

Name

Professor

Course

Date

### Good Poetry: Propaganda or Purely Aesthetic

Instead of showing a strong support or disparaging propagandistic components of poetry, it is better to diverge into the adversatives with another alternative. Poetry does not have to be purely aesthetic, outside of the word “good,” and it does not have to be “a weapon in the class struggle.” Art can become an informative mechanism that could spark change in the perceptions of the public. Propaganda can be explained as a vital facet of poetry with different objects and styles. Although most are cautious to apply the word “propaganda” to depict a form of poetry, it is better to employ the term in a non-derogatory way. Propaganda is a means of defining poetry that appreciates the ability to be both shaped by and be a stimulus to the principles and approaches of the audience.

Even though propagandistic poetry can be a great tool for good, it has to be centered on a rigorous moral doctrine and use a style that views the audience as individuals, not hostages. The style and purpose are the key determinants of the intensity of propagandistic poetry. Still, propaganda and art are linked in an intricate web, and there are ethical criteria to instruct poets in creating principled propagandistic poetry. This paper will focus on Kenneth Burke’s works on an in-depth level and review his arguments on choosing propagandistic poetry over purely aesthetic poetry and the underlying explanations for the preference.

### **The Connection between Propaganda and Poetry**

Kenneth Burke was a literary theorist and poet that was revered for his influences on contemporary critical theory. Moreover, his prose and poetry regularly interconnect creative writing and criticism (Poetry Foundation). Burke was of the opinion that every form of art involves an element of misinformation. Allen Tate, a social commentator, and poet composed a contemptuous commentary denouncing artists that ignored the collective to follow political objectives, and he pointed out Burke as a good illustration. While poets like Burke were emphasizing on the political capability of poetry, Tate questioned the fate of poetry's essence, universality, and artistry (McKenzie). Tate contended that the best thing about poetry was the manner in which it opposed the period in which it was written, preferring to involve itself in something detached from time-based audiences and needs.

Nevertheless, Burke resisted Tate's approach to the function of poetry. In response to Tate through letter-battles, Burke demonstrated cynicism and astonishment to the case that literature does not need an audience. He states, "Does this man not attempt to enhance the allure of his verses? There must be instances where he excluded elements that he believed were essential, but the importance of which he believed would not be inspiring and apparent to others" (McKenzie). Tate also has to be discerning in his poetry to address the audience, skipping and adjusting the parts that are not easily comprehended by the audience. The argument that Burke presents is that since every poet must sway the audience to engagement and interest, each form of poetry contains a propagandistic aspect. Tate's assertions that art could be separate from circumstance and audience is not possible in reality. All poetry must react to and elicit reactions from the audience.

Indeed, this reaction reinforces poetry. In *The Nature of Art Under Capitalism*, Burke proposed that since propagandistic art involves the world, it protects poetry from being excluded

from only utilizing the principles that result from a particular social texture like purely aesthetic poetry does (677). Paradoxically, propaganda is the art that centers on the capacity of readers to effect personal and collective change while purely aesthetic art exhibits a lethargic world where things happen devoid of any connection to the readers. Furthermore, Burke reasons that purely aesthetic poetry could soothe readers into an unrealistic sense of security and comfort while propaganda involves the reader in something that has an exceptional ability of extensively impacting society.

It is mandatory that there be a link between the poet, the world, and the reader. Burke was successful in creating a complete association between outside world and art in *Counter-Statement*. Apparently, in *Counter-Statement*, Tate was offended by such words from the book like “we may view literature as a budding form of action” when he condemned it so thoroughly (185). Unquestionably, Burke’s claim that the reader has specific categorical anticipations would offend Tate. Poetry involves propagandistic elements (such as a focus on the reader’s hopes) meaning that Burke insinuates that art is a weapon for the propagandist pursuing extensive social change.

Irrespective of Burke’s reasonable argument that poetry can and does have a significant impact on society, he wisely retracts from any allegation that would compare poetry to the political orations that tackle daily issues. According to his *The Nature of Art Under Capitalism*, the role of poetry is to affect general opinions imperceptibly, not to request a particular action regarding an isolated incident (675). Useful propagandist poetry must not instruct the readers on supporting a union petition, but develop concern and compassion for the strikers as rational beings.

When Burke composed the *Counter-Statement*, he claimed that art cannot survive without propaganda, altering readers' perceptions, rather than direct actions, regarding prevailing ideologies (189). He argued that the function of poetry is to groom the mind to defend particular reforms ultimately. Therefore, the role of poetry is not to directly champion a real concern, but to adjust viewpoints in a more elusive manner.

Incidentally, there is a central distinction between the functioning of propaganda and poetry. William Carlos Williams, a friend of Burke, was justifiably upset when Communists demanded that his poetry is converted into a weapon with a goal (Poetry Foundation). Nonetheless, Burke's affirmation that poetry contains propagandistic traits by no means denotes that poetry must have the same function as a political poster.

#### *The Appropriate Process of Propagandistic Poetry*

When Burke was informing the Communists and aesthetes that propaganda and poetry are primarily similar, he did not imply that all poetry furthers a moral cause, and he did not believe that all propaganda is done craftily. Potentially revolutionary poetry must be established on ethical standards and stylistically arranged to develop identification, not omit or degrade. The sense of morals in propagandistic poetry is partly centered on the issues it is supporting.

Burke's sixth principle in *The Nature of Art Under Capitalism* is that "pure art is safest when the fundamental ethical structure is firm." At this point, according to Burke, the primary prerequisite for a broad fundamental ethical structure is that it destabilizes capitalist concepts (677). He proceeds to declare that the moral infringement resulting from capitalist impairment of the work-patterns requires propaganda poetry. Burke predicts the communist cause as the first valuable rule encouraging great propagandistic poetry. However, he finally simplifies his prerequisite beyond just a reproach of capitalism by proclaiming that the immorality of

capitalism is attributed to its unopposed acceptance and universality. Furthermore, Burke despises the thoughtless manner in which the society approves capitalism.

Poetry is particularly susceptible to either imitating commonly sustained opinions or substantially destabilizing them. While purely aesthetic poetry tends to advocate for a state of acceptance, as Burke's fifth principles suggests, propagandistic poetry allows for the disputing of the concept. Although it has the capacity to back unexamined thought, it is exceedingly efficient when it defies the ideals of society. Burke expresses this in *Counter-Statement* by stating that "art can be of worth only when inhibiting a society from becoming too insistently, too despondently, itself" (105) Even though it may require energy for poets to refrain and assess if their pieces reinforce or challenge the current situation, it is deserving of the effort.

At times, the shifting of poetry from its ubiquitous prejudices requires tremendous external influence. According to the *Counter-Statement*, such external adjustments impact our cultural suppositions and allow poetry to contest aesthetic, political, and religious bias (89). Although massive environmental influences allow opportunities for poetry to shape society, it is not only about having worthy causes but considering the use of propaganda.

Burke argued that the style of propaganda significantly defines its integrity. The most successful propaganda will include an appropriate application of style engaged with the public instead of influencing them. Burke rephrased this stating that successful propaganda employs a tone that does not patronize people. This style does not only dispirit opponents but also re-instills them with morals. Burke's visualization of propagandistic poetry ensures that people are included, rather than excluded, and handles them as fellow beings rather than marionettes waiting to be operated. Its style does not only find the deplorable instead of the pleasing but also

applies the approach of humanization or idealization. In summary, it would be a style that supported recognition.

Indeed, language and style do illustrate not only the theme but also depicts the poet and the society in which the poet belongs. Burke elucidates that the poet, as narrator, neither solely symbolizes the topic nor does he/she merely exemplify himself/herself but also embodies his readers. He states this in *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* by saying that the poet speaks for an audience that identifies with him (229). Having such a personal and fortunate rapport with the audience, the poet must be particularly mindful of the current beliefs, expressions, and conceptions of the audience and stand for them besides for himself/herself.

Poetry must try to include, not to omit, its intended audience if it is to develop sympathetic identification. Burke succeeded in displeasing most of his communist colleagues with his denigrations of Marxist works that omitted and disheartened the readers without inspiring anyone to action (Vrijders 14). In reality, Burke believed that most of the communist work was excessively nonchalant, authoritarian and specific. He blasted poets that put much of the concentration of their imaginative extent to the planned confrontations with the police, lockouts, unpleasant working conditions, unemployment, and strikes.

Burke claimed that this generated a deprived and overgeneralized poetry that would fall short of its purposes, failing even as propaganda because it did not stimulate audiences. Burke was of the opinion: What propaganda poetry pieces could achieve for communism had less to do with Williams' determined "Vote the straight Communist ticket" and more to do with discovering the common factors, ensuring inclusion, and developing something he would explain as identification (Vrijders 20).

If the communists were aiming at efficiently distributing their message across the world, they would have done it in a manner that would entice supporters, instead of estranging them. It was Burke's expectation that all forms of propaganda align with a principle of inclusion instead of exclusion. His expectation put him at loggerheads with most at the First American Writers' Congress (Vrijders 13). In typical fashion, the communists were keen to portray the problems of the laborer in unions and strikes. Still, Burke viewed this as ineffective propaganda since average Americans did not feel pleasantly of the phrase worker since it was adversative to their identity and cultural history

Instead, Burke proposed a propaganda by inclusion that centered on America's acquaintance with the "people" as the cultural mark for equality ambitions. However, some of the communists were so absorbed in their practices that they did notice the "propaganda by inclusion" as propaganda at all. The emphasis on propaganda by inclusion ultimately grew into his idea of identification. Particular consideration of the form and style of language could convince an audience to amend their opinions and thoughts regarding a political stance.

### **Conclusion**

In the beginning half of the twentieth century, purely aesthetic poets on one side and party protestors on the other attempted to idolize either propaganda or poetry, resulting in a separation of privilege. Instead of accepting this dichotomy, Burke proposed that propaganda and poetry had similar effects and creations in an audience. He expressed the manner in which those that wanted to influence the outlooks of the audience may do so without being imprudent or immoral.

Even though this essay is directed to Burke's prerequisites of a poet, it is vital to note that not all who devise propagandistic poetry are establishing their works on solid ethical values.

Moreover, not all poets are conscious of their propagandistic partialities. Although Burke attempts to counsel his fellow poet-communists in developing poetry that is honorable and impactful, he comprehends that it is quite crucial to develop the ability to oppose propaganda and to be aware of cases where poets are iniquitous.

When art has such propagandistic traits, it becomes even more important that perceptive critical abilities assist readers. Intrinsically, poetry functions as a semi-propagandistic tool and the purpose of criticism is to create awareness on its propagandistic comment. Similar to Burke's censure of persistent capitalist propaganda, readers must learn to acknowledge that poetry is fundamentally propagandistic. Although the reader supposes that poetry is harmless since it is art, he/she must be aware of the propagandistic components of poetry.



## Works Cited

- Burke, Kenneth. *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*. U of California P, 1974.
- Burke, Kenneth. *Counter-statement*. U of California Press, 1931.
- Burke, Kenneth. "The Nature of Art Under Capitalism." *The Nation*, vol. 137, no. 3571, 13 Dec. 1933, pp. 675-677, [www.unz.org/Pub/Nation-1933dec13-00675?View=PDF&PDF=Nation-1933dec13](http://www.unz.org/Pub/Nation-1933dec13-00675?View=PDF&PDF=Nation-1933dec13). Accessed 14 July 2017.
- McKenzie, John M. "Reading Resistance to Kenneth Burke: "Burke the Usurper" and Other Themes." *The Journal of the Kenneth Burke Society*, [www.kbjournal.org/mckenzie](http://www.kbjournal.org/mckenzie). Accessed 14 July 2017.
- Poetry Foundation. "Kenneth Burke." *Poetry Foundation*, [www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/kenneth-burke](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/kenneth-burke). Accessed 14 July 2017.
- Vrijders, Dries. "Kenneth's Burke New Deal." *The Space Between*, vol. 1, pp. 13-28, [www.monmouth.edu/the\\_space\\_between/articles/DriesVrijders2009.pdf](http://www.monmouth.edu/the_space_between/articles/DriesVrijders2009.pdf). Accessed 14 July 2017.