I’d like you all to consider what it means to say that the media shapes the reality of situations and events. It goes without saying that the topics covered in the media give insight into what we, as a society, consider newsworthy or important. But, in my opinion, there’s much more to it than that. Today I am focusing on the concept of public tragedy, arguing that the media not only constructs the reality of these tragedies, but also engages the public in rituals of guilt and redemption. My research is based in theories identified by rhetorical theorist and literary critic Kenneth Burke and expanded upon by several others. These theories can be applied to some extent to many public tragedies, but my talk today will deal primarily with the Columbine school shooting.

The basis of my argument stems from Burke’s theory of the ritual drama, which provides a theoretical framework for understanding the rhetorical tendencies of mankind. By rhetorical tendencies, I mean the use of language as a provoking and responsive agency; that is, language both responds to and shapes the nature of situations. The function of this rhetorical language is to shape attitudes or induce action. In Burke’s view, rhetoric is inescapable; it is a component of language itself. And, whether intended or not, the language chosen to respond to a situation necessarily shapes the audience’s attitudes, and therefore the very reality, of that situation.

The ritual drama comes into play because, as Burke theorized, language creates hierarchies of authority within societies. When people feel that they have failed to adhere to the rules and expectations of their society, they become burdened with guilt. Guilt is the first stage of the ritual drama, followed by purification and redemption. In the case of a public tragedy, like the Columbine shooting, the public is burdened by this guilt because they identify with the participants, who are members of the same hierarchy.

So why use the term drama? According to Burke, humans live in action, in drama itself. Burke directed attention to literature and plays because these dramas respond to “imaginary obstacles” that have direct parallels in real life. The dramatic frameworks that he provides are symbolic tools for coming to terms with the drama of real life. The ritual drama is a representation of life through what would seem at first glance to be dramatic metaphor; but Burke insisted that the application is literal. In order to be effective, the symbolism must accurately portray those potentially “real” obstacles that the audience can imagine occurring in
their own lives. When the audience identifies with the situation, the power of rhetorical language is greater.

Now we must question in what ways the public identified with the players of this symbolic drama to the extent that marked the beginning of a guilt/purification/redemption cycle. Consider Littleton, Colorado, the scene of the shooting. A predominantly white, middle-class community was thrown into turmoil when a violent crime was committed at the high school. The villains of this drama were not criminals, but two teenage students. The public’s identification with the scene is clear; if it could happen in Littleton, it could happen anywhere. But how could this happen? How could we have let this happen? Now we have guilt.

This identification piqued the interest of most of the public. The mass media became the primary source of information on the event and, if you will recall the rhetorical power of language, created the reality of that event. Kenneth Burke’s theory of terministic screens gives an account of how this occurred. I have already mentioned that language can change attitudes and instigate action. Additionally, the perceptions and attitudes of the audience are dependent on the nature of the language used. There are multiple stories one could tell about an event, all with the potential to be valid, yet none would provide the “whole story” or “whole Truth.” When a single story is chosen, as it must be whenever a person expresses language, at best it can be a slice of the whole. The disclosed perspective necessarily conceals and deflects other stories about the event, and therein lies the rhetorical power.

The media coverage of the Columbine shooting demonstrates that the nature of the language, or the story, has influence over the thought and action of the audience. Understand that the shooters, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, opened fire at approximately 11:19am on April 20, 1999. News coverage of that shooting began at 11:47am that same day. In less than twenty minutes, the public had streaming video of Columbine students fleeing the school as pipe bombs continued to detonate. Considering the event was still in progress, could the news media hope for objectivity? The reports produced suggest not. The Denver Post, on April 21, 1999, published an article under the headline “High School Massacre: Columbine Bloodbath Leaves up to 25 Dead.” Not only is this death toll nearly double the actual 13 victims, but the terms “massacre” and “bloodbath” highlight the violence and gore at the school. Bloody rampage. Gruesome. Executed. War zone. Panic. Carnage. Maniacal. These are the terms used throughout the Denver Post article
to describe the scene.

Analysis based on terministic screens is not limited to single words; the entire reports publicized after the tragedy reinforce the stories implied by those terms. A local newspaper published a report suggesting that Harris and Klebold targeted athletes and ethnic minorities before choosing to fire randomly, even though the official police report stated that there had been no specific targets. The Denver Post continued the characterization of the shooters as careless villains, referencing their membership in the Trench Coat Mafia group, who listened to angry rock music and talked about beheading people at school. According to these reports, the Trench Coat Mafia, Harris and Klebold in particular, were obsessed with violence, war, and death. It was even suggested, briefly, that the boys’ interest in German rock bands was connected to their alleged neo-Nazi affiliations.

The relationship between emphasizing certain aspects of a person or event while downplaying others, as developed by Burke, is exemplified by the media portrayal of both the event itself and the shooters. In a phase which Brian Ott and his colleagues referred to as “naming the event,” news reports of the Columbine shooting realized the story of two ruthless murderers. Harris and Klebold were troubled, obsessed with violence, and social misfits. It was ignored, in those early days, that the two boys were sons, brothers, and friends before they were killers. Regardless of their accuracy or inaccuracy, these reports created the reality of the scene for millions across the country. In so doing, they engaged the public in a state of guilt that begged for purification.

Purification may consist of mortification, the scapegoat mechanism, or a combination of the two. Mortification is the act of self-blame, while the scapegoat mechanism transfers guilt to a specific target. Both acts of purification are symbolic processes that allow for a cleansing of guilt. Purification rituals were engaged in the case of the Columbine shooting’s media coverage in several ways. First, the descriptions of Harris and Klebold that I have been discussing are in fact components of the scapegoat mechanism in action.

Targeting a scapegoat, according to rhetorical critics Brian Ott and Eric Ako, consists of several distinct steps. First, there must be an undesirable quality shared between the scapegoat and those who have targeted it. As Burke has written, symbolic forms that manage guilt can only be successful if the audience is guilty of the sins portrayed in the discourse. Next, a symbolic
separation of the two parties is created. This removes the sense of commonality, and allows the "scapegoat-ers" to consider the "scapegoat-ees" as entirely different or other. Thus the shared quality is eradicated, and the public can form an alliance against the scapegoat. Mortification, on the other hand, purifies by detecting guilt within oneself and cleansing it through acceptance and penance. Rather than blaming a separate party, action must be taken on a personal level.

The shared quality between the shooters and the general public in this case was a fascination or predisposition toward violence and anger. It cannot be doubted that violence permeates our society, whether it be within the various forms of media or in the streets of our cities. We are all a part of a society that creates the very same violent television, music, movies and video games that Harris and Klebold were vilified for enjoying. Were it not for the public's captivation with violence, the materials accused of "inspiring" the shooting would never have been imagined. Let us not forget that Harris and Klebold were also considered outcasts at Columbine High School, victims of bullying that could have very well stemmed from our society's fear and loathing of anything different.

In accordance with the scapegoat process, once the shared quality has been established a separation must occur. How did the public manage to perform this symbolic action? Harris and Klebold were made scapegoats for their unnaturally strong affinity for violence and their uncontrollable anger. The general public is guilty of an interest in violence, but Harris and Klebold were, as suggested by reports, obsessed with it. And while anger is similarly universal in our society, Harris and Klebold were taken over by their anger, unable to control their impulses. The boys were different in some way from the "normal" teenager; possessing some weakness that was allowed to direct their actions.

An alliance of the general public against the scapegoat or scapegoats would, following Ott and Akoi's take on the process, lead to symbolic closure of the tragedy through the punishment of the scapegoats. The essay in which Ott lays out his pattern for "expunging the evil within" concerns the case of the Matthew Shepard murder. In that public tragedy, the scapegoats were given a trial (with wide media coverage, of course) and sentenced to prison to serve their punishment. At Columbine, however, Harris and Klebold committed suicide long before police ever entered the building. It could be that meeting the same fate as their victims served to punish them in the act of their crime. But does this provide the same kind of symbolic closure to the
public’s purification ritual that a trial might? Does it allow the public to be redeemed?

In my opinion, the suicides of the shooters did not provide closure for the public because there was no symbolic sacrifice performed of magnitude proportional to the crime. Had the scapegoat process been fully successful in its targeting of Harris and Klebold, some of the other purification rituals that took place after the shooting may not have been necessary. The obliviousness of parents, the ineptitude of the police, and the violence of the media were all targeted as supplemental scapegoats. None of these efforts seem sufficient to meet the recurring obstacle of a horrific deed. The dominant purification ritual left available to audiences was some form of mortification.

As I mentioned, mortification involves the act of self-blame. The members of the public who identified with the tragedy of the shooting were mostly members of middle class families. It was considered blameworthy that the shooters’ parents had been unaware that their sons were capable of committing such a violent act. Though the public at large could not be held responsible for predicting this isolated incident, parents across the country were forced to reflect on their own parenting—would they know if their children were planning acts of aggression?

The media aided in the public’s mortification by releasing reports about warning signs that should have somehow been detected and quashed by parents or authority figures. However, the news coverage of Harris and Klebold themselves began to change about a week after the shooting occurred. Early accounts portray both shooters as ruthless killers. Later reports, on the other hand, identify Harris as the leader of the rampage and Klebold as a follower, his mind poisoned by Harris. Apparently Klebold did not exhibit any warning signs— he had not composed violently themed stories, he had not threatened his classmates, and he had not created hate-filled web pages as Harris had. In one sense the message sent to parents was mixed— they should look out for “warning signs” in their children, but should also be on guard if their child did not exhibit them. In another sense the message was quite clear— constant vigilance was the only hope.

A Washington Post article, published a little over a week after the shooting, stated, “in hindsight there were many clues, many peculiar signs, that Harris, who has emerged as the leader of the rampage, and Klebold, the follower, were actively dangerous,” and, in an interview with a Klebold neighbor, “it’s so unbelievable. With Eric, there were signs, there were red flags everywhere, that were ignored. With Dylan, there was not one sign. Not one.” Constant
vigilance.

Mortification did not only take place on the small scale of relationships between parents and children. As I mentioned, violence permeates our society- in television, movies, video games, and across the country. For that, we can only blame ourselves. Purification through mortification relies on some act of penance, an attempt to rid guilt by doing good deeds. After Columbine, there was a backlash against violence in the media. Parental controls on televisions became more popular, metal detectors in schools became a common sight, gun control became a hot topic of discussion, and in-school counseling sessions for teenage students was offered.

These acts, in a sense, attempted to prevent something that had already happened. Realistically, none of these changes could avert tragedies like Columbine forever- but symbolically, they served an important purpose. Taking action in response to and in case of a public tragedy not only serves as atonement for public guilt, allowing the transition from purification to redemption take place, but also equips the public with symbolic tools to deal with real events. Unfortunately, once redemption is reached, the ritual tends to fade slightly from memory... until another public tragedy occurs.

Redemption is, as Burke might say, always temporary, for the ritual drama is a cyclical process of which we are always a part. As the years passed after the Columbine shooting, news coverage on the topic lessened- until there was another school shooting at Virginia Tech. Obstacles recur; but one gets the feeling that public rituals of atonement lack the proportion to the criminal acts that would lead to a more lasting sense of redemption. Thus, the public was engaged in a new loop of the same cycle.

Symbolic rituals of penance continue to this day. Even on the UNH campus, mortification rituals can be detected. After a man was sighted on school grounds, allegedly carrying a firearm, the university adopted a text message and email alert system for students. Now, if a potential danger is discovered on campus, the student body will know about it, but they will not be any more prepared to confront it. After several vehicles were stolen from UNH parking lots, the administration issued warnings and updates through email. Again, the students were informed about the risk, but given no means to avoid it. It seems that these alerts are designed less to prevent crimes from taking place and more to provide the community with a sense of safety and protection. While there is no physical shield against dangers that could befall us, these symbolic
means of framing events put us at ease. Somehow, we have atoned for this sort of threatening situation.

In conclusion, there is no escaping the ritual drama. The dramatic forms that Burke used to order experience were inspired by life, not the other way around. While it may seem bleak to consider mankind to be trapped in an unavoidable cycle of tragic rituals, these rituals provide the symbolic means for living. Mortifying acts do not truly bring about redemption because they continue. The public continues to engage in these rituals without taking into consideration whether they actually achieve anything of pragmatic value. But they do inspire collective action and unite communities. However imperfect, our rituals provide the best methods we can hope for to cope with the problems of real life.