

# Rhetorical Analysis of The Talking Heads' "Once in a Lifetime"

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Kenneth Burke's Five Master Terms exist to bring to light the motivation behind, theoretically, any bit of text to which we care to apply them. The beauty of this Pentad is its fundamentality in regards to the motivations humans have in creating words and meaning using the tools of language available. This doesn't just apply to long-winded theses regarding the nature of dramatistic meaning, though perhaps something like that would be more up [Burke's alley](#). No, in this case I plan to utilize his methods for a more seemingly mundane example, the motivations behind something as simple as song lyrics.

I say song lyrics are simple, but in this case I am going to attempt a feat of rhetorical analysis few have considered possible by analyzing the song "Once in a [Lifetime](#)" by The Talking Heads. I emphasize the difficulty of this analysis because I fear that I am about to embark on a journey to make sense out of madness; a 1984 documentary of the band's music is entitled *Stop Making Sense*, for one example. For another more drastic example, songwriter David Byrne was one of the most intentionally abstract lyricists of his time; in an

early episode of apparent madness, he took to the stage of his college and shaved his hair and beard in front of the faculty to the accompaniment of piano accordion and a showgirl displaying phrases in Russian. He was promptly ejected from that school. Regardless, his song "Once in a Lifetime" is symbolic of the introspective, neurotic, and post-modern approach he often uses to create his lyrical identity. Though I at first found it to be a rough fit, I believe the Pentad can be successfully applied to describe the motivation ...

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...it becomes clear that everything is unclear. I will summarize my application, however, for the sake of my own understanding. The dominant Term here is Act, the balance between essence and existence carefully held by Byrne's dialectic of water and time as a unified sameness. Working symbiotically with Act is the idea of Agent, a theoretical character defined as finding, investigating, and determining a situation without Acting within it. Byrne's purpose is to know right or wrong in the Scene of his lifetime. The Agency through which he defines truth within the Scene is time, which shares more than a fingers' breadth of space with my first term, Act. I've come to the end of the analysis with a sense that I've just begun: a lot of fancy words to describe the futility of change. I did preface this application by noting The Talking Heads' propensity to stop making sense.

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