's lamp guiding your steps and opportunity's arm steadying your way. (1)

The three-day experience was *an* experience of integrated action and emotion that celebrated the life of an American president. Lying in state at the Capitol Rotunda, the funeral service at the Washington National Cathedral, and the interment services on the other side of the nation were conducted in a familiar pattern established by previous funerals. The form provided the rhythm for the experience, but the emotion contained in the form cemented the parts together, creating a highly rhetorical and aesthetic experience. The epideictic display of patriotism and virtue-oriented oratory reminded Americans and the world what it meant to be identified as an American. As Reagan continues to be referenced and quoted, his life as portrayed by his funeral

influences the individual citizen toward an attitude of Americanism that provides common ground for human discourse in the public experience.

Conclusion

Different in nature than forensic and deliberative rhetoric, epideictic rhetoric provides the possibilities for aesthetic experiences that can inform the political process. A nation participating in a presidential funeral may be gathered for that specific purpose, but examined individually, their beliefs cross religious, socio-economic, race, gender, and political boundaries. If they don't share beliefs, then what draws them together and allows them to have a collective experience of identification? The answer lies within Aristotle's conception of epideictic: It is what they feel—the shared emotions that influence their value system. (Belief is different from values in that belief implies trust and confidence placed in some person or thing outside of the self, while a value refers to something intrinsically desirable such as a principle or a quality.) Individually, they may have a different idea of death, but the sincerity of their emotions allows them to participate in the funeral as a unified body. Thus, attitudes and audiences can be influenced toward cooperating in their communities through the shared emotional experiences that order and influence epideictic ceremonies such as presidential funerals. Participation in the public ritual of a funeral identifies them with a community that shares a common culture or a common value system.

After Kennedy's funeral, Lyndon B. Johnson found that the Kennedy legend constantly loomed over his own presidency. "Camelot was to have great consequences," O'Neill wrote. "It made the lot of President Johnson—himself not quite the stuff of legends—a hard one. None of his successes would please the Knights of the Roundtable as Kennedy's failures had. He aggravated their determination to recreate the past: to have another Camelot whatever the price" (66). Nevertheless, the presidential myth lives on and continues to be invoked by people in both

of America's major political parties. Ronald Reagan invoked Kennedy in 1980, Dan Quayle was told in the 1988 vice-presidential debates that he was no Jack Kennedy, and Barack Obama invoked both Kennedy and Reagan in 2008. Reagan helped create his own legacy and is becoming the country's new Lincoln; born on the second floor of an apartment building instead of in a log cabin, he embodies the American Dream.

So, why do I select these presidents for my study? The answer seems to be found within the emotional connection the American people made with them at their deaths. It may be that other presidential funerals have influenced or educated the American public to some degree, but it can be argued that Lincoln, Kennedy, and Reagan wrote themselves upon the hearts of the American people as their virtues were commemorated on the public stage. Death comes to all. It is the one inescapable reality of life. And it seems that even the cynic, willingly or unwillingly, experiences a moment of identification that makes epideictic rhetoric the rhetoric of possibility for bringing opportunity to the political process and order to the soul.

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