"No Laughing Matter: Revisiting Kenneth' Burke's Comic Approach to Criticism"

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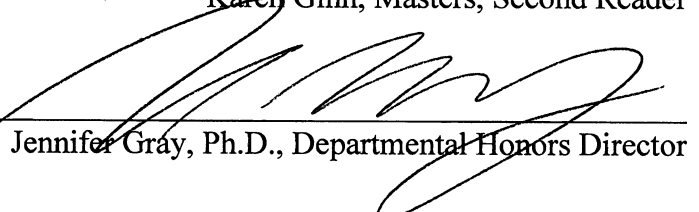
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Abstract:

In the literature on Kenneth Burke's comic frame, scholars have misarticulated and misrepresented what the frame is and how it operates. These mistakes divert attention from Burke's more nuanced discussion of the frame and leads to an oversimplified and problematic conception of Burkean comedy. Furthermore, the constant commitment to finding the frame throughout a variety of rhetorical discourses and texts misses how Burke saw the frame as a method of criticism. In my analysis of the comic frame literature, I discuss these misconceptions and how they differ from Burke's intentions for the comic frame. I then use "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" as a guide to what a more grounded and faithful approach to the comic frame would like look. The aim of this thesis then is to suggest for scholars to revisit key tenants of the comic frame in their uses of it and argue for how Burkean comedy can be revitalized as a method for social criticism.

Introduction

The literature on Burkean comedy has circulated mistakes about what the comic frame is and what it entails. Many confuse the comic frame with humor or insist on ridicule as one of the frame's defining features. Most of the literature also involves scholars locating comedy in a particular discourse rather than using it as a frame for their own analysis. These mistakes in the literature miss crucial elements and nuances of Burkean comedy, resulting in superficial understandings of how the comic frame operates, the articulation of comedy as a more benign but still problematic form of scapegoating, and attempts to find examples of comedy rather than using the comic frame as an analytical lens for social criticism.

Many scholars have attempted to expand the comic frame in their analysis of social and political rhetorical artifacts, such as seeing it as a way to perform activism (DeLaure 453) or build more collaborative attitudes towards the international community (Chirindo 221). Movies, television shows, protests, as well as more specific sites such as the rhetorical constraints facing a Vice Presidential candidate (Bostdorff) have all been avenues for scholars using Burke's comic frame; however, these attempts to use and expand the comic frame are based on misconceptions that divert attention away from Burke's more comprehensive discussion of the comic frame in *Attitudes Towards History*. Furthermore, although comedy does likely persist in these rhetorical texts, it likely also exists in conjunction with other frames. Burke insists that these frames of acceptance and rejection, which comedy is one, cannot "be isolated in its chemical purity" (*Attitudes* 57). Often what scholars pinpoint as comedy also contains elements of other categories. This attempt to locate comedy, made complicated by the overlapping of frames, also fails to take into account the comic frame's potential as a method of social criticism; as Burke himself said, "whatever poetry may be, *criticism* had best be comic" (*Attitudes* 107).

The goal of this thesis is to explore how scholars have misunderstood the comic frame and argue for a return to comedy as a method for social criticism. I begin with a discussion of what comedy is as a charitable but not gullible way of charting of human motivations, a salvation device that collectivizes guilt, and a method of social criticism. Then tracing the misunderstandings of the frame, comedy as humor, comedy as ridicule, and the present literature's attempts to locate comedy rather than to adopt it, I argue for a need to revisit Burke's original discussion of the comic frame. Finally, I discuss how to adopt comedy in social criticism using Burke's "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle,'" as a guide. The comic frame involves "maximum awareness of the complex forensic material accumulated in sophisticated social structures" (*Attitudes* 107). As such, it can be a useful device for gaining a more complete picture of social problems. We must first, however, embrace the comic frame in all its complexity and understand what comic criticism would truly look like. My goal then is to pinpoint these mistakes in the literature and suggest how future research could adhere more closely to Burke's articulation of the comic frame.

Burkean Comic Criticism

In *Attitudes Towards History*, Kenneth Burke proposes categories of "acceptance" and "rejection" that deal with the attitudes or ways in which people define the "human situation" (3). These frames of acceptance and rejection provide insight into how individuals dramatize the world around them and their role in it. Burke explains how this starts with the problem of evil, where "in the face of anguish, injustice, disease, and death one adopts policies. One constructs his notion of the universe or history, and shapes attitudes in keeping" (*Attitudes* 3). These frames of acceptance and rejection involve the naming of people and situations which ultimately shapes the action that humans take towards their situation. As Burke puts it, "Be he poet or scientist, one

defines the 'human situation' as amply as his imagination permits; then with this ample definition in mind, he singles out certain functions or relationships as either friendly or unfriendly" (*Attitudes* 3). These definitions "prepare us for some functions and against others, for or against the persons representing those functions. The names go further: they suggest how you shall be for or against" (*Attitudes* 4). John McGowan, in his discussion of Burke, further details how the adoption of these attitudes through the naming of a situation unfolds:

> In his account [Burke], humans only form relations to the world through the naming of situations. Our attitudes come into existence solely through acts of naming. Note that we do not necessarily name the attitude; what we name is the situation, and then the attitude is assumed in relation to the situation that is now understood by virtue of the name assigned to it. (44)

Here, McGowan makes sure to emphasize that these attitudes we adopt are not what are named but what are assumed as a result of the name we give to various situations. These attitudes or "'system of meanings' pre-exist the speaker and the particular situation, the name carries with it reference to a culturally established way of placing the self in relation to the non-self" (McGowan 45).

Burke analyzes different attitudes or "systems of meaning' as they are reflected in the poetic categories of epic, tragedy, comedy, elegy, satire, burlesque, grotesque, monasticism, and the didactic. He aims to understand the corresponding actions they create, most notably the assignment of motives (92). Burke explains how "Out of such frames we derive our vocabularies for the charting of human motives. And implicit in our theory of motives is a program of action, since we form ourselves and judge others (collaborating with them or against them) in accordance with our attitudes" (*Attitudes* 92). Our actions, therefore, depend heavily on the

attitudes we take towards various situations and the motives we ascribe to those involved in those situations. As Burke says, "Call a man a villain, and you have the choice of either attacking or cringing. Call a man mistaken and you invite yourself to attempt to setting him right" (*Attitudes* 4). Burke further describes the importance of motives in our relationships by noting that when "deciding why people do as they do, we get the cues that place us with relation to them. Hence, a vocabulary of motives is important for the forming of both private and public relationships" (*Attitudes* 170). How we define the action of others affects how we see ourselves in relation to them.

A Comic Frame of Motives

Amid Burke's discussion of frames of acceptance and rejection and how they influence the imputing of motives arises the poetic category of comedy, or the comic frame, which Burke depicts as the most serviceable of all the frames for the handling of human relationships (*Attitudes* 106). Rueckert explains how Burke sees the comic frame as a way to "cure the ills from which America and Western society are now suffering" (Rueckert 113). Central to the comic frame is viewing adversaries and their motives not as villainous or evil but as mistaken:

> The progress of humane enlightenment can go no further than picturing people not as vicious but as mistaken. When you add that people are necessarily mistaken, that all people are exposed to situations in which they must act as fools, that every insight contains its own special kind of blindness, you complete the comic circle, returning again to the lesson of humility that underlies great tragedy. (*Attitudes* 41-42)

Comedy involves the recognition of a shared humility in that all people, no matter how much they do know, cannot know everything. Comedy requires the ability to recognize and describe human foibles and mistakes in non-essentializing terms. Whereas the poetic category and frame

of tragedy views motivating forces as "superhuman," comedy is "essentially humane" in that motives are not stripped entirely of their materialistic tendencies (*Attitudes* 42). Burke differentiates tragedy and comedy further noting how "Contemporary exasperations make us prefer the tragic (sometimes melodramatic) names of 'villain' and 'hero' to the comic names of 'tricked' and 'intelligent' (*Attitudes* 5). It is much easier, however, to work with an opponent who is merely "tricked" than to work with one who is a "villain" or "evil."

The comic frame then enhances collaboration by viewing motives in all of their complexity. This can be seen when Burke compares the comic frame to historical comedies and their operations:

> The audience, from its vantage point, sees the operation of errors that the characters of the play cannot see; thus seeing from two angles at one, it is chastened by dramatic irony; it is admonished to remember that when intelligence means wisdom (in contrast with the modern tendency to look upon intelligence as merely a coefficient of power for heightening ability to get things, be they good things or bad) it requires fear, resignation, the sense of limits, as an important ingredient. (*Attitudes* 41-42)

As an audience, we watch how the characters' limited perspectives result in them making crucial mistakes. We see what the other characters cannot see. Therefore, we are encouraged to remember that true intelligence involves the recognition of one's own limits. Comedy creates an awareness for those limits as well as a broader understanding of why people do what they do.

The comic frame stresses human error and mistakenness and seeks to shed light on circumstances leading to acts of foolishness by providing a more complete picture of the surrounding situation. Burke insists that it requires "maximum forensic complexity" (*Attitudes* 42). Rueckert argues how the frame recognizes that "life—reality—is not static but is always in

process and that we must adopt a frame that accounts for the true complexity of the human

situation and resist the mind's compulsion to reduce this complexity to an oversimplified, orderly

set of terms" (119). This attempt to avoid oversimplification begins with recognizing the

complex motives at play in others' actions and recognizing the potential for humans to make

mistakes without being essentially defined by that mistake, a pattern that is more decidedly

tragic.

In the comic frame, motives contain both spiritual and physical elements. Burke remarks

how within the frame "an act can 'dialectically' contain both transcendental and material

ingredients, both imagination and bureaucratic embodiment, both 'service' and 'spoils'"

(*Attitudes* 167). In other words, the comic frame would "avoid the sentimental denial of

materialistic factors in human acts" (*Attitudes* 170). Burke explains these elements of the frame

further noting how "It avoids the dangers of euphemism that go with the more heroic frames of

epic and tragedy. And thereby it avoids the antithetical dangers of cynical debunking that

paralyze social relationships by discovering too constantly the purely materialistic ingredients in

human effort" (*Attitudes* 106). McGowan explains how the comic frame avoids oversimplifying

motives as either one of the other (transcendental or material) and has a more "sophisticated

appreciation of the full range of human motives—and the full range of the ways those motives

can be characterized" than the other poetic categories or frames (57).

The comic frame's more complex view of human motivations complements another one

of its key elements—charitableness:

> The comic frame is charitable, but at the same time it is not gullible. It keeps us alive to
>
> the ways in which people 'cash in on' their moral assets, and even use moralistic
>
> euphemisms to conceal purely materialistic purposes—but it can recognize without

feeling its disclosure to be the last word on human motivation. Dealing with man in

society, it requires maximum awareness of the complex forensic material accumulated in

sophisticated social structures. By astutely gauging a situation and personal resources, it

promotes a realistic sense of one's limitations […] yet the acceptance is not passive.

(*Attitudes* 107)

Here, Burke describes this charitable attitude in relation to the extremes of purely euphemistic

(spiritual/moralistic) and purely materialistic descriptions of motives noting how the comic

frame recognizes the potential for both but does not assume to know fully everything about these

motivations. Unlike other frames of acceptance and rejection, comedy avoids extremes by

recognizing that both moralistic and materialistic motives can be at play simultaneously and that

any attempt to oversimplify motives reduces human complexity. It does so while also

recognizing that it cannot ever give a complete account of human motivation. The comic frame

then "provides the charitable attitude towards people that is required for purposes of persuasion

and co-operation, but at the same time maintains our shrewdness concerning the simplicities of

'cashing in'" (*Attitudes* 166). Here, Burke insists that the comic frame can recognize human

complexity without completely excusing or condoning any bad act or mistaken person. Rueckert

explains how comedy "assumes that there is always some symbolic content, that some covert

motive may be lurking in even the most overt and explicit of statements and actions" (Rueckert

120). Thus, it is charitable in recognizing the complexity of motives but not gullible in that it is

aware of the ways in which people can conceal their motivations. In other words, the comic

frame understands the benefit in working together with those one might oppose, and yet, it does

so without completely submitting and excusing the views and actions of the other side. That

being said, the comic frame's spirit of humility is the key to collaboration. As Rueckert

explains, comedy "works against arrogance and pride, against believing that one is always right and has the right to be right and impose it on others" (118). In fact, such an absolutist mentality would work contrary to the comic goal which McGowan insists is an awareness "that each moment, each voice, is, in every sense of the word, partial. 'From the standpoint of this total form…, none of the participating sub-perspectives can be treated as precisely right or precisely wrong. They are all voices, or personalities, or positions, integrally affecting one another'" (52). All perspectives are just that. They are ways of seeing the world that are partial and not total. Which is why the comic frame stresses humility and the recognition of one's own limits. It is charitable in recognizing those limits, but it is not gullible in completely denying human agency and the ability for humans to make sizeable mistakes.

Charitableness, Guilt, and the Comic Frame's "Socialization of our Losses"

The charitable attitude articulated by Burke becomes an essential defining element of the comic frame, and this charitable attitude avoids the placement of blame on a scapegoat, common to tragedy and hierarchy, by collectivizing guilt. Burke differentiates between tragedy and comedy insisting that his "book would accept the Aristophanic assumptions, which equate tragedy with war and comedy with peace" (*Attitudes* Introduction). In the afterword in *Attitudes Towards History*, he connects tragedy with his later theories on "hierarchical psychosis" (*Attitudes* 348). Burke's theory on hierarchy begins by recognizing that with language comes the need for order which leads to certain commandments of "Thou shall not do this" and "Thou shall do this," and because humans are unable to fulfill all of these commandments they feel guilt (Carter 4). Hierarchies are then established with definitions of good and bad that offer individuals a moral or social position to place themselves based on those definitions (Carter 8-12). The better you are at keeping the commandment, whatever it may be, the closer you are to

the top of that hierarchy. For example, one might value the hierarchy of honesty versus dishonesty. In this hierarchy, people would feel guilty for lying and strive to be honest. Therefore, the more you tell the truth, the closer you are to the top of that hierarchy. When individuals find themselves in a hierarchy, they tend to engage in scapegoating in order to rid the pure group (the good, in this case honest individuals) from the sinful other (bad, in this case liars) (Carter 18-20). This element of tragedy depends upon victimization in order to purge the rest of the group of its guilt. In other words, it depends upon "the use of the tragic scapegoat in symbolic purification" (*Attitudes* 322). Contrary to tragedy where blame is placed upon a victim to be sacrificed, McGowan argues that "The work of comedy is to foster first the 'charitable attitude' that can help us to avoid the temptation of blaming others for our ills" (58). In other words, tragedy places guilt outside the self and comedy places guilt on everyone, including the self.

In order to deal with the problem of guilt, Rueckert argues that comedy "socializes our losses" in that instead of blaming ourselves or saying "I'm guilty," we are reminded that "All people are guilty" (124). Burke explains this further, detailing how comedy operates as a salvation device with its spreading of guilt:

> This salvation device spreads the guilt around; by making us all responsible for the abiding fact of division, by accepting that all of us retain foreign elements that are not fully compatible with, are not fully identified with, the prevailing order, the "socialization of losses" eschews the fantasy that one great purgative killing could save us from the slings and arrows of our daily interactions, from the inefficiencies of democracy. Where tragedy trains our focus on the "individual hero" who attains a kind of "divinity" through

serving as the sacrificial victim, comedy replace[s] the hero with "a collective body."

(*Attitudes* 268)

In this case, comedy attempts to manage hierarchical structures by collectivizing guilt. McGowan argues how this strategy "saves us from delusions of redemption from the divisions and collisions of pluralism. And it provides us with a social, this-worldly, non-extreme response to the ongoing presence of evil in human affairs" (57). Burke explains this by noting how "comedy deals with *man in society*, tragedy with the *cosmic man*" (*Attitudes* 42). The comic frame recognizes that we all make mistakes and find ourselves in situations where we act foolish, so we cannot rid ourselves of any "villains" because human error exists in all of us.

Comedy further attempts to manage hierarchy and guilt in that it makes "man the student of himself" (*Attitudes* 171). Instead of ridding oneself of a villain, it requires an awareness of one's own errors and limitations:

> The comic frame should enable people to be observers of themselves while acting. Its ultimate would not be passiveness but maximum consciousness. One would "transcend" himself by noting his own foibles. He would provide a rationale for locating the irrational and the non-rational. (*Attitudes* 171)

While tragedy aims at righting others' wrongs, comedy invites us not only to look more charitably at our opponents but also to look inside ourselves to see how our own potential partial perspectives and blindness contributes to various situations. Rueckert describes this further insisting that "Comedy teaches humility (we are all sometimes mistaken, foolish, wrong, wrongheaded) because in realizing our errors (and correcting them) and in being able to laugh at ourselves we realize that we are no better than everyone else, but just like everyone else in some ways" (118). We would be better off to approach our opponents not as though we are better than

them but with the recognition that both us and them are operating within limitations, and through collaboration, we can see a more complete and total view of problems and situations that we could not see strictly from our limited perspectives.

The Comic Frame as a Method for Social Criticism

Comedy tries to manage hierarchy and guilt through a method of criticism. In fact, as Rueckert explains, "The whole book [*Attitudes Towards History*] is an extended definition and demonstration of what comic criticism is and a highly persuasive argument as to why the comic perspective should be adopted by the social critic" (113). Hence, Burke explains the comic frame as a way of considering "human life as a project in 'composition,' where the poet works with the materials of social relationships. Composition, translation, also 'revision,' hence offering maximum opportunity for the resources of criticism" (*Attitudes* 173). Burke also insists that "the comic frame of reference opens up a whole new field for social criticism, since the overly materialistic co-ordinates of the polemical-debunking frame have unintentionally blinded us to the full operation of 'alienating processes'" (*Attitudes* 167). In Rueckert's words, "Comic criticism is a social instrument; it allows one to both act and observe one's actions" (121). Burke explains this further noting how "the comic frame, in making man the student of himself, makes it possible for him to 'transcend' occasions when he has been tricked and cheated, since he can readily put such discouragements in his assets column under the head of experience" (*Attitudes* 171). Thus, in order to manage the woes of society, comedy acts as a tool for the social critic, a symbolic act that unveils the complexity of the human situation.

Although the comic frame does offer a way of dealing with guilt and the problem of hierarchy through its method as a tool for social criticism, scholars have yet to fully adopt the frame for such use. Burke saw the potential of the comic frame as first a method of criticism. As

he put, "whatever poetry may be, criticism had best be comic" (*Attitudes* 107). He believed that

"Without the resources of comic ambivalence, one is not equipped to gauge the full range of

human potentialities" (*Attitudes* 74). His continued emphasis on the potential of the comic frame

or comic criticism throughout *Attitudes Towards History* has undoubtedly sparked many to

attempt to utilize the comic frame; however, these attempts have often resulted in

misunderstandings and analyses of examples of comedy in public discourse rather than the

adoption of the frame for social criticism. In other words, these attempts have centered around

locating comedy in a particular discourse rather than adopting comedy as an analytical lens.

      In the next section, I will discuss a few of the ways that scholars have misunderstood the

comic frame in their attempts to locate it. I will compare Burke's discussion of comedy and

hierarchy to scholars' own articulations, tracing the tendencies for comic frame literature to

equate humor and comedy, articulate comedy as ridicule, and isolate comedy in public discourse

and how such tendencies fail to understand and encapsulate the core elements at the heart of

Burke's comic criticism. I will then discuss what true Burkean comic criticism might look like

and suggest how future research could adopt this method of analysis. William Rueckert, perhaps,

gets at the heart of what Burkean comedy is when he discusses the difference between it and

other frames:

> It is a frame of acceptance dedicated to the amelioration of individual lives in society,
>
> largely by means of knowledge of human error and a whole series of salvation and
>
> transcendence devices that stress a both/and rather than an absolutist either/or, US versus
>
> THEM attitude. It is a mind-set committed to negotiation, education, and peace; one that
>
> is always opposed to the closed confrontational mind-set that so often leads to violence,
>
> killing, and war. (118)

As I move forward, a central element of Burkean comedy to keep in mind is how it works to create collaboration by collectivizing guilt and maintaining the idea that all humans make mistakes and have their own limitations. The charitable attitude at the heart of the comic frame becomes its essential defining feature. We cannot collaborate with any opponent without it, and yet it is one of the most difficult aspects of the frame to fully understand and articulate without it being corrupted by the spirit of hierarchy. As Allen Carter says, "to be 'moved by a sense of order' is to be 'goaded by the spirit of hierarchy'" (8). We cannot ever fully escape hierarchy, and yet comedy does its best to manage it.

<p style="text-align:center">Scholar's Misunderstandings of and Misguided Attempts to Locate Comedy</p>

In the literature on Burkean comedy, scholars have articulated misunderstandings and misconceptions of how the comic frame operates. By describing it as synonymous with humor, discussing it as a form of ridiculing a clown, and attempting to find comedy rather than use it as a method of social criticism, scholars divert attention from the complexities of the comic frame and oversimplify or misconstrue key aspects of how the comic frame operates. These mistakes, likely resulting from the equation of Burkean comedy with other theories on comedy, result in very different interpretations of the comic frame than Burke described, which leads to mistakes and misuses of the frame in scholars' analysis of rhetorical texts and discourses.

Humor

The first common mistake that many scholars make in their understanding of the comic frame is perpetuating humor as synonymous or complementary to the comic frame. Burke, however, clearly distinguishes between the two:

> We might, however, note an important distinction between comedy and humor, that is disclosed when we approach art forms as "frames of acceptance," as "strategies" for

living. Humor is the opposite of the heroic. The heroic promotes acceptance by

magnification, making the hero's character as great as the situation he confronts, and

fortifying the non-heroic individual vicariously, by identification with the hero: but

humor reverses the process: it takes up the slack between the momentousness of the

situation and the feebleness of those in the situation by dwarfing the situation. It converts

downwards, as the heroic converts upwards. Hence it does not make for so completely

well-rounded a frame of acceptance as comedy, since it tends to gauge the situation

falsely. (*Attitudes* 43)

Here, Burke explains that humor, like the heroic, oversimplifies situations but from the opposite

side. Whereas the heroic magnifies the situation, humor dwarfs the situation, and both reduce the

complexity of the situation. Consequently, humor would be more of an antagonistic force to the

comic frame in its potential to oversimply. Burke further describes how humorists use the

"customary method of self-protection [which] is the attitude of 'happy stupidity' whereby the

gravity of life simply fails to register; its importance is lost to them" (*Attitudes* 43). Basically, the

heroic elevates a character to the level or magnitude of a situation whereas humor diminishes the

situation to match the "feebleness" of the character, and both do not try to see the situation as it

is but rather elevate or deflate the character or situation in order to match the other, which

contradicts the aims of the comic frame.

  Despite this clear distinction between comedy and humor, many often interpret humor as

synonymous or a potential part of the comic frame. For those that see humor and comedy as

synonyms, their analyses typically center on how humor was employed by the group or media

they're examining. For example, in the article "Comedy as a Cure for Tragedy: Act Up and the

Rhetoric of Aids," scholars Adrienne Christiansen and Jeremy Hanson found that "Most of ACT

UP rhetoric draws upon the comic frame's emphasis on humans' capacity for laugher, reason, and action rather than scapegoating and paralysis" (158). In their analysis, they found the humorous techniques of concealment/exaggeration of Gay and HIV+ identities, ironic playful use of language, and campy theatrical performances as examples of the comic frame (Christiansen 162-165). As they put it, "The group's [ACT UP] reliance on humorous performances clearly suggests use of the comic frame" (Christiansen 162). Obviously, this differs greatly from Burke's quote about the distinction between the two; however, the scholars perpetuate that "Rather than reducing social tensions through mystification, scapegoating, or banishment, rhetoric in the comic frame humorously points out failings in the status quo" (Christiansen 161). Clearly, Burke would disagree with this idea that comedy exposes problems through humor, especially given humor's propensity to diminish or oversimplify a situation.

Nonetheless, many other scholars also found humor and humorous examples to be an integral part of the comic frame. Stephen O'Leary, in the article "A Dramatistic Theory of Apocalyptic Rhetoric," notes how "To those who do not accept the arguments of the tragic apocalypticists, however, their predictive claims can only appear as comedy: as humorous examples of human fallibility and overconfidence" (414). Here, O'Leary describes the central part of the comic frame, human fallibility, as being exhibited through humorous examples which contradicts Burke's own articulation of the comic frame. Scholar Marilyn DeLaure makes a similar mistake by connecting key elements of Burkean comedy with humor and by confusing humor and the comic frame as synonyms:

A comic orientation also recognizes, however, that too much seriousness and self-criticism can be overwhelming, even debilitating. Comedy encourages a charitable attitude, toward others and oneself, which is crucial for assuaging doubt and guilt, both

key obstacles to environmental engagement. Thankfully, to counterbalance Vishner's

heavy-handed critique, NIM [No Impact Man] provides moments of levity, humor, and

joy. (455)

In this excerpt, DeLaure says that the comic frame insists that too much seriousness and criticism

can be a problem, which seems contrary to Burke in that he sees the essence of comedy as a tool

for criticism and "maximum consciousness" (*Attitudes* 171). Furthermore, DeLaure articulates

that moments of humor help counteract the heavy critique which is something that Burke does

not discuss. As quoted earlier, William Rueckert points out, "the whole book [*Attitudes Towards*

History] is an extended definition and demonstration of what comic criticism is and a highly

persuasive argument as to why the comic perspective should be adopted by the social critic"

(113). As such, complex criticism is the essence of what the comic frame does, which means it

does not try to alleviate the seriousness or overwhelmingness of a critique through humor but

rather depicts things as complexly and holistically as it can. Suzanne Enck and Megan Morrissey

make a similar mistake of confusing comedy with humor by noting how "the comic frame

encourages us to see the world doubly, to 'dwarf' otherwise magnified situations, and promote a

spirit of humility rather than humiliation" (307). Here, the description of humor that Burke

supplies in *Attitudes Towards History*, that differentiates comedy and humor, becomes confused

with comedy. The "Dwarfing of situations" belongs solely to humor as seen in Burke's statement

"but humor reverses the process: it takes up the slack between the momentousness of the

situation and the feebleness of those in the situation by dwarfing the situation" (*Attitudes* 43).

Although some scholars recognize that humor and the comic frame are not synonymous,

unlike the aforementioned scholars, they still make the mistake of seeing humor as

complementary to the comic frame which still differs greatly from the clear distinction Burke

makes between the two. Valerie Renegar, George Dionisopoulos, and Mathew Yunker, in their article "Up in the Air with a Burkean Clown: The Comic Frame of Acceptance in Uncertain Economic Times," use Burke's description of humor to differentiate it slightly from the comic frame but still depict humor as a complementary force:

> Burke notes that "humor specializes in incongruities; but by its trick of 'conversion downwards,' by its stylistic ways of reassuring us in dwarfing the magnitude of obstacles or threats, it provides us relief in laughter" (1959, p. 58). […] However, the humor in the film [*Up in the Air*] does not promote "happy stupidity" (Burke, 1959). Rather, in witnessing the comic clash between two imperfect, yet likeable characters, the audience is encouraged to accept a comic—what Carlson (1988) calls a balanced—view of society. (194)

Here, humor is not completely synonymous with the comic frame but is an extension to how the comic frame operates. In other words, comedy is not necessarily humorous but humor can complement displays of the comic frame. Similarly, scholar Cheree Carlson notes this complementary aspect of humor and comedy by distinguishing how "Not all laughter arises out of what Burke terms 'charitable' debunking. As critics, we need to learn to tell the difference between humor arising from the comic frame and other forms of humor" ("Limitations on the Comic Frame" 310). Carlson insists that there are different types of humor: humor that arises from the comic frame and other types that do not. Burke, however, never articulates that humor can be a part of the comic frame. In fact, he distinguishes humor as something separate by noting how "it does not make for so completely well-rounded a frame of acceptance as comedy, since it tends to gauge the situation falsely" (*Attitudes* 43).

Scholars will often insist that "a comic perspective is not necessarily humorous since humor often requires the simplification and reduction of complex situations" (Renegar 195). Burke never insinuates that comedy can be humorous and clearly differentiates between the two. While comedy as a literary genre may be associated more with humor, comic criticism, otherwise known as the comic frame, does not deal with humor but rather operates as a specific attitude one takes towards a situation. Scholars find it difficult to differentiate between the two. Denise Bostdorff notes how "comedy typically is funny, at least in some very mild way, a fact that may spring from comedy's relationship with tragedy" (6). She explains how this humor stems from a "perspective by incongruity":

> Comedy utilizes what Burke would call "perspective by incongruity," in which the clash between incongruous elements creates a new point of view […] Perspective by incongruity is one of the key elements of humor in rhetorical artifacts like political cartoons and may explain why comedy in general so often is funny. (6)

The issue again here is Burke clearly separates humor from comedy. While Burke does point out that "Humor specializes in incongruities; but by its trick of conversion downwards, by its stylistic ways of reassuring us in dwarfing the magnitude of obstacles or threats, it provides us relief in laughter" (*Attitudes* 58), he never depicts humor and the comic frame as operating together.

Mistaking humor as complementary or synonymous with the comic frame might originate with Hugh Duncan. In his book *Communication and Social Order* (1962), he discusses comedy in great detail. In one excerpt, he describes comedy and its potential for laughter:

> We submit to the discipline of comedy because we believe it is necessary to social solidarity and group survival. Communication is kept open and free through laughter

because laughter clarifies where tragedy mystifies. Tragic art and religious ritual lead to

victimage and mystification. (388-389)

Here, and in his full discussion of comedy, it is unclear if Duncan is developing his own theory

on comedy as an art form or as Burkean comic criticism. Likely, he is articulating his own

theories on comedy as an art form in that he never specifically mentions Burke or the comic

frame. As such, his discussion of comedy in terms of humor follows the common conception of

comedy and humor to be synonymous. Scholars, however, identify Duncan's theories on comedy

as an extension or rearticulation of Burke's comic frame. Perhaps scholars may merely find it

difficult to separate Burke's comic criticism from more general theories on comedy. Whatever

the case, scholars utilizing Burke's comic frame often see Duncan as also articulating that theory.

For example, in one of her notes, Cheree Carlson says that "Even Duncan tends to equate

Burke's concept of the comic with clowning and other obvious forms of humor" ("Limitations

on the Comic Frame" 320). This example shows how scholars often cite Burke and Duncan

together which results in many seeing humor and the comic frame as complementary or

synonymous.

Thus, scholars have misunderstood Burke's comic frame, likely through the association

of Burke and Duncan, to be more of a reflection of comedy as an art form, when the comic frame

itself is a method of criticism that does not function like typical comedy. Burkean comedy does

not involve humor or laughter, which are qualities often linked to comedy, but rather the

elements Burke discusses in *Attitudes Towards History*. William Rueckert better articulates this

when he says "Burke is not really interested in comedy as a dramatic form but as an attitude

toward history, a habit of mind, a perspective, a critical/analytic way of looking at and examining

the drama of human relations as it unfolds in history" (Rueckert 117). Consequently, while

Burke's comic frame is related to but distinct from the dramatic form of comedy, many scholars may not realize entirely that separation or distinction.

The Clown

Not only do scholars often make the mistake of combining humor and Burke's comic frame, but scholars also often introduce the "clown" figure into discussions of the comic frame. Burke never mentions a clown in connection to the comic frame; however, Hugh Duncan does (402) which may be where that mistake also originates. One of the key misunderstandings that precedes the clown, however, is the idea of humiliation rather than humility as a central aspect of the comic frame. Burke says that one of the key goals of the comic frame is "to continue the search for a vocabulary that, as [André] Gide might say, could provide *humility* without *humiliation*. A comic vocabulary should be framed with this as its ideal" (*Attitudes* 344). Humiliation acts as a more benign but still problematic form of victimization, a central part of the tragic frame. As William Rueckert points out "Humiliating another person is a function of power, as is all victimization, whether of a minor variety, as in putting someone down, or of a major variety, as in the Holocaust" (126). Hence, the comic frame aims to move away from victimization and still create humility without falling into these tragic patterns.

Despite Burke's distinction that the comic frame strives for humility not humiliation, scholars tend to articulate the reverse. Adrienne Christiansen and Jeremy Hanson distinguish how "In contrast to the tragic frame, the comic frame never requires the death or banishment of a scapegoat. It attempts to shame or humiliate the target into changing his or her actions" (160). Clearly, this sentiment differs greatly from what Burke sees the comic frame as doing. Especially given that the comic frame recognizes "that all people are exposed to situations in which they must act as fools" (*Attitudes* 41), meaning there is no specific "target" to be "shamed." Suzanne

Enck and Megan Morrissey make a similar mistake in their discussion of *Orange is the New Black*:

> Within the context of OITNB, however, post-race, color blind fantasies are potentially interrupted as Piper's efforts to collaborate with fellow inmates of color (by presuming a social position equivalent to theirs) are met with humiliation consistent with her framing as a comic fool. (307)

Again, this sentiment defines humiliation as an integral part of the comic frame. The essence of the charitable attitude of the comic frame, however, does not insist on humiliating those who make mistakes but rather using those situations as an awareness of human error that exists within all of us. Stephen O'Leary echoes this misconception of the comic frame when he calls it "a comic drama of humiliation" that supposedly exposes "ignorance and false confidence to public ridicule" (414). Ridicule itself would be another form of victimization. If one ridicules someone else then they are "goaded by the spirit of hierarchy" (Carter 8). They are making someone feel guilty of being down, in this case down is "ignorance." As mentioned previously, the comic frame manages hierarchy by "socializing losses" by saying that "all people are guilty" (Rueckert 124). In this case, that would mean all people are in some ways ignorant or "every insight contains its own special kind of blindness" (*Attitudes* 41). Although comedy does aim at "exposure of fallibility" (O'Leary 392), it does so by making "man the student of himself" (*Attitudes* 171). It aims for all people to recognize their limitations, not merely the limitations of a "target." Julie Stewart and Thomas Clark make a similar mistake when they point out how South Park "employs a comic frame to ridicule extreme political behavior and language while promoting, through the children, an ethic of pragmatism and populism, with anti-elitism, anti-

authority, and anti-hypocrisy themes" (333). Again, the comic frame does not ridicule but rather makes all people aware of their own fallibility.

This idea of ridicule also likely originates with Duncan. He notes how "Where tragedy begins with a firm statement of belief in some social principle and dooms those who threaten it, comedy begins with an exploration of a social principle and ridicules those who place it beyond reason" (447). Dooming something and ridiculing it are similar in that they are both forms of victimization. While one might be less violent, they both shift the blame onto a victim. The assumption with ridicule is that "I am right, and I am going to shame you for being wrong." This is contrary to the aims of the comic frame which "works against arrogance and pride, against believing that one is always right and has the right to be right and impose it on others" (Rueckert 118). More than that, Burke also insists that "every insight contains its own blindness" (*Attitudes* 41-42). We cannot collaborate with anyone if we ridicule them into submission. We must recognize humility at the core of the comic frame. Even if we presume we are right and our opponents are wrong, we must recognize our own potential to be wrong and the human error that exists within all of us. Ridicule does not allow for that humility nor does it allow for a charitable attitude towards those we deem as wrong. Again, Duncan may be articulating his own idea of comedy that functions similar to comedy as a dramatic form, meaning that he may not be articulating comedy in the Burkean sense. Despite that, however, Duncan's idea that "comedy purges through victims who assume our degradation and suffering so we can confront it together in rational discourse" (395) can be found as a reference for the comic frame in the works of scholars like Cheree Carlson and Valerie Renegar**.** Carlson notes how "comedy shuns the violent sacrifice a scapegoat in favor of social chastisement of the clown" ("Gandhi and the Comic Frame" 448). In Carlson's version, Burke's comic frame operates as nothing more than a less

severe version of tragedy which overlooks the comic frame's charitableness. Carlson insists that the comic frame "chastises" (a less severe version of scapegoating) a clown figure which does not make sense given that Burke says "Where tragedy trains our focus on the 'individual hero' who attains a kind of 'divinity' through serving as the sacrificial victim, comedy replace[s] the hero with 'a collective body' (*Attitudes* 268). Carlson's notion of ridiculing a "clown" figure represents tragedy's use of a scapegoat rather than the comic frame's spreading of guilt around by "socializing losses" and replacing the scapegoat with a "collective body" (*Attitudes* 268). It is important to remember that Burke says "people are necessarily mistaken, that all people are exposed to situations in which they must act as fools" (*Attitudes* 41). Burke insists that, in comedy, not one person is "chastised" for making a mistake but that we are all reminded of our potential to be mistaken.

Other scholars also perpetuate a more benign form of scapegoating through a supposed comic lens. Renegar notes how "We can 'load the clown with our vices and then beat him mercilessly' (Duncan 397) because doing so creates distance 'between the clown and the rest of society' (Murphy 273)" (qtd. in Renegar 187). Again, this is scapegoating in a less violent form. Instead of killing those who serve as a way to purge our guilt, in Duncan and Murphey's comic conception we exclude clowns from society until they change and recognize their errors. Christiansen and Hanson discuss this in the context of the rhetoric ACT UP noting how "In contrast to the tragic frame that justifies the death or banishment of victims, ACT UP members used the comic frame and their positions as comic clowns to shame and ridicule their adversaries" (167). Burke's notion of the comic frame tries to operate without purging guilt through a scapegoat, even if that purging is less violent. A comic frame promotes collaboration with one's opponents rather than shaming them into submission. Furthermore, it operates against

hierarchy by "socializing losses" and spreading the guilt, so that we "all are guilty" (Rueckert 124). Burke's more charitable approach to human relations is absent from these scholars' conceptions of the comic frame.

From humiliation and ridicule comes the idea of the clown which becomes a key figure in scholars' misunderstandings of Burke's comic frame. In the article "Environmental Comedy: No Impact Man and the Performance of Green Identity," Marilyn DeLaure details the idea that "Beavan's performance is weakest when he fails to play the clown and takes himself too seriously" (456). She holds that "In comic drama [another phrase DeLaure uses for the comic frame], the clown is flawed, chastised, but then is able to learn from his or her mistakes; furthermore, we are compelled to recognize some part of that clown in all of us" (DeLaure 453). Although these ideas do reflect Burke's idea of human fallibility and propensity to make mistakes, they again maintain the idea of "chastising" the clown which represents a more benign form of scapegoating. While DeLaure does preserve the idea that people "can see some part of the clown in all of us" (453), she still misses the key component of the comic frame which is self-awareness. We become "students of ourselves" or "observers of ourselves while acting" (*Attitudes* 171). Burke expresses our need to be fully conscious of our own errors and limitations as well as others rather than seeing only some part of ourselves within the clown. Again, Burke never discusses a clown in relation to the comic frame. Carlson notes how "The clown embodies all the problems of the social order, but even as s/he is separated from the herd, we recognize a 'sense of fundamental kinship,' a knowledge that everyone 'contains [the clown] within'" ("Limitations on the Comic Frame" 312). While in some ways that does get at Burke's own articulations of the comic frame, it misses the point by insisting on exclusion and separation. The

comic frame does not rely on a victim to load our problems onto but rather people are brought together through the collectivization of guilt and recognition of shared human fallibility.

As mentioned earlier, in some of the scholars' works, the clown also becomes a representation of "ignorance" which perpetuates the problems of hierarchy. As Carlson puts it, "The clown is not an evil person, although s/he may do evil through ignorance" ("Limitations of the Comic Frame" 312). Carlson's use of evil here is interesting and contrary to Burke's notion that "The progress of humane enlightenment can go no further than picturing people not as vicious but as mistaken (*Attitudes* 41). Furthermore, to call human fallibility and error "ignorance" seems to miss the complexity for which what the comic frame aims. Burke describes a key distinction between error and ignorance:

> Yet, while never permitting itself to overlook the admonitions of even the most caustic social criticism, it [the comic frame] does not waste the world's rich store of error, as those parochial minded persons waste it who dismiss all thought before a certain date as "ignorance" and "superstition." Instead, it cherishes the lore of so-called "error" as a genuine aspect of the truth, with emphases valuable for the correcting of present emphases. (*Attitudes* 172)

Here, Burke hints at the common practice of dismissing earlier thinking as "ignorance" or "superstition." He goes on to say that the comic frame sees these past errors or misconceptions of the world as "a genuine aspect of the truth." While Burke may be talking about a more historical case of dismissing past beliefs as ignorance, this passage also insists that we should not be so quick to assume error to mean ignorance but rather a perspective that does offer some genuine or valid aspect of truth. That does not mean we should take "error" completely at face value, but it does mean that we should recognize "that each moment, each voice, is, in every sense of the

word, partial. 'From the standpoint of this total form… none of the participating sub-perspectives can be treated as precisely right or precisely wrong. They are all voices, or personalities, or positions, integrally affecting one another'" (qtd. in McGowan 52). Ignorance seems an oversimplification that perpetuates the idea that someone else is right or intelligent and someone else, in this case the clown, is ignorant and needs to be corrected. Burke instead insists on the categories of "tricked" and "intelligent" which insists that one has been deceived rather than simply one does not know (*Attitudes* 5). Ignorance presumes that one does not know, but we all have our own blindness, and we should not see the comic frame as righting those who are "ignorant" or "blind" but as recognizing partial perspectives or human error as an essential part of being human.

Although still holding to the idea of the clown, Celeste Condit does get at the idea of what Burke's comic frame entails:

> The comic frame tells us that we are all, inevitably, impure. To the extent that we strive for understanding and a better world, we must forgive each other our failings, for we are each equally the clowns of our dramas. Rather than a tragic challenge and defense that requires one of us to win and one to lose, one of us to be scapegoat and one scapegoater, I suggest we step out of the tragic mode. (81)

Again, although Burke never mentions a clown, Condit captures the charitable attitude of the comic frame in ways that scholars often miss. As she puts it, "We must forgive each other for our failings," meaning that we must recognize that we all have the potential to make mistakes. Often the clown represents a figure that must be excluded from society to purge the culture of those who are misguided (Renegar 187), but that misses the heart of the comic frame. As William Rueckert puts it, elements of comic criticism stress "that getting along with people—rather than

hating or vilifying or excluding or victimizing or killing them—is a primary object or goal of the good life" (122). Thus, the notions of humiliation, ridicule, and temporary exclusion of a clown figure as Duncan and other scholars have insisted misunderstand the aim of comic criticism which is to collectivize guilt and promote collaboration.

Attempting to Locate the Comic Frame

The third mistake scholars often make, including the ones examined above, is to try and locate comedy in a particular discourse. Burke, in *Attitudes Towards History,* makes a specific claim about poetic categories or frames of acceptance and rejection. He argues how "none of these poetic categories can be isolated in its chemical purity. They overlap upon one another, involving the qualitative matter of emphasis" (*Attitudes* 57). Burke also points out how his attention to the comic frame "is not to imply that the other frames do not have their uses" (*Attitudes* 107). Steven Schwarze, in his article entitled "Environmental Melodrama," calls to question the continued privileging of the comic frame by the academic community noting how "wholesale judgements of the melodramatic frame are not surprising, given the discipline's embrace of Kenneth Burke and the valorization of the comic frame as a superior mode of engagement with public controversies" (240). Despite Burke's own statements regarding the tendency for frames to overlap and for other frames to have their uses, the long-standing tradition in comic frame scholarly literature, as further evidenced by Schwarze's own critique, has been to locate and analyze where the comic frame has been employed in public discourse.

This attempt to locate the comic frame can best be seen in scholars' analysis of President Barack Obama's American exceptionalism rhetoric. American exceptionalism, or the belief that America differs from other nations because of its "national credo, historical evolution, and unique origins" (Weis 1), began to face special scrutiny, particularly after President Obama

stated, at a G20 summit press conference, that "I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism" (Taesuh 352). Scholars have argued that, in this moment and others, President Obama shifted from traditional exceptionalism, one that depicts the superior America as having a special, sometimes divine, role to play in human history (Gilmore 302), to what Robert Ivies and Oscar Giner call "American exceptionalism with a democratic inflection" ("American Exceptionalism in a Democratic Idiom" 361). Kundai Chirindo and Ryan Neville-Shepard describe this as "comic exceptionalism." Less mythic in nature, Obama's rhetoric, according to scholars, involves collectivism and the misguided other ("American Exceptionalism in a Democratic Idiom" 361). Although he still agrees that America embodies certain exceptional traits, Obama emphasizes the value of building partnerships with other countries. Ivie and Giner assert that Obama's new democratic exceptionalism, founded through the 2008 election, "was a pragmatic version of a national mission and world leadership steeped in democratic tradition that emphasized global cooperation over global domination" ("American Exceptionalism in a Democratic Idiom" 361). For Chirindo and Shepard, "Obama's comic interpretation of exceptionalism tried to constitute ways for Americans and Muslims around the world to view each other" which was needed after Bush's War on Terror (221). In other words, the new rhetoric, still centered on the exceptionalist identity, sought to establish better ways of viewing and engaging with the international community. Thus, Obama's new exceptionalism rhetoric became a rhetorical site for locating the comic frame.

Scholars have argued that Obama's exceptionalism rhetoric represents a shift from the "tragic frame" of traditional exceptionalism to what they termed "comic exceptionalism." Traditionally, they argue, American exceptionalism has involved an international moral

hierarchy created through the identification of heroes and villains and a foreign policy bent on imposing the nation's will on the rest of the world (Ivie 368). Instead of relying on a foreign enemy, Obama promoted collaboration with international others. As Ivie and Giner pinpoint in their discussion of Obama's rhetoric during the 2008 presidential primaries, "Speaking in a democratic idiom, he [Obama] turned the mythos of mission from a story of moral conquest into a practical vision of working collaboratively on the global scene to promote peace by augmenting social justice" ("More Good, Less Evil" 279). They further remark on how Obama pursued "peacebuilding policies over assigning blame" ("More Good, Less Evil" 294). As quoted by Ivie and Giner, Obama articulated that "'Things get done,' […] by 'bridging differences' rather than by 'stand[ing] above the rest of the world'" (qtd. in "More Good, Less Evil" 285). These scholars insist that Obama renounced the previous positioning of America as too morally superior to build better relationships with the international community and instead "exuded confidence that democracy could sustain the nation by building stronger partnerships rather than by withdrawing from the world or trying to dominate it" ("More Good, Less Evil" 285). As these examples represent, scholars have identified Obama's rhetoric as comic in how he characterizes and promotes collaboration with the international community.

Although some scholars have classified Obama's new exceptionalism as more comic in nature, Travis Cram argues that perhaps Obama's rhetoric has not completely shifted fully to a comic frame of acceptance and is actually a mix of both tragedy and comedy. In his discussion of Obama's rhetoric on Iran, Cram found that "Obama responded to the challenge of Iran's nuclear program by fashioning a frame of responsibility in a comic register, shifting the obligation to resolve the standoff peacefully onto both Iran and the United States" (69). In other words, Obama moved away from the tragic frame's placement of blame on an external foe by placing

some of the blame on the United States' for the country's rocky relationship with Iran. Despite this comic inclination of Obama to share the blame with Iran, Cram also found that Obama insisted on the isolation of the country if they broke the rules or acted violently (88). Cram argues that while isolation cannot be equated with scapegoating, it cannot be considered fully comic (88). As he describes, "Obama presented a hybrid of Kenneth Burke's tragic and comic frames that chastised the Iranian regime for dangerous behavior while acknowledging American guilt, error, and responsibility for bringing the nuclear standoff to a peaceful end" (69). Here, Cram articulates how chastisement of an adversary runs contrary to true comedy. Due to this chastisement, he notes that Obama's rhetoric tends to be more of a mix of the comic and tragic frames:

> NSS 2010 and President Obama's Iran rhetoric clearly display the tragic possibilities that Terrill and Reeves and May fear alongside the comic tendencies that Chirindo and Neville-Shepard hail (such is the upshot of rhetorical ambiguity, after all). However, it is important to note that the president's perspective offers a tragic comic hybrid. (Cram 87)

This tragic-comic hybrid offers a justification for Obama's willingness to create collaboration with international others while also still falling into some of the tragic impulses to isolate and chastise those that break international rules. Cram in his discussion of the tragic-comic hybrid reflects Burke's own claim about how these poetic categories overlap in public discourse (*Attitudes* 57).

Like Cram, I argue that Obama's rhetoric cannot be seen as purely comic. In my own analysis of the president's foreign policy speeches, I found examples of Obama's more collaborative spirit towards international others that scholars hail as comic. For example, in

Obama's speech on the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, the president emphasizes the need

to work with the international community:

> So, this is our strategy. And in each of these four parts of our strategy, America will be
>
> joined by a broad coalition of partners. Already, allies are flying planes with us over
>
> Iraq; sending arms and assistance to Iraqi security forces and the Syrian opposition;
>
> sharing intelligence; and providing billions of dollars in humanitarian aid. Secretary
>
> Kerry was in Iraq today meeting with the new government and supporting their efforts to
>
> promote unity. And in the coming days he will travel across the Middle East and Europe
>
> to enlist more partners in this fight, especially Arab nations who can help mobilize Sunni
>
> communities in Iraq and Syria, to drive these terrorists from their lands. This is
>
> American leadership at its best: We stand with people who fight for their own freedom,
>
> and we rally other nations on behalf of our common security and common humanity. (3)

In this characterization of America, the country's exceptionality stems from a leadership in the

world that relies on help from others. This drama is one of collectivism and mutuality (Chirindo

217). American exceptionalism here remains more implicit and does not involve distinguishing

America from the international community through a good versus evil mindset. This fits the

collaborative spirit that Chirindo and Shepard hail:

> Comic exceptionalism brings about an egalitarian orientation among actors. It favors
>
> international cooperation and frames adversaries as misguided, rather than as anathema,
>
> and is thus a means of taming the cataclysmic implications that often result from
>
> international disagreements. Through many of his foreign policy pronouncements,
>
> Obama challenged world leaders and general populations alike to view each other as
>
> flawed members of the great community. (217)

Furthermore, the human fallibility of the comic frame can be seen in another speech of Obama's

regarding Islamic Terrorism:

> The Framers who drafted the Constitution could not have foreseen the challenges that
>
> have unfolded over the last 222 years. But our Constitution has endured through
>
> secession and civil rights, through World War and Cold War, because it provides a
>
> foundation of principles that can be applied pragmatically; it provides a compass that can
>
> help us find our way. It hasn't always been easy. We are an imperfect people. Every
>
> now and then, there are those who think that America's safety and success requires us to
>
> walk away from the sacred principles enshrined in this building. And we hear such
>
> voices today. But over the long haul the American people have resisted that
>
> temptation**.** And though we've made our share of mistakes, required some course
>
> corrections, ultimately, we have held fast to the principles that have been the source of
>
> our strength and a beacon to the world. ("American Values and National Security" 11)

In this characterization of America, Obama discusses elements of the country's own weaknesses.

He acknowledges that mistakes have been made. His characterization of America as imperfect

recognizes the flawed human traits typical of a comic frame; however, he still uses exceptionalist

language (a beacon to the world) that draws on the national identity founded in exceptionalism.

In these foreign policy speeches, however, one can also find more implicit divisive

rhetoric directed towards Obama's internal opposition. For example, in his speech on the 2016

Orlando Shooting, Obama explained that "They (Terrorist Groups) want us to validate them by

implying that they speak for those billion-plus people, that they speak for Islam […] And if we

fall into the trap of painting all Muslims with a broad brush and imply that we are at war with an

entire religion, then we are doing the terrorists' work for them" (6). Here, Obama implies that his

opposition, the Republican party, creates division in the same way that terrorists seek to. He

places blame on those who disagree with him and attack all Muslims and the religion of Islam,

when not all Muslims are terrorists. Burke's comic frame attempts to characterize the other as

misguided. Here, Obama simply puts terrorists and Republicans on the same level by implying

that Republicans are just as bad as the terrorists.

  In a further example, Obama's states that "people with possible ties to terrorism, who are

not allowed on a plane, should not be allowed to buy a gun" ("Orlando Shooting" 5). In this

quote from the text, Obama presents the solution (gun control) in a matter of fact fashion, which

implies that Obama feels that the right thing to do is common sense. He then criticizes his

audience for not taking these common-sense steps (gun control) to fight terrorism. Here, Obama

implicitly blames his audience for being ignorant. Obama further states "Enough talking about

being tough on terrorism. Actually, be tough on terrorism and stop making it easy as possible for

terrorists to buy assault weapons" ("Orlando Shooting" 5). Here, Obama again criticizes his

Republican audience for not backing up their anti-terrorist policies with actions. Guilt then

should be felt by those who let political distractions, such as gun control, or their own ignorance

keep them from doing the right thing. Obama paints all Republicans with a broad brush and

implies that their apathy for the real issues keeps them from backing up their anti-terrorism

policies with actions. This can be seen when he notes that "friends from the other side of the

aisle" have condemned the Obama administration for not using the phrase "radical Islam"

("Orlando Shooting" 5). Obama countered that "calling a threat by a different name does not

make it go away. This is a political distraction" ("Orlando Shooting" 5). Obama ridicules his

audience for being dishonest by creating and engaging in these diversion tactics in order to

advance politically. Rather than trying to fight terrorism, the audience spent time arguing over

what the enemy should be called, an issue Obama saw as irrelevant. Obama then reduces the motives of his opposition to ill-intentioned. The Republicans are either apathetic, they do not really care about the issues like they say they do, or deceptive, they use political distractions to get ahead. The only other alternate characterization for his audience is ignorance, for these steps Obama proposed were common sense. All of these examples support a more ambiguous tragic-comic reading of Obama's rhetoric that Cram articulates in that Obama creates an identity for his Republican adversaries that oversimplifies their motives as ill-intentioned.

As these examples show, in Obama's foreign policy speeches where scholars locate the emphasis on collaboration with and comic characterizations of international others, one can also find an oversimplification of and transfer of blame onto Republicans. This again illustrates a key point Burke makes in *Attitudes Towards History* about how "none of these poetic categories can be isolated in its chemical purity. They overlap upon one another, involving the qualitative matter of emphasis" (*Attitudes* 57). Due to this overlapping, the long-standing attempt in scholarly literature to locate the comic frame in particular discourses may perhaps be futile. As in the case of Obama, it is impossible to find the comic frame without the impulses of the tragic frame intermingled as well. One would likely never find pure comedy but rather the comic frame in conjunction with other frames. Also, other forms of discourse or rhetorical situations may be better suited for other frames rather than comedy, as Steven Schwarze insists. Thus, I argue we should revisit Burke's statement "whatever poetry may be, criticism had best be comic" (*Attitudes* 107).

As all three of these sections indicate, literature on Burkean comedy has included key mistakes and misconceptions of the comic frame that differ from Burke's original discussion of comedy. These misconceptions likely originate from scholars citing other theories and

discussions on comedy as extensions or reformulations of Burke's comic criticism. All of these examples, however, share a propensity to try to locate or find examples of comedy rather than use comedy as a filter for analysis. Consequently, much of the research on the comic frame has been misguided. In this next section, I will look at Burke's piece "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" to suggest what Burke's comic criticism might look like. This example exemplifies how scholars could more accurately adopt the comic frame as a method of social criticism.

"The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" and Burke's Comic Criticism

Whether it is American exceptionalism rhetoric, apocalyptic rhetoric, environmental discourses, examples from movies and television shows, or any other media artifact, the long-standing tradition of research utilizing the comic frame has been an attempt to isolate a place where comedy operates and discuss its usefulness in that domain. This specific use of the comic frame differs from Burke's original articulation of the frame as a method of criticism and relates to Burke's notion of the "Bureaucratization of the Imaginative" that "comedy meditates upon" (*Attitudes* Introduction). The "Bureaucratization of the Imaginative" names "the vexing things that happen when men try to translate some pure aim or vision into terms of its corresponding material embodiment" (*Attitudes* Introduction). Burke's original vision of comedy sought not to offer recompense for social ills but to help "produce a state of affairs whereby these rigors could abate" (*Attitudes* 175). His aim was to do so through his method of criticism. As William Rueckert explains, "Burke knows very well that society does not read books, individuals do, and it is inside of the head of these individuals that you want to try to change with your criticism—rather than say, the institutions, which is what politicians try to change" (117). Burke created this tool that could be used as a method of social criticism for changing the minds of those who read such books. The material embodiment of this aim, however, has involved misunderstandings of

comedy and locating of examples of comedy rather than analyzing social problems within the comic frame.

  The question then becomes, what would true comic criticism look like? I think our best example comes from Burke himself. In the "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle,'" Burke critiques Hitler's rhetoric outlined in *Mein Kampf* that blames the Jews for the economic and social ills that Germany faced following World War I. Burke notes how often scholars critique *Mein Kampf* by inflicting "a few symbolic wounds upon this book and its author" and how such an approach is "contributing more to our gratification than to our enlightenment" ("The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" 191). Burke, on the other hand, felt the need to analyze the rhetoric more closely to try to "discover what kind of 'medicine' this medicine-man has concocted, that we may know, with greater accuracy, exactly what to guard against, if we are to forestall the concocting of similar medicine in America" ("The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" 191). Burke's analysis of Hitler's rhetoric follows a discussion of what and how Hitler does what he does in order to unify Germany, why he does it, and why it was effective. This tracing of the complex factors contributing to Hitler's actions reflect the comic frame's search for "maximum forensic complexity" (*Attitudes* 42). Thus, if we are to adopt a comic frame for social criticism, we should examine "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" closely to understand how Burke avoids dehumanizing Hitler and provides a more complex picture as to why Hitler did what he did.

  Burke, in his analysis, offers a more detailed picture of the specific actions Hitler takes to create unity in Germany. He notes that "Hitler found a panacea, a 'cure for what ails you,' a 'snakeoil,' that made such sinister unifying possible within his own nation" ("The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" 192). Hitler's "cure" required unification through the selection of a common enemy. As Burke says, "this policy [unity by common enemy] was exemplified in his selection

of an 'international' devil, the 'international Jew'" ("The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" 194). In

other words, Hitler created a common enemy through a racial theory that contrasted the Jewish

race against the supposed superior Aryan race in order to unify Germany. Burke explains how

"The 'Aryan' is 'constructive'; the Jew is 'destructive'; and the 'Aryan' to continue his

construction, must *destroy* the Jewish *destruction*. The Aryan, as the vessel of *love*, must *hate*

the Jewish *hate*" ("The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" 204). The two races were, thus, contrasted

against each other as oppositions, good versus evil. In order to create unity, Hitler gave the

German people a common enemy because "Men who can unite on nothing else can unite on the

basis of a foe shared by all" ("The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" 192).

Burke explains how Hitler created this common enemy in two ways: a non-economic

explanation for economic problems and through the corruption of religious thought. Burke

describes how Hitler's "medicine" provided "a *noneconomic interpretation of economic ills*. As

such, it served with maximum efficiency in deflecting the attention from the economic factors

involved in modern conflict; hence by attacking 'Jew finance' instead of *finance*, it could

stimulate an enthusiastic movement that left 'Aryan' finance in control" ("The Rhetoric of

Hitler's 'Battle'" 204). In other words, Hitler, according to Burke, justified the economic

problems following the first World War through his racial theory that characterized Jews as the

antithesis of Aryans:

> But Hitler gives this ennobling attitude an ominous twist by his theories of race and
>
> nation, whereby the "Aryan" is elevated above all others by the innate endowment of his
>
> blood, while other "races," in particular Jews and Negroes, are innately inferior. This
>
> sinister secularized revision of Christian theology thus puts the sense of dignity upon a

fighting basis, requiring the conquest of "inferior races." ("The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" 202)

So, not only did Hitler provide a noneconomic answer to economic problems, directing the attention from the causes of certain social and economic ills, he did so through a sinister twisting of religious doctrine that justified his racial theory by perpetuating the superiority of the Aryan race above all others, most notably the Jews.

While these two sections seem to suggest a villainization of Hitler for what he did, that is actually the opposite of what Burke does in his analysis, especially when he explains the context and motivations behind Hitler's actions. Burke, in the comic register, at one point notes how "The question arises, in those trying to gauge Hitler: Was his selection of the Jew, as his unifying devil-function, a purely calculating act? Despite the quotation I have already given, I believe that it was not. The vigor with which he utilized it, I think, derives from a much more complex state of affairs" ("The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" 196). Burke delves into the complexity of the German situation by discussing the reason why Hitler needed unity in the first place and that reason stemmed from the "parliamentary wrangle" of the Hapsburg Empire:

> The parliament of the Habsburg Empire just prior to its collapse was an especially drastic instance of such disruption, such vocal diaspora, with movements that would reduce one to a disintegrated mass of fragments if he attempted to encompass the totality of its discordances. So, Hitler, suffering under the alienation of poverty and confusion, yearning for some integrative core, came to take this parliament as the basic symbol of all that he would move away from. ("The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" 200-201)

The political disunity of the Hapsburg Empire lacked a unifying element that Hitler began to desire after seeing this state of political upheaval. Burke makes an interesting distinction about

how Hitler originally handled the Hapsburg Empire by noting its similarities to how American newspapers dealt with conflicting interests. By focusing on the conflicting interests themselves, American newspapers and Hitler could direct the attention away from the source of these conflicts:

> The strategy of our orthodox press, in thus ridiculing the cacophonous verbal output of Congress, is obvious: by thus centering attack upon the *symptoms* of business conflict, as they reveal themselves on the dial of political wrangling, and leaving the underlying cause, the business conflicts themselves, out of the case, they can gratify the public they would otherwise alienate: namely the businessman who are the activating members of their reading public. ("The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" 201)

Here, Burke suggests that our own newspapers focus on the symptoms of political dissonance due to conflicting interests without addressing the underlying causes. Hitler did this as well; however, he went one step further by searching "for the cause. And this 'cause,' of course, he derived from his medicine, his racial theory by which he could give a noneconomic interpretation of a phenomenon economically engendered" ("The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" 201). Hitler created unity by constructing a political state that was the exact opposite of what he deemed the Hapsburg Empire to be. As Burke put it, "On the one side, were the ideas, or images, of disunity, centering in the parliamentary wrangle of the Habsburg 'State of Nationalities.' This was offered as the antithesis of German nationality, which was presented in the curative imagery of unity" ("The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" 206). In order to move away from the Hapsburg Empire, Burke insists that "the wrangle of the parliamentary is to be stilled by the giving of *one* voice to the whole people, this is to be the "inner voice" of Hitler, made uniform throughout the German boundaries, as leader and people were completely identified with each other" ("The

Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" 207). Thus, instead of conflicting interests, now everyone was given one voice which silenced disagreement but created a rigid unifying set of ideas and beliefs for the German populace that centered around noneconomic explanations for economic problems. This was an extreme counter response to the political turmoil Hitler witnessed in the Hapsburg Empire, but not all that different from how American news outlets discussed conflicting interests.

As this prior example shows, Burke, in his analysis of Hitler, discusses scenic factors that influenced Hitler's motivations and strategies for concocting his medicine, but Burke, wanting to aim for "maximum forensic complexity" (*Attitudes* 42), also briefly addresses the personal motivations for why Hitler did what he did. Burke first notes how his medicine functioned "as medicine for him personally" ("The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" 199) suggesting that Hitler's unity through devil-function provided him solace that followed his harsh stay in Vienna:

> It seems that, when Hitler went to Vienna, in a state close to total poverty, he genuinely
> suffered. He lived among the impoverished; and he describes his misery at the spectacle.
> He was *sensitive* to it; and his way of manifesting this sensitiveness impresses me that he
> is, at this point, wholly genuine, as with his wincing at the broken family relationships
> caused by alcoholism, which he in turn relates to impoverishment. ("The Rhetoric of
> Hitler's 'Battle'" 196)

Here, Burke humanizes Hitler by showing his personal struggle precipitating the rise of his political policies. In this way, he brings Hitler back into the human community. Like the tragic and epic frames, Hitler provided euphemistic answers for materialistic problems (*Attitudes* 106). Burke follows this "rationality" and need for unity and avoids painting Hitler as a demonizing villain who corrupted the minds of the German people in order to expunge the Jews. Hitler

himself was corrupted, so to speak, by this medicine. Burke rather often goes back to this question of whether or not Hitler was calculated in his demonizing persuasion or whether it stemmed from a sincere belief in what he was selling:

> Here, I think, we see the distinguishing quality of Hitler's method as an instrument of persuasion, with reference to the question whether Hitler is sincere or deliberate, whether his vision of the omnipotent conspirator has the drastic honesty of paranoia or the sheer shrewdness of a demagogue trained in Realpolitik of the Machiavellian sort. Must we choose? Or may we not, rather, replace the "either—or" with a "both—and?" ("The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" 211)

Burke suggests a both/and rather than an absolutist either/or interpretation of Hitler's motivations, which reflects a key aspect of the comic frame (Rueckert 118). Burke recognizes that to assume one or the other would be an oversimplification of the various facets that contributed to the devasting German situation and would not capture the complexity of what happened in Germany and in Hitler himself. In Burke's characterization, Hitler is not purely evil but a rather complicated person, to say the least.

Beyond the scenic factors and personal motivations of Hitler, Burke recognizes that Hitler could not have acted completely on his own, and so he addresses why Hitler's rhetoric was effective as to know what to guard against in the future. He notes how "After the defeat of Germany in the first World War there were especially strong emotional needs that this compensatory doctrine of an *inborn* superiority could gratify" ("The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" 202). The doctrine that provided a noneconomic answer to economic problems was exactly what the German people needed. As Burke explains, "A people in collapse, suffering under economic frustration and the defeat of nationalistic aspirations, with the very midrib of

their integrative efforts (the army) in a state of dispersion, have little other than some 'spiritual'

basis to which they could refer their nationalistic dignity" ("The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'"

205). Hitler's racial theory provided the people with a material villain and a spiritual explanation

for that villain, and so it "was a perfect recipe for the situation" ("The Rhetoric of Hitler's

'Battle'" 205). Burke details further what this particular doctrine provided to the German

people:

> And is it possible that an equally important feature of appeal was not so much in the
>
> repetitiousness per se, but in the fact that, by means of it, Hitler provided a "world view"
>
> for people who had previously seen the world but piecemeal? Did not much of his lure
>
> derive, once more, from the bad filling of a good need? […] He was not offering people a
>
> *rival* world view; rather, he was offering a world view to people who had no other to pit
>
> against it. ("The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" 218).

Thus, when looking at what Hitler did, it is important to also understand why it was effective. It

was effective because it gave the German people an answer to their problems, an answer that

currently had no other to contest it.

Burke also insists that Hitler's rhetoric's effectiveness stemmed from its ability to unify,

regardless of how that unity was created. Burke points out how "The yearning for unity is so

great that people are always willing to meet you halfway if you will give it to them by fiat, by

flat statement, regardless of the facts" ("The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" 205-206). The unity

by devil-function was not Hitler's invention. Burke explains how "an important ingredient of

unity in the middle ages (an ingredient that long did its unifying work despite the many factors

driving towards disunity) was the symbol of a *common enemy*, the Prince of Evil himself" ("The

Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" 193). Thus, Burke suggests that people's inherent willingness for

unity allows them to accept such unity in whatever form it is given, making Hitler's

villainization of the Jews an acceptable and persuasive method when there was no other rival

method to challenge it.

The unity by a common enemy had another aspect, however, to recommend it. Burke

explains how "there is 'medicine' for the Aryan members of the middle class in the projective

device of the scapegoat, whereby the 'bad' features can be allocated to the 'devil,' and one can

'respect himself' by distinction between 'good' capitalism and 'bad' capitalism, with those of the

different lodge being the vessels of the 'bad' capitalism" ("The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'"

196). By putting all the problems of capitalism on Jewish finance, Aryan finance could be

restored through the expunging of the Jews rather than systematic change that would require

much more effort. Burke explains why battling an external enemy is easier than battling an

enemy from within:

> And the greater one's internal inadequacies, the greater the amount of evils one can load
>
> up on the back of "the enemy." This device is furthermore given a semblance of reason
>
> because the individual properly realizes that he is not alone responsible for his condition.
>
> There *are* inimical factors in the scene itself. And he wants to have them "placed,"
>
> preferably in a way that would require minimum change in the ways of thinking to which
>
> he had been accustomed. ("The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" 203)

The German people could project onto the Jews all their problems, and then once the Jews were

eradicated, their problems would supposedly be solved. Of course, that would not have been the

case. And yet, it requires less systematic change. It oversimplifies the German situation in a way

satisfying to the people and creates unity in the process, and thus, was effective in giving the

German people an easier solution to their problems.

Burke's more complete picture of what Hitler did, how he did it, why he did it, and why

it was effective showcases the comic frame's attempts to understand the complex motivating

forces behind why people do what they do. While Burke does not shy away from suggesting the

"sinister" unifying that Hitler accomplished, he does not implicate Hitler alone. Burke at one

point notes that "all the ingredients Hitler stirred into his brew were already rife, with spokesmen

and bands of followers, before Hitler took them over" ("The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" 213).

In other words, Hitler was not some exceptionally evil deviant that wanted to expunge the Jews,

he was a complicated human that operated within a sinister genre already present. It is this

sinister genre that Burke "scapegoats" rather than Hitler himself:

> It may well be that people, in their human frailty, require an enemy as well as a goal.
>
> Very well: Hitlerism itself has provided us with such an enemy—and the clear example
>
> of its operation is guaranty that we have, in him and all he stands for, no purely fictitious
>
> "devil-function" made to look like a world menace by rhetorical blandishments, but a
>
> reality whose ominousness is clarified by the record of its conduct to date. In selecting his
>
> brand of doctrine as our "scapegoat," and in tracking down its equivalents in America, we
>
> shall be at the very center of accuracy. ("The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" 218-219)

Burke does not villainize Hitler but rather villainizes Hitler's rhetoric, understanding that Hitler

did not accomplish his sinister unifying alone. Burke spends little energy judging Hitler himself,

and instead insists that we need to guard against such sinister rhetoric itself. Burke's whole

analysis centers on this as his goal. As he explains, "Our job, then, our anti-Hitler battle, is to

find all available ways of making the Hitlerite distortions of religion apparent, in order that

politicians of his kind in America be unable to perform a similar swindle" ("The Rhetoric of

Hitler's 'Battle'" 219-220). Here, Burke is insisting that this could happen again, and by

studying Hitler's rhetoric, understanding where it came from, and why it was effective, we can

avoid the rise and pervasiveness of this type of rhetoric in America. Burke follows the

complexity of how the villainization of the Jews happened, and he does so through the comic

frame that avoids euphemistic understandings of Hitler's motivations (he was evil) and rather

shows both the spiritual and material factors motivating his choices and the effectiveness of

those choices. Although Hitler's rhetoric operates in the tragic mode with its victimization,

Burke, in his analysis of Hitler, operates in the comic. As Burke put it, "But as the issue looks

from the comic point of view, however 'tragic' tragedy may be in itself, the critical analysis of

'tragic' motives is in essence 'comic'" (*Attitudes* 348). A return to comic criticism should

function similarly to "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" by avoiding essentializing statements of

motives and tracing the complexity of even the most tragic of deeds.

Conclusion: Where do we go from here?

This thesis explored the ways in which scholars misunderstand and attempt to find

comedy in public discourse. I first began with a discussion of the comic frame, emphasizing its

charitable but not gullible approach to the charting of human motives, its operation as a salvation

device that collectivizes guilt, and its use in social criticism. I then traced the common mistakes

in literature to equate comedy with humor, to associate comedy with ridicule and a clown figure,

and to try to isolate comedy in public discourse. The equation of comedy with humor often leads

to oversimplifications of and misunderstandings about how the comic frame operates.

Furthermore, amid discussions of the clown and ridicule were the more benign forms of

scapegoating that emphasized humiliation rather than humility, which was the opposite of how

Burke described the comic frame. Given our flawed natures and how the spirit of hierarchy

goads us into the tragic need to isolate, exclude, ridicule, victimize, or patronize those who we

see as "wrong," the comic frame is a welcomed alternative for dealing with human relations. In fact, Burke says that "We hope, incidentally, to have so weighted our discussion that the comic frame will appear the most serviceable for the handling of human relationships" (*Attitudes* 106). What is lost in translation then is the comic frame's potential to provide "humility without humiliation" (*Attitudes* 344). The comic frame attempts to promote humility through the maximum awareness of human fallibility and limitations: an important distinction that is often corrupted by the spirit of hierarchy.

Furthermore, throughout the literature, scholars often only use comedy as a rhetorical mode to find. As I demonstrated in the example of Obama, often frames overlap, and the constant attempt by scholars to find comedy in a variety of discourses overlooks Burke's original intentions for the comic frame and ignores how each frame has its uses in certain situations (*Attitudes* 107). Thus, I argued how "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" serves as an example of what comic criticism would look like. By tracing the complexities of Hitler and Germany's situation following World War I, Burke avoids the tendency to essentialize about Hitler, but he does so without excusing anything that he did. Thus, he utilizes the "charitable but not gullible" element of the comic frame. This example can serve as a guide for how scholars wanting to adopt comic criticism in their analysis of social problems.

Thus, in light of the persistent mistaken and misguided attempts in scholarly research to find examples of comedy in societal discourses and texts, I urge future research to return to Burke's original articulations of comedy, mainly his discussion of the comic frame as a method of criticism. William Rueckert argues that Burke describes the comic frame as "the corrective frame that social critics should adopt and apply at that particular point in history if both the critics and our sick society are to be restored to sanity and health" (112). He further details how

"The motto of this book [*Attitudes Towards History*] might be Everyone a comic critic, for like all of Burke's other books, this one is addressed directly to individual readers and urges them all, tries to persuade them to make themselves—their minds—over in the image of the comic critic" (Rueckert 117). This method of criticism could help bring more complexity to our understanding of social problems. In order to continue using the comic frame, we should return to the frame's core elements and consider using it as we take on the role of social critics.

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