

## **Murderers as Victims: Reassigning Guilt in Al Gore's "Columbine Memorial Address"**

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Al Gore's "Columbine Memorial Address" is a eulogy that memorializes the shooting deaths of thirteen people by two Columbine High School seniors and attempts to discern why this tragedy happened. This essay shows how Gore frames the tragedy by defining components of Kenneth Burke's dramatic pentad to reassign guilt from Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold to adults in society. The perpetrator-as-victim narrative has been used historically to absolve perpetrators of guilt, including in the Tuskegee Syphilis reports, the drowning of Mary Jo Kopechne, and the death of Karen Wood. This essay's analysis involves the study of a single rhetorical act that worked to absolve a third party within the framework of a eulogy. Studying the perpetrator-as-victim narrative within Gore's speech is important because Columbine plays a large and continuing role in the national discourse on mass shootings.

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On the morning of 20 April 1999, near Littleton, Colorado, Columbine High School seniors Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold set into motion the "Judgment Day" they had been planning for months (Cullen 46). They placed a diversion bomb in a nearby park to distract police forces before storming Columbine High School. They then set up two large propane bombs in the cafeteria, carefully timing their explosion to coincide with "maximum human density" (32) and maximum destruction. The boys waited outside the high school; "each was strategically located approximately forty-five degrees from the south entrance of the high school so they could shoot at fleeing students without endangering each other" (Larkin 1). Each was equipped with a rifle and a sawed-off shotgun, knives, pipe bombs, CO<sub>2</sub> canisters, and Molotov cocktails (2). However, both the diversionary bomb and the cafeteria bombs failed to detonate properly. Eric and Dylan, dressed in black dusters to conceal their weapons and to incite fear, started shooting from the parking lot and then entered the building. They roamed the cafeteria, hallways, and library of Columbine High School, shooting randomly at students and teachers and throwing handheld explosives. In the end, twelve students and one teacher had died, far fewer than the hundreds of people the duo expected to kill. At 12:08, less than an hour after the first shot was fired, Eric and Dylan returned to the carnage in the library and turned their guns on themselves. Bombs in each boy's car were supposed to explode amid the survivors, media, and emergency personnel, but they also failed to detonate as planned. The bodies of Eric and Dylan were found by SWAT team members around 3:15 p.m., but emergency personnel worked through the next day to clear the building, detonate unexploded bombs, and recover victims (Cullen 83).

The tragedy at Columbine captured the nation's attention and spurred quite an uproar within the media. Dave Cullen notes that "the story took twenty-eight minutes to hit local television" (52) and was soon covered by national stations as well. There seemed no end to the student witnesses flooding out of the school and milling around, and in the midst of confusion, panic, and an almost total lack of concrete facts, the media and witnesses were led to much speculation. Cullen observes that the most "notorious myths took root before the killers' bodies were found." Some of the most insidious of these involved "a pair of outcast Goths from the Trench Coat Mafia snapping and tearing through their high school hunting down jocks to settle a long-running feud" and a "connection

to Marilyn Manson, Hitler's birthday, minorities, or Christians" (149). What made the media coverage of Columbine different from that of past shootings was that "over a period of hours, local news covered the action as it unfolded—a perfectly mediated dramatic event" (Frymer 1389). The media furor was fed by both the confusion and the belief that it was still a "hostage standoff" (Cullen 65), since Eric and Dylan weren't found until hours after they died. The country was infatuated with "almost witnessing mass murder" (67; emphasis in original). Not only did the events at Columbine throw the safety of schools into question, they made people wonder how something so terrible could happen in suburban white America:

How did brainy kids from seemingly stable, affluent homes become killing machines without a hint of remorse? The murders fascinated and appalled the country, not least because the mayhem unfolded in an archetypal place (a suburban high school) and touched on cultural forces (the Internet, violent movies and videogames) familiar to all Americans. Still, there is one overarching question: why? (Bai et al.)

Five days after the shooting, the community came together to memorialize the victims and attempt to address the questions left by the gaping wound:

Sunday morning, April 25, the Columbine churches were packed. Afterward, the crowds trekked down to the Bowles Crossing Shopping Center, across from Clement Park. Organizers had planned for up to thirty thousand mourners in the sprawling lot. Seventy thousand showed up. Vice President Al Gore was on the platform, along with the governor, most of Colorado's congressional delegation, and a whole lot of clergy. The TV networks broadcast the ceremony live. (Cullen 117)

As vice president of the United States, Al Gore was tasked with delivering an epideictic speech in the form of a eulogy to answer the difficult question of "What say we?" for a shocked and grieving nation. Gore's speech exhibits some hallmark characteristics of a eulogy when he unites the country by referring to the collective "heart of America" that stands for goodness. He honors the "profound heroism among those who died" and reminds the world "that the young killers of Columbine High School do not stand for the spirit of America." Gore also provides hope and encourages societal improvement by promising that "we can work our way as a people" so that "those children who died here this week will not have died in vain."

Gore is clearly eulogizing the victims during the memorial ceremony; however, his eulogy does not focus blame on the two boys who murdered the thirteen people Gore is memorializing. Instead of laying guilt solely on Harris and Klebold, Gore assigns responsibility to society, claiming, "We can stop the violence and the hate." Using genre theory, I will show why Gore is justified in engaging in the perpetrator-as-victim narrative, using Kenneth Burke's dramatic pentad to demonstrate how Gore frames the tragedy to cast responsibility on society as a whole. I will then situate the use of the perpetrator-as-victim narrative in Gore's "Columbine Memorial Address" historically by comparing it with the Tuskegee Syphilis reports, Mary Jo Kopechne's drowning, Karen Wood's death, and President Bill Clinton's "Remarks to the Columbine High School Community in Littleton."

According to Campbell and Jamieson, a rhetorical act such as Gore's speech can be explained and studied by assigning it to a genre. They explain that "the rhetorical forms that establish genres are stylistic and substantive responses to perceived situational demands" (19). Historically, there have been many criticisms of genre theory. Critics have argued that its "logical rigor" (Conley 49) "not only limit[s] but distort[s] the work being examined" (50). Additionally, assigning generic categories has been accused of "reducing a complex human event to a simplistic and abstractly conceived type" (Patton 5) and of "provid[ing] no basis for making vital distinctions about the char-

acter and ideological orientation of the speaker” (6). However, by addressing genre from a standpoint of motive instead of from the traditional standpoint of form, many of these criticisms can be accounted for. Therefore, categorizing Gore’s address by its genre becomes an insightful means of analyzing the speech.

Adrienne Dennis Kunkel and Michael Robert Dennis examine the specific generic nature of eulogies, explaining that some people believe a eulogy is “predetermined by the life of the eulogized, and that its performance is a stylistic and rather non-rhetorical matter.” However, these two authors are of the belief that we can learn much from the “observation and interpretation” of the “rhetorical aims of the eulogizer” (3). As Gore stood to eulogize the victims of the Columbine massacre, he had to respond “to a situation in which a community is ruptured by death” (Campbell and Jamieson 19). He had to provide meaning to the situation in order to fulfill his eulogistic obligations of “[reknitting] the sundered community” (20). Gore realizes that “the entire nation is a community of shock, of love, and of grief,” and he claims that “nothing that I say to you can bring comfort.” However, as deliverer of the “Columbine Memorial Address,” the situation demands that Gore comfort the audience, explain why this happened, and provide hope for the future.

The perpetrator-as-victim narrative is justified in Gore’s speech since both perpetrators are dead. Casting blame on them would lack the finality and closure that a eulogy requires since both boys committed suicide. Dave Cullen explains, “The final act of the killers was among their cruelest: they deprived the survivors of a living perpetrator. They deprived the families of a focus for their anger, and their blame” (212). In the wake of this unfathomable tragedy, in which the perceptions of innocence in children and of safety in schools were shattered, someone had to be blamed:

National polls taken shortly after the attack would identify all sorts of culprits contributing to the tragedy: violent movies, video games, Goth culture, lax gun laws, bullies, and Satan. Eric did not make the list. Dylan didn’t either. They were just kids. Something or someone must have led them astray. [The boys’ parents] were the chief suspects. They dwarfed all other causes, blamed by 85 percent of the population in a Gallup poll. They had the additional advantage of being alive, to be pursued. (107)

Cullen’s analysis of public sentiment revealed a powerful motivating factor of the perpetrator-as-victim narrative: “The killers were dead, so much of the anger was deflected” (155).

Aside from the fact that both of the killers were dead, blame was reassigned since the teenage boys were just children. The boys could not bear responsibility for the murders because, by definition, children are not able to make the mature judgments that adults are capable of. In addressing the Columbine community after the shooting, Gore repeatedly confirms that these “young killers” were just children. Guilt for the massacre had to be placed someplace else. Gore transfers the guilt from these two boys to the adults in society by relaying the message that “every one of us is responsible for the children of our culture.” We are made responsible for their well-being and moral standards. And we are also responsible when they act in such a tragic and evil manner.

Gore’s speech was not the only discourse absolving Eric and Dylan of guilt. David Brooks notes that in the aftermath of the shootings, all the analysis “had one theme in common: that the perpetrators were actually victims.” The conflicting opinions regarding the guilt of these two boys were also quite evident in the decisions surrounding the commemoration of the victims of Columbine. A week after the massacre, fifteen large crosses—thirteen for the victims and two for the killers—were placed on the crest of a hill right next to Columbine High School. The carpenter who constructed the crosses “taped a black-and-white photo of one victim or killer to each cross, and he left a pen dangling from each one to encourage graffiti.” Visiting the crosses became a sort

of “pilgrimage”: over the course of “five days, 125,000 people trekked up the hill to reach the crosses” (Cullen 192). The crosses of the murdered were adorned with loving messages and other objects, but the “killers’ crosses hosted a bitter debate” (193). While some people openly grieved for and forgave the killers, others were appalled that the murderers were regarded in the same light as the victims. After three days, the family of one of the victims “hailed the crosses [of Eric and Dylan] away, hacked them into little pieces, and then tossed the rubble into a Dumpster” (194). Although the number of crosses memorializing the victims of Columbine was reduced to the thirteen murdered victims, this did not end the dialogue surrounding where responsibility for the massacre should lie.

It is evident that Gore is justified in his use of the perpetrator-as-victim narrative based on the generic nature of the eulogy, and his use of the narrative can be comprehended by deconstructing the address using Kenneth Burke’s dramatic pentad. Burke explains, “Since we characterize a situation with reference to our general scheme of meanings, it is clear how motives, as shorthand terms for situations, are assigned with reference to our orientation in general” (*Permanence and Change* 31). Burke also states that “any complete statement about motives will offer some kind of answers to these five questions:

- what was done (act),
- when or where was it done (scene),
- who did it (agent),
- how he did it (agency),
- and why (purpose).” (*Grammar of Motives* xv)

In analyzing a rhetorical act, it is not enough to simply examine how these terms are defined; one must analyze how they interact with each other. According to Burke, “We want to inquire into the purely internal relationships which the five terms bear to one another, considering their possibilities of transformation, their range of permutations and combinations—and then to see how these various resources figure in actual statements about human motives” (xvi). How Gore defined the elements of the drama in regard to the Columbine tragedy frames how he invites the audience to perceive the situation.

In analyzing the eulogy of the thirteen murdered people at Columbine, it seems strange that Gore would give only a passing reference to the two boys who were responsible for these deaths. Instead of the act and purpose being portrayed as a rampage by a “young, budding psychopath” (Cullen 239) and “a garden-variety depressed teenager” (Larkin 148), it became something that we as members of society caused. The act was that Eric and Dylan were not exposed to “the power of a better example.” Gore claims that “the human heart responds to goodness,” and Eric and Dylan would not have been led to act this way if they had been exposed to love and had seen a better example by the adults they came in contact with. We clearly see that Gore’s “Columbine Memorial Address” construes the audience as the perpetrator, and the act that led to the death of fifteen people was society’s failure to value “love over indifference.” In a sense, the act and purpose of the shooting are represented as the inaction of the adults in Eric and Dylan’s lives.

When Gore addresses the Columbine community and the nation, he gives very little attention to the people who seem to have had the most control: Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. As the nation craved to learn why and how this happened, Gore’s speech did much to define and assign agency. He instructs the audience that “we must have the courage not to look away from those who feel despised and rejected, those for whom we are taught: sin lieth crouching at their door.” This statement implies that this happened because two boys felt despised and rejected. Instead of the agency being attributed to the boys, it is assigned to an external factor: “sin” or another third party was the agency by which the tragedy happened. Columbine became not an issue of two deeply troubled youth but rather “a marker of a national or societal problem of school violence” (Birkland and

Lawrence 1406). By externalizing the agency, the agents of the situation were no longer Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold.

Gore's speech, in effect, establishes a third party as an agent. Gore realizes that people have been "brought to [their] knees in the shock of this moment" and that a response is necessary to prevent further such tragedies. Gore poses the question "What say we?" in the face of this tragedy. His answer is "More than ever I realize that every one of us is responsible for the children of our culture," implying that we all bear responsibility for the actions of Eric and Dylan. Al Gore briefly touches on some of the factors that were widely believed to have led to the massacre: "the violence and cruelty in our popular culture," how it is "too easy for a young child to get a gun," and "crime and drugs." However, the responsibility is again placed on all adults as Gore repeatedly claims that "we can do something about that." But who is the "we" that Gore is referring to? He specifically calls out parents: "Your children need your attention." He calls out grandparents: "We need your time." He calls out all of society: "There are kids who need your example and your presence." He calls out all adults to rise to the "challenge of creating in all of God's children a clean heart, and a right spirit within." All members of our society, then, are the agents of the crime, all of whom bear the burden to "teach our children why embracing the right values transcends a moment's cheap sensation."

While the act, purpose, agency, and agent are all important in establishing the perpetrator-as-victim narrative, Gore's characterization of the scene plays a large role in the address. Littleton, Colorado, "is the heart of Evangelical country" (Cullen 29), and people there are "openly and sometimes aggressively religious" (Larkin 17). This generalization of the community's religious and cultural makeup is highly evident both in Gore's speech and in the Columbine Memorial service. "The memorial service for the dead and wounded students and their families was taken over by evangelical pastors and turned into a revival service" (Larkin 41–42). The content of Gore's speech reflects this notion that the scene of the Columbine massacre is strictly that of a Christian community. Gore's speech is peppered with quotations from scripture, primarily from the New Testament. Gore's heavy use of scripture demonstrates the apparent assumption he makes that his audience needs to address this tragedy from a spiritual standpoint, specifically a Christian one.

As is fitting for a eulogy, Gore highlights the positive influence of the victims and gives meaning to their deaths. He does this specifically with "coach and teacher Dave Sanders, who bravely led so many to safety—but never made it out of the building himself." Gore also recognizes the death of Cassie Bernall, one of several Christians who died. However, she became a martyr in the aftermath of the shooting. Amid the chaos in the hours and days after the massacre, the story surfaced that Cassie Bernall had been shot for telling the killers, "Yes, I do believe in God." Larry Stammer notes that the rumors surrounding Cassie Bernall's death construed her as a martyr and that Eric and Dylan's rampage at Columbine was seen by some as an attack on Christianity. Gore's choice to cite scripture so often was already justified by his characterization of the community, but it was reinforced by the circulating story of Cassie Bernall.

Gore engages in the martyr narrative concerning Cassie Bernall when he immediately points the audience to Matthew 5:10 in regard to her death. The verse "Those who suffer for righteousness' sake—theirs is the kingdom of God" might give peace and hope to the survivors, but his use of it also assumes that Cassie died solely because of her faith. It is this "attack on Christianity" that justifies Gore in defining the scene of the crime as a Christian one. In the very opening of his speech, Gore explains that no human words can bring consolation, but "there is a voice that speaks without words, and addresses us in the depths of our being," and it says, "Peace, be still." This is quite a powerful reference by Gore, for it metaphorically equates the storm of Jesus's time to the situation at Columbine. And the audience is left with the assurance that it should have faith in a God powerful enough to calm the storm.

Similarly, near the very end of the speech, Gore draws a comparison with the prophet Isaiah, referring to his words: “For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind” (Isaiah 65:17). We, too, look forward to a time when healing will come and evil will be no more. This hope is warranted because of how Gore frames the scene in relation to the “attack on Christianity.” When Gore asks the audience, “What say we into the open muzzle of this tragedy cocked and aimed at our hearts?” he answers his own question by calling on the audience to respond with “spiritual courage” to “match the eternal moment.”

The application of Kenneth Burke’s dramatic pentad clearly shows how Gore’s speech works to absolve Eric and Dylan of the crime and reassign guilt to society as a whole. However, Gore’s speech is neither a new genre nor is it alone in engaging the perpetrator-as-victim narrative; it is just one piece in a larger collection of rhetoric that works to reassign guilt. Gore’s speech is unique, however, and thus my approach is markedly different from prior research projects that have studied the reassignment of guilt. While the work on the Tuskegee Syphilis reports and Karen Wood’s death, for example, involve the study of multiple discourses, Gore’s “Columbine Memorial Address” is a single rhetorical act. While Ted Kennedy seeks to absolve himself of Mary Jo Kopechne’s death in a single rhetorical act, Gore is seeking to absolve a third party. Additionally, Gore’s “Columbine Memorial Address” is the only rhetorical act that reassigns guilt and engages in the perpetrator-as-victim narrative within the context of a eulogy. Moreover, although both Vice President Al Gore and President Bill Clinton gave speeches in the aftermath of Columbine, President Clinton does not engage in the perpetrator-as-victim narrative.

On 20 May 1999, a month after the attack at Columbine, President Clinton traveled to Colorado to address the Littleton community. There are some striking differences between his speech and Gore’s, although both address the same community in the aftermath of the same tragedy. Both speeches honor the victims and address the enormity of the shooting, but Clinton’s speech is deliberative; it is not a eulogy and does not reassign guilt. Clinton urges society to “help us build a better future for all our children, a future where hatred and distrust no longer distort the mind or harden the heart.” He also refers to the “dark forces that take over people and make them murder.” Clinton’s assignment of guilt is far different than the responsibility that Gore places on society.

From a historical standpoint, Gore’s use of the perpetrator-as-victim narrative within a eulogy is unique in comparison to other incidents and even other speeches delivered in response to the Columbine tragedy. In his speech, Clinton notes that our country has suffered numerous tragedies and school shootings, but in the wake of Columbine, “something profound has happened to your country” and the nation has had “a different reaction.” More than a decade after the tragedy, Columbine still weighs heavy on the national psyche. For example, after the school shooting at Sandy Hook, which took more and younger lives than the massacre at Columbine, President Obama refers to “Tucson, and Aurora, and Oak Creek, and Newtown, and communities from Columbine to Blacksburg before that,” giving voice to the notion that many mass shootings, starting with Columbine, are irrevocably interwoven.

The perpetrator-as-victim narrative in Al Gore’s speech defies what one might expect from the generic requirements of a eulogy. By applying Kenneth Burke’s dramatic pentad, it is clear that Gore reassigns guilt from Harris and Klebold to society as a whole. While Al Gore is not the first to engage in the perpetrator-as-victim narrative, his position is unique in that it absolves the murderers of guilt within a eulogy. The shooting at Columbine had a unique and enormous impact on society in 1999 and continues to shape how we perceive and respond to mass shootings today. By fully understanding Al Gore’s “Columbine Memorial Address,” we can gain a better understanding of the perpetrator-as-victim narrative and how we react to and contend with current and future tragedies.

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