Local newspapers and the restoration of order: Littleton after Columbine

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LOCAL NEWSPAPERS AND THE RESTORATION
OF ORDER: LITTLETON AFTER COLUMBINE

by

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Bachelor of Arts
Fort Lewis College
2001

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Master of Arts Degree in Communication Studies
Hank Greenspun Department of Communication
Greenspun College of Urban Affairs

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Local Newspapers and the Restoration of Order: Littleton After Columbine

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

Local Newspapers and the Restoration of Order: Littleton After Columbine

By

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On the morning of April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold walked into the cafeteria of Columbine High School and began a rampage that would leave twelve students and one teacher dead and twenty three other students wounded. This project examined the role local newspapers played in the recovery of the Littleton, Colorado, community in the wake of this tragedy. A rhetorical analysis of all material concerning the shootings contained the The Denver Post and The Denver Rocky Mountain News from the first day of coverage (4/21/99) and continuing for five days (4/25/99) was performed. This analysis employed Kenneth Burke's dramatism, specifically the concept of mortification, to explain the symbolic cleansing of guilt that occurred in the community after the shootings. The study concluded that the local newspapers helped the community identify with the sin that had occurred, labeled the source of the disorder and eradicated it from the community, and detailed renewed community covenants and memorialized the victims to reflect the formation of a new order.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Patricia Neilsen, an art teacher, had already been shot in the shoulder when she made this frantic 911 call from the Columbine High School library on April 20, 1999:

Patricia: Yes, I’m a teacher at Columbine High School and there is a student here with a gun. He just shot out a window. I believe, um, I’m at Columbine High School, I don’t know what’s in my shoulder. It, it was just some glass. I don’t know what’s going on.

Dispatcher: Has anyone been injured ma’am?

Patricia: I am, yes! And the school is in a panic and I’m in the library. I’ve got students down. Kids under the table! My kids are screaming, under the table, kids, and my teachers are trying to take control of things. We need police here.

Dispatcher: OK, OK, we’re getting them. Who is the student, ma’am?

Patricia: I don’t know who the student is. I saw a student outside. [...] He turned the gun straight at us and shot and my God the window went out and the kid standing there with me, I think he got hit.

Dispatcher: OK, help is on the way ma’am.
Patricia: Oh God! Oh God! Kids, just stay down. Do we know where he’s at? I’m in the library. He’s upstairs. He’s right outside of here. He’s outside this hall. There are lines of people... Kids, just stay down! Do we know where he’s at? He’s outside in the hall. There’s alarms and things going off and smoke. (Yelling): My God smoke is coming into this room. I’ve got the kids under a table. I don’t know what’s happening. [...] Smoke is coming in from out there and I am a little... My God, it’s... (Sounds: Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang.). (“Kids” A6).

Neilson later escaped from the library but ten students along with two gunmen, died under tables and behind bookshelves around her (Emery A6). Neilson had witnessed the deadliest moments of the worst school shooting in United States history. Before taking their own lives, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold had killed twelve students and one teacher. The nation was stunned.

This tragic event garnered national and global news coverage and prompted parents, academics, and policy-makers to ask, how could this happen? Columbine High School is in Littleton, Colorado, a community that appeared to be the last place where such a horrific event would occur. The Denver suburb had a population of only 35,000 in 1999 (“In Sorrow”) and boasted a per capita personal income that ranked among the highest in the nation (Bureau of Economic Analysis D69; Bureau of Census 428). Most of the 1,935 students attending Columbine in 1999 were from middle-class or affluent families, were likely to finish high school successfully, and planned to pursue advanced degrees after graduation (Digest of Education Statistics: Selected 111; Digest of
Education Statistics: Revenues 99). A banner over the front entrance to the school said: “Through these halls pass the finest students in America” (“From the Senior” AA17).

Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were part of the Littleton community and the student body of Columbine High School. The two seniors worked together after school at a local pizza parlor, liked to bowl, and were good with computers (Bartels and Imse AA10). As children, Harris played Little League baseball and Klebold was a member of the Boy Scouts (Bartels and Imse AA10). Harris’ father was a retired Air Force officer and Klebold’s mother worked with disabled students at local community colleges (Emery, Lipsher, and Young A10). These same two teenagers planted more than thirty bombs inside their high school during a post-prom party and laughed as they shot dozens of their classmates (“In Sorrow”).

Following the shootings, local newspapers played a pivotal role in the interpretation of the event for the Littleton community. The Denver Post and The Denver Rocky Mountain News not only informed the public of the facts surrounding the massacre, but also interpreted the event for those affected most by the violence. It is this vital healing function of the newspapers that is the concern of this study.

The Columbine High School shootings were extremely shocking for area residents due to the violent nature of the event, its setting, and the identity of the perpetrators. The local media were granted a unique opportunity and encumbered with a singular obligation to tell the story of the shootings and explain the event for a community in crisis. This rhetorical analysis of reporting of the event by both local newspapers will seek to explain, using the dramatistic theory of Kenneth Burke, the
ways in which *The Denver Post* and *The Denver Rocky Mountain News* facilitated and advanced the recovery of the Littleton community after the tragedy.

This project will commence in the next chapter with a description of the historical and contextual framework that surrounded the newspaper texts to be analyzed. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the situation out of which the rhetoric of the local newspapers emerged and the scene in which the tragic events of the shooting unfolded. Information to be detailed in this section includes: a comprehensive chronology of the shootings; demographic and cultural information about the communities of Littleton, Colorado, and Columbine High School; and relevant biographical details of the lives of Klebold and Harris.

The third chapter of this study is titled, "Framework for Analysis: Review of Relevant Literature, Method and Dramatism" and will detail the method to be employed in this project. A review of existing literature concerning crises, public tragedies, and the Columbine High School shootings will first be presented. The next section of this chapter will define the scope of this study with a description of texts to be analyzed followed by a justification for that choice of material. Finally, the relevant portions of Burke's theory of dramatism will be described so that this theoretical framework may be applied in the next stage of the study.

An analysis of the texts will take place in the fourth chapter using the theoretical perspective presented previously. The chapter, titled "Analysis: Stages of Coverage and Restoration of Order," will demonstrate the contribution that local newspapers made to the symbolic restoration of order in the Littleton community after the tragedy. A thorough examination of five days of newspaper coverage and extensive use of
examples will reveal stages of newspaper coverage that emerged after the shootings and the role that these stages played in restoring symbolic order in the community through Burke's concept of mortification.

The fifth and final chapter of this project will explain the meaning and value of this study within the context of its contribution to the discipline. Conclusions will be drawn from the results reached in the above analysis that have the potential to be generalized to other areas of inquiry. The implications of this work for future studies of the framing of tragic events by the media will be a focus of this section. Limitations of the present study and suggestions for future research will also be included in the concluding chapter of this project.
CHAPTER 2

COMMUNITY AND CONTEXT: THE SETTING AND ACTORS IN THE COLUMBINE HIGH SCHOOL SHOOTINGS

Denny Rowe, a sophomore at Columbine High School, was one of the first students to see Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold as they approached the school's cafeteria at 11:00 a.m. on April 20, 1999. The trench-coat-clad pair opened their jackets to reveal what looked like grenades as they walked across the grass toward the school. One of them lit a brick of firecrackers and threw it toward the school entrance then brandished a semiautomatic rifle and shot seventeen-year-old Rachel Scott in the head. Fifteen-year-old Danny Rohrbough was standing just outside the entrance to the cafeteria when a bullet hit him in the thigh. Rohrbough stumbled and tried to run before one of the gunmen shot him in the back, killing him instantly (Glick and Keene-Osborn 25-26).

It was Free Cookie Day at Columbine High and there were approximately 500 students gathered around tables and waiting in line in the cafeteria when Harris and Klebold began shooting and throwing pipe bombs into the building (“In Sorrow” par. 14). Some of the students initially thought that the commotion signaled the long-awaited senior prank. “Surely those are firecrackers, they thought. Surely those guns are fake. Is the blood fake? Can a fake bomb make walls shake?” (“In Sorrow” par. 14). Smoke soon filled the cafeteria, and the fire alarm began to sound in a repetitive,
deafening roar. The sprinkler system was simultaneously activated and was transforming the school into “a blinding, misty jungle” (“In Sorrow” par. 15).

Upstairs, science teacher Dick Will mistook the first sounds of gunfire for a muddled experiment in the chemistry lab. A group of his students ventured down the hall to investigate and returned screaming, “They’re shooting!” (“In Sorrow” par. 18). Will gathered his class in the corner of his classroom, turned off the lights, and began to stack chairs and desks against the door (“In Sorrow” par. 19).

At 11:15 a.m., the son of a Denver Police Officer made the first 911 call from the school (Glick and Keene-Osborn 24). Matthew Depew and seven fellow students were trapped in a storage room adjacent to the school cafeteria. Officer John Lietz, himself the father of a Columbine student, was on the other end of the line and could hear gunfire and pounding as the gunmen tried to break into the closet:

Lietz told the kids to barricade the door with chairs and sacks of food, and to be ready to attack the gunmen if they got in. Several times Lietz heard the shooters trying to break into the room; they were so close that he could hear them reloading cartridges. At one point, as they pounded on the door, Depew calmly told Lietz that he was sure he was going to die. “Please tell my father I love him,” he said. (Glick and Keene-Osborn 24)

Dave Sanders, a business teacher and basketball coach, was standing near the cafeteria doors when the first victims fell. Sanders ran into the lunchroom and shouted, “He’s got a gun! Get down!” before running upstairs to the library and science rooms to warn other students (Glick and Keene-Osborn 25-26). He met Harris and Klebold in a
hallway where they shot the teacher in the chest. Lexis Coffey-Berg watched as the teacher was struck with two bullets. "You could see the impact. You could see it go through his body. He was spitting up blood" ("In Sorrow" par. 20). Sanders crawled to a nearby classroom where students tried for three hours to save him, pressing their shirts to his chest to stop the bleeding. Deidra Kucera, a student desperate to get help for Sanders, wrote a sign that said "Help me I'm bleeding to death" and taped it to the classroom window facing the parking lot (Glick and Keene-Osborn 26).

On classroom TVs, barricaded students watched with the rest of the country as SWAT teams, news helicopters, and frantic parents began to assemble outside the school. Coffey-Berg told *Time* magazine that she and her friends began to compose notes to their parents, putting feelings in writing that they feared they would never get to convey in person ("In Sorrow" par. 23). Coffey-Berg also recalled that everyone around her was praying. "In a world where there are so many religions, everyone was praying the same way" ("In Sorrow" par. 23). One student vowed, "If I ever get out, I'm going to be nice to my little brother" ("In Sorrow" par. 24).

At 1:45 p.m. shots still rang out in the school and Harris and Klebold had made their way to the library. Students cowered under desks as the shooters laughed and yelled, "All jocks stand up" (Glick and Keene-Osborn 26) and "Who's next? Who's ready to die?" ("In Sorrow" par. 31). Kacey Ruegsegger, seventeen, had been studying in the library when the shooting started. One of the shooters now walked over to the desk where she hid, leaned down and said, "Peek-a-boo" before shooting her in the shoulder at point blank range (Glick and Keene-Osborn 26).
Isaiah Shoels, one of a handful of African American students at Columbine High School, was hiding under another desk in the library with Craig Scott and Matt Kechter when one of the shooters walked by and said, “Hey I think we got a n---- here” (Glick and Keene-Osborn 26). They shot Shoels in the head and, after he crumpled to the floor, shot him two more times in the face. As Harris and Klebold turned their weapons on Kechter, Scott sat very still and “began praying for courage” (“In Sorrow” par. 34). Covered in his friends’ blood, Scott got up and ran for the door of the library, yelling for others to follow him. One girl, shot in the shoulder with a shotgun, pleaded for Scott’s help as he ran past. The two fled the library and the school together and Scott hurried to describe the appearance and location of the shooters to the police (“In Sorrow” par. 34). Rescue workers, meanwhile, were attempting to save Patrick Ireland, a seventeen-year-old shot multiple times in the head, as he dangled from the second floor window of the library.

More than 200 law enforcement officers and four SWAT teams were desperate to stop the shooters and evacuate the victims (Obmascik A1). SWAT teams and medics entered the library shortly after 4:30 p.m. and identified the bodies of the shooters, one of them still holding a handgun. After firing an estimated nine hundred rounds of ammunition and planting more than thirty bombs in the building and the parking lot, Klebold and Harris had finally turned the guns on themselves and lay on the floor amidst the bodies of ten of their victims (“In Sorrow” par. 43). Rescue workers ushered surviving students through the halls, now filled with six inches of water from the sprinkler systems, past the bodies of their classmates and blood-soaked walls (“In
Sorrow” par. 37). In the cafeteria, half-eaten lunches still lay on the tables (“In Sorrow”).

One of the aspects of the Columbine High School shootings that made the event so heartbreaking was its unpredictability—children were suddenly killing their classmates in the middle of suburban America. This chapter will attempt to account for the shocking nature of the shootings by detailing the historical-cultural context out of which the events at Columbine High School unfolded. First, the community of Littleton, Colorado at the time of the event will be described in detail, followed by an examination of the smaller community existing within Columbine High School. A discussion of the lives and motives of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold will comprise the third section of this chapter.

Littleton, Colorado

With a population of only 35,000 in 1999, Littleton, located just southwest of Denver in the foothills of the Rockies, was more of a town than a city (“In Sorrow”). Gibbs described Littleton as, “a stretched finger of the big city, with aspiring families who don’t lock their doors, enclaves with names like Coventry and Raccoon Creek and Bel Flower, scrubland turned into golf courses, houses that run anywhere from $75,000 to $5 million or so” (“In Sorrow” par. 6). As home to the Promise Keepers, James Dobson’s Focus on the Family, and numerous megachurches, Littleton is the “heart of America’s evangelical community” (“Noon” par. 3).

In 1999, the average per capita personal income in the Denver metropolitan area (including Littleton) was between $34,000 and $38,000, among the highest in the nation.
(Bureau of Economic Analysis D69) and 123.4% of the national average (Bureau of Census 428; Bureau of Labor Statistics). During that same year, the Federal Bureau of Investigation reported that 64 murders occurred in the Denver metropolitan area, a small figure considering that almost one fourth of those deaths occurred at Columbine High School on April 20, and 191 murders were committed in Dallas during that year (3).

Although these statistics may invoke images of white picket fences and children with colorful lunchboxes being waved off to school by stay-at-home moms in fifties-style dresses, many scholars have argued that the suburbs are changing (Hoerl; Saltzman; and Osborne). According to Kristen Hoerl, modern suburbs are marked with material excess, social isolation, and a lack of community involvement (262). Since the early 1990s, the suburbs have become increasingly racially and economically diverse, a fact that challenges traditional notions of the suburbs as a haven for the middle-class to escape poverty (Hoerl 262). Immigrant families seeking opportunity in low rent housing are increasingly making their homes in the suburbs alongside wealthy urbanites seeking better schools and larger homes for less money compared with schools and homes in the cities (Osborne). This growing economic disparity creates a shrinking middle class in the suburbs and causes “suburbanites to worry that their claims to privilege and high status may be threatened or never realized at all” (Hoerl 263).

Hoerl argued that this diversification of the suburbs also challenges traditional conservative values once held by residents of these communities. An exemplar of this liberalization is the frequency of suburban families in which both parents work. Hoerl
stated, "many conservatives fear that suburban youth are not growing up to become productive members of society; their mothers are too busy working to take care of them and have left them to be raised by the mass media" (263). Christopher Caldwell also contended that as suburban mothers leave home to work, their children become isolated and dangerous to others in the community (30). Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold both grew up in environments that challenged traditional notions of the nuclear family model—a factor that was pointed to in the media as contributing to their deviant personalities and their ability to execute the rampage at Columbine High School.

Columbine High School

Within the changing suburb of Littleton, Colorado, another distinct community existed inside the walls of Columbine High School and among its 1,935 students (Cohen). In 1999, the Littleton school district consisted of twenty-five schools with a total enrollment of approximately 16,400 (Digest of Education Statistics: Revenues 99). Of these students, 90.2% were white with the other 9.8% divided between black, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, and American Indian/Alaskan Native students (Digest of Education Statistics: Revenues 99). This distribution was fairly consistent with statewide demographics concerning minorities and suburbs. Although in 1999 almost 206,000 of Colorado's 699,000 students were minorities, only 19.6% of those minority students were living in small town or suburban areas such as Littleton (Statistics in Brief 14).

Of five- to seventeen-year-olds in the Littleton school district, only 6.5% of children were at or below the poverty line as compared to a poverty rate of 9% in
Colorado and 11.6% in the nation (Digest of Education Statistics: Revenues 111). In 1999, over one thousand students graduated from Littleton district high schools and the district had a high school dropout rate of only 1.3% (Digest of Education Statistics: Revenues 99). These statistics suggest that, overall, students who attended Columbine High School were white, from middle-class or affluent families, and were very likely to finish high school successfully.

Chosen just days before the shootings to be a graduation speaker for Columbine High, Sara Martin wrote:

I have loved oysters at seven in the morning in the teachers’ lounge with Mme. Lutz and the halls that smelled like rotting Easter eggs... I have loved fire drills and Tai Chi on the lawn with Mr. Kritzer’s philosophy class. I have loved you and our moments of folly together... We’re all looking for passion, for something, anything in our lives. (“In Sorrow” par. 2)

It was only after the tragedy of April 20, that parents, journalists, political leaders and researchers began to scrutinize the culture of Columbine High School and uncover a climate that was much less utopian than that described by Martin.

In the frenzy to collect information in the days following the shootings, one of the first details that emerged was that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were members of a group called the Trench Coat Mafia and that jocks, another clique at Columbine High, were recognized enemies of this group. Although the actual shootings were primarily indiscriminate, details of the shooters' plans to kill as many jocks as possible were revealed in the boys' handwritten diary and on their website. This attention to group
membership cast a spotlight on the formation and significance of high school cliques and, specifically, the cliques existing at Columbine.

In an interview with Columbine students only days after the shootings, journalist Adam Cohen stated that unlike depictions in 1950s movies, in which students split into two groups, the divisions at Columbine are more complicated. “Students look a lot alike—mostly white, well off and primed for success. But students have no trouble ticking off a startling number of cliques—jocks, hockey kids (a separate group), preppies, stoners, gangbangers (gang-member wannabes), skaters (as in skateboarders) and, as they say, nerds” (par. 3). Cohen asserted that the dynamics between members of these cliques are often “very raw” particularly for the groups at the extremes of the social spectrum: the jocks and the outcasts (par. 9). A “Lord of the Flies dynamic” is at work, according to Cohen, in which the popular students spend large quantities of time affirming their status by picking on their less socially prominent peers (par. 8).

Gibbs interviewed sixteen-year-old Alejandra Marsh, a friend of Harris and Klebold, the week after the shootings and she affirmed this negative treatment of less popular students at Columbine. Marsh described incidents in which the less popular students, including the Trench Coat Mafia, were called “dirtbags” and “faggots” and were harassed to the point of having rocks and bottles thrown at them from moving vehicles (“In Sorrow” par. 11). Marsh said, “It’s almost the definition of a teenager to be cruel to those who are not like you” (“In Sorrow” par. 11).

Having won thirty-two statewide sports championships in the 1990s, many athletes at Columbine High School may have felt that they deserved the prestige and popularity awarded within the school to jocks (Pooley). In an interview with Time
Scott Schulte, a football player and track athlete said, "It's the greatest school with the greatest kids. We are perfect, and the atmosphere is perfect" (Pooley par. 17). In the same interview, other Columbine students described a climate of intimidation in which even teachers apparently catered to school athletes. In addition to student complaints, seven months before the Columbine shootings, the local sheriff's department warned the Jefferson County Board of Commissioners about growing violence in the area of Columbine High School including fighting by gang-like groups of athletes. School officials, at the time, called the report exaggerated (Pooley).

Hoerl maintained that high school athletics play a major role in suburban life. Athletic competitions serve as a training ground in which students learn to struggle against others who are equally qualified for positions of status (270). "Figuratively speaking, athletics teaches students it is okay to beat others. Sometimes that is literally the case as well" (Hoerl 270). Increasingly, according to Hoerl, athletes are encouraged to view competition as ruthless and winning is valued at all costs. Coaches encourage their players to dehumanize their opponents, an attitude that often extends into everyday social interactions (271). Social stratification is created in any school in which both outsiders and athletes exist, but attitudes of physical brutality and cutthroat competition "sustain an endless hierarchy determined by strength and callousness" (Hoerl 271).

The community of Columbine High School is, in many ways, typical of suburban schools in the United States: mostly white, middle-class students who are likely to succeed after graduation. The events of April 20, 1999 however, highlighted the sometimes brutal dynamic existing between cliques in Columbine High and raised the question of whether similar climates reside in schools around the nation. This
stratification of students within the high school proved particularly oppressive for students such as Harris and Klebold who were often bullied by more popular groups of their peers. It is within this tense power struggle that Harris and Klebold struggled to survive and would ultimately die.

Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold

Eric Harris’ website was dismantled shortly after he and Dylan Klebold killed themselves, thirteen of their classmates, and a teacher at Columbine High School. Before April 20, 1999, this portion of Harris’ writing, posted on the website, went largely unread:

America: Love it or leave it mother f---. All you racist (and if you think im [sic] a hypocrite, come here so I can kill you) mother f---ing assholes in America who burn our flag and disgrace my land, GET OUT!
And to you a---holes in Iraq and Iran and all those other little piece of s--- desert lands who hate us, shut up and die! We will kick your a--- if your try and f--- with us, or at least I will! (Burns 3)

This same angry teenager was described by Brooks Brown, a fellow classmate and friend, as a “nice guy” (Pooley par. 1). In fact, Brown talked to Harris in the high school parking lot on the day of the shootings as Harris pulled a duffle bag from his car. Minutes before the shooting started, Harris told Brown to get away from the school saying, “Brooks, I like you. Now get out of here. Go home” (Pooley par. 7). These words may have saved Brown’s life.
According to Eric Pooley of *Time* magazine, at the first sounds of gunfire on April 20, some Columbine students suspected that Harris was involved. Harris was the son of a retired Air Force officer and a caterer, two “well-intentioned people who seem to have been wholly outmatched by their cold, manipulative son” (Pooley par. 10). Throughout Eric’s childhood, the Harrises moved between Air Force bases in Ohio, Michigan and upstate New York (Pooley). Although he is remembered fondly by adults he interacted with in his youth, Harris’ personality was apparently volatile as he was taking mediation for depression and was “capable of violent outbursts, slow-boil intimidation and murderous rage” (Pooley par. 10). Brown, in an interview with *Time* magazine a week after the shootings described Harris as “an incredible individualist, charismatic, an eloquent speaker, well read, the kind of guy who could bulls--- for hours about anything and be witty and brilliant” (Pooley par. 14).

Dylan Klebold’s involvement in the shootings was more of a mystery to his peers at Columbine High. The father of one of Klebold’s friends asked after the rampage, “If Dylan can do this, who isn’t capable of it?” (Pooley par. 13). Klebold was considered shy and sullen although “he moved faster when he was in Harris’ wake, drawing energy and confidence from him” (Pooley par. 11). Klebold’s mother assisted disabled persons with job placement at a local community college and his father was a geophysicist who had just moved into the mortgage-services business. Unlike Harris, who had been recently been rejected by the Marine Corps and numerous universities, Klebold was making ambitious plans for the future (Pooley).

At the time of the shootings, Klebold and his father had just spent five days visiting the University of Arizona where Klebold planned to attend in the fall. The
night before the shootings, Klebold spent time online playing in a fantasy baseball league and even made plans to trade players on April 20, the day he would commit suicide after killing thirteen others. Despite Klebold’s future-oriented outlook, on April 20, while SWAT team members still surrounded Columbine High School, Klebold’s father worried that his son may be involved. He contacted police and volunteered to help negotiate the surrender of his son, an offer refused by SWAT team leaders (“In Sorrow”).

According to Brown, Harris and Klebold shared “a reverse-snob solidarity that develops among people who feel both shunned by and more intelligent than the majority” (Pooley par. 14). Harris and Klebold were not loners, however. They had a close circle of friends and were involved in school activities (Gibbs and Roche). Harris played soccer until the fall of 1998, and Klebold was in the drama club. The weekend before the shootings, Klebold went to the prom and held hands with his date and Harris later joined the couple at post-prom parties. Harris and Klebold attended several classes together and were remembered by creative writing classmates in particular. According to Terra Oglesbee, their writings were “dark and sad. Their poems were always about plants dying and the sun burning out. Whenever I heard them, I would just plug my ears because I can’t stand stuff like that” (Pooley par. 15).

Outside of the classroom, Harris and Klebold worked together at a pizza parlor in Littleton and, according to the restaurant’s owner, were both model employees (“In Sorrow”). On at least one occasion prior to the shootings, however, this friendship produced negative results. In January 1998, Klebold and Harris were convicted of a felony after breaking into a van and stealing about four hundred dollars worth of
electronic equipment. They were assigned to a juvenile rehabilitation program that required completion of community service programs and anger-management training. Both boys proved to be model participants and finished the program early. Harris’ program termination report read, “Eric is a very bright young man who is likely to succeed in life” (“In Sorrow” par. 47). Klebold was deemed by the same report as being “intelligent enough to make any dream a reality” (“In Sorrow” par. 47).

The preceding descriptions of Harris and Klebold are consistent with the image of rural school shooting perpetrators generated by Scott T. Kidd and Cheryl L. Meyer. Kidd and Meyer conducted searches using Internet search engines, the archives of news organization websites, and databases for information concerning six school shootings occurring from 1996 to 1999. The authors identified six characteristics common to the offenders: uttering of verbal threats prior to the actual event; an interest in violent media; a history of violent behavior; writing about killing or death; rejection by peers; and suicidal thoughts or gestures (4-6). A compilation of these characteristics led Kidd and Meyer to generate this profile:

The typical multiple-victim school shooting offender is a Caucasian adolescent male who recently made verbal threats of homicide. He is an above average student, but he often writes about death or killing in school assignments or personal journals. He feels rejected by others and has an intense interest in violent movies, books, or music. He has acted violently in the past and has fantasized about or threatened suicide. However, he does not necessarily use alcohol or illegal drugs. In
addition, the offender will likely commit his offense with a gun owned by a family member. (6)

Kidd and Meyer acknowledged, however, that this profile is not formulaic or preventative. Larger societal forces were at work in the lives of Harris and Klebold that a single study is at a loss to explain. Kidd and Meyer would likely concur with this statement by Brooks Brown: “Society created them. It’s Frankenstein and his monster. We need to analyze the doctor” (Hoerl 267).

In hind-sight, it is tempting to mold Harris and Klebold to profiles such as that generated by Kidd and Meyer and speculate as to why these two disturbed, angry boys did not receive help or intervention prior to their shooting spree and suicides. Before the shootings, however, Harris and Klebold were viewed by the people closest to them simply as rebellious teenagers, not as dangerous, calculating killers. It is important to view the biographies of Harris and Klebold in light of the fact that the extreme nature of their rebellion on April 20, 1999 was unforeseeable, even to their family and friends. This unpredictability is a common theme in accounts of rural and suburban school shootings discussed in the following section.

Rural and Suburban School Violence

The incidence of school violence, especially involving multiple fatalities as was the case at Columbine High School, is very rare. S. P. Kachur et al. reported that of eighty-five homicides in United States schools between 1992 and 1994 only two cases involved multiple fatalities. In a later study, however, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that multiple victim incidents of school violence had increased to
an average of five occurrences per year in the 1995 to 1998 school years from an average of only one incident per year during the 1992 to 1995 school years. Additionally, although the rate of violent school-related deaths was nine times greater in urban than in rural schools in 1996, multiple-fatality incidents are occurring in rural areas with increased frequency (Kachur et al.).

Five prominent occurrences of rural school violence throughout the United States preceded the Columbine High School shootings in April 1999. In February 1996, fourteen-year-old Barry Loukaitis killed two students and his algebra teacher and wounded one other student with a rifle at Frontier Junior High School in Moses Lake, Washington. A physical education teacher, whom Loukaitis attempted to take as a hostage, eventually wrestled the rifle away from the shooter (Kidd and Meyer 2-3).

In Pearl, Mississippi, on the morning of October 1, 1997, sixteen-year-old Luke Woodham stabbed his mother to death in their home. He then drove to Pearl High School where he killed two students and wounded seven others with a .30/30-caliber rifle in the commons area of the school. A school administrator prevented Woodham’s escape from the scene (Kidd and Meyer 3).

Exactly one month after the incident in Mississippi, Michael Carneal, fourteen, took several firearms that he had stolen from his neighbor’s garage, to Heath High School in West Paducah, Kentucky. In the hallway of the school, he revealed the weapons to a group of students, hoping to gain attention. When attention of the group shifted from Carneal, he became angered and killed three students and wounded five others with a .22-caliber pistol (Kidd and Meyer 3).
Jonesboro, Arkansas would be the next entry on this horrific list. In March 1998, eleven-year-old Andrew Golden and thirteen-year-old Mitchell Johnson stole a van owned by Johnson's mother and drove it to the house of Golden's grandfather. The two boys then broke into the home and stole a large quantity of firearms and ammunition. Dressed in full camouflage, Golden and Johnson drove to Westside Middle School and hid their weapons in a wooded area approximately one hundred yards from the school. Golden pulled the fire alarm in the school and then returned to the wooded area to join Johnson. As students and teachers filed from the school, the shooters killed four classmates and a teacher and wounded dozens of others. Police caught Golden and Johnson as they attempted to flee to the parked van (Kidd and Meyer 3).

On May 21, 1998, Kipland Kinkel was arrested and suspended from Thurston High School in Springfield, Oregon, for possession of a stolen firearm. Kinkel's father picked him up from the police station and, shortly after an argument about the incident, Kinkel shot his father to death with a handgun his father had given him as a gift. When Kinkel's mother returned home from work that evening, Kinkel shot and killed her as well. The next day, Kinkel took a .22-caliber rifle to school and opened fire on fellow students as they ate lunch in the cafeteria, killing three and wounding numerous others (Kidd and Meyer 3).

When Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were preparing for their attack on Columbine High School, they reflected on the actions of previous perpetrators. In a home video made by Harris and Klebold, Harris recalled the shootings in Oregon and Kentucky and warned, "Don't think we're trying to copy anyone. We had the idea a
long time before the first one ever happened” (Gibbs and Roche par. 3). Harris and Klebold were dismissive of the actions of earlier shooters saying, “our plan is better, not like those f----s in Kentucky with camouflage and .22s. Those kids were only trying to be accepted by others” (Gibbs and Roche par. 4). Indeed, with fifteen dead and 23 wounded, Harris and Klebold committed school violence on a new scale and the Columbine High School shootings would become the deadliest in the nation’s history.

Only minutes after the first shots were fired, KCNC-TV, the local CBS affiliate in Denver, interrupted regular programming to broadcast live coverage from Columbine High School (Rotbart par. 10). KCNC-TV broadcasted live for more than thirteen hours without commercial interruption:

As late as 3:45 p.m., news crews report shots can be heard inside the school. Dramatic aerial pictures from the KCNC news helicopter show students rushing from the school with their hands held over their heads, lest they be mistaken for the gunmen. Members of an alert KCNC camera crew talk their way onto the roof of a nearby residence with a clear view of the school. Viewers see police snipers targeting their weapons on the building. More chilling are the images of children trapped inside, their faces pressed up against the windows. (Rotbart par. 11)

Coverage of the event lasted for weeks, months, and eventually years. On April 21, the day after the shootings, NBC’s Dateline aired “Killings at Columbine High: The Day After.” Two days after the tragedy, grieving parents and friends of the victims appeared on ABC’s Good Morning America and NBC’s Today (Shapiro). One year after the
shootings, ABC's Nightline aired a piece that reflected on media coverage of the incident, NBC's Tom Brokaw hosted a town meeting in Denver on gun violence, and Fox aired "Terror in the Rockies: One Year Later" (Trigoboff).

Also on the year anniversary of the Columbine shootings, Charles Gibson of Good Morning America interviewed Brooks Brown's mother, Judy Brown. Brown noted that the attack was Klebold's response to the harassment that he had experienced at school and that the media refused to focus on this issue because "people don't want to know that society can do this to your son" (Hoerl 267).

Summary

Through a description of the communities of Littleton, Colorado and Columbine High School and the biographies and motives of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, this chapter has provided the historical-cultural context needed to understand depictions of the shootings by the local newspapers. Knowledge of the demographics of the community and the personalities of the shooters is vital to an examination of the explanations for the event offered by The Denver Post and The Denver Rocky Mountain News. A replication of the tone of the community and the school on April 20, 1999, as provided by this chapter, aids the present-day reader in comprehending the desperate need for explanations felt by the Littleton community and the subsequent demand placed upon media covering the event.

The information presented in this chapter will serve as a backdrop for the rhetorical criticism that is to take place in later stages of this project. In the next
chapter, the critical framework and method necessary for this analysis will be detailed.
CHAPTER 3

FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS: REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE, METHOD AND DRAMATISM

Approximately one week had passed since the Columbine shootings when Nancy Gibbs of Time magazine wrote:

The story of the slaughter at Columbine High School opened a sad national conversation about what turned two boys' souls into poison. It promises to be a long, hard talk, in public and in private, about why smart, privileged kids rot inside. Do we blame the parents, blame the savage music they listened to, blame the ease of stockpiling an arsenal, blame the chemistry of cruelty and cliques that has always been part of high school life but has never been so deadly? Among the many things that did not survive the week was the hymn all parents unconsciously sing as they send their children out in the morning, past the headlines, to their schools: It can't happen here, Lord, no, it could never happen here. ("In Sorrow" par. 5)

Gibbs' sentiment was echoed in an editorial cartoon by Ed Stein in the Denver Rocky Mountain News. The sketch depicts a cemetery full of headstones that bear the inscription “It can’t happen here” accompanied by the names of cities in which school shootings have occurred (B3). The newest plot, at the center of the drawing, is marked
with freshly dug earth, a shovel, and a headstone that reads, "It can't happen here, Littleton Colorado" (B3).

The horrific nature of the tragedy at Columbine High School virtually demanded extensive media coverage and complicated the nature of that coverage, particularly for local media. *The Denver Post* and *The Denver Rocky Mountain News* sought to chronicle the events of April 20, 1999 and also to explain them. This chapter will detail the method to be used in the rhetorical analysis of these texts. To contextualize the present inquiry, a review of existing literature concerning crises and public tragedies will first be presented. The next section of this chapter will define the scope of this study with a description of texts to be analyzed followed by a justification for that choice of material. Finally, the theoretical framework that will be used to illuminate these texts will be described.

**Literature Review**

Crises and public tragedies such as the shootings at Columbine High School are newsworthy for many reasons, not the least of which are the dramatic storylines that often unfold in which ordinary people are abruptly the victims of extraordinary circumstances. It is in these times of crisis that the media play a crucial double role: informing the public of the facts surrounding the event and, equally important, attempting to explain the tragedy to a stunned and grieving audience. This review of literature details scholarship that examines this role of the media in the portrayal of tragedy and is divided into the following sections: hate crimes; urban unrest; celebrity and public tragedy; September 11, 2001; and school violence.
Hate Crimes

Hate crimes are often particularly difficult to understand and explain due to the often vicious nature of the acts and the inexplicable reasoning of the perpetrators. Brian L. Ott and Eric Aoki conducted a frame analysis of print media coverage of a brutal hate crime that occurred in Laramie, Wyoming. On October 6, 1998, Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson lured Matthew Shepard from a bar to a field at the edge of town. There the two men tied Shepard to a split rail fence and beat him 18 times with the butt of a .357 magnum. On the evening of the next day, a mountain biker found Shepard, disfigured, unconscious, and suffering from severe brain trauma. Shepard would die five days later in Poudre Valley Hospital in Fort Collins, Colorado, without ever regaining consciousness (Ott and Aoki 483-84).

Ott and Aoki argued that “the news media’s tragic framing of that event works rhetorically and ideologically to relieve the public of its social complicity and culpability, to reaffirm a dominant set of discourses that socially stigmatizes gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (GLBT) persons, and to hamper efforts to create and enact a progressive GLBT social policy” (484-85). Drawing on the methods of frame analysis and Kenneth Burke’s concept of scapegoating, the authors analyzed news coverage of the murder in the Washington Post, the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, Time magazine, and The Advocate from October 10, 1998 to December 2001.

The authors identified four phases in the print media’s framing of the Matthew Shepard story: naming the event; making a political symbol; expunging the evil within; and restoring the social order (486). In the course of these four stages, a symbolic
process occurred through the newspaper coverage in which the crime was deemed newsworthy, Shepard became a martyr of anti-gay crime, and the perpetrators were cast from the community, made to be scapegoats for the crime, and finally, punished for their actions (486-94).

The media’s tragic framing of the Matthew Shepard murder helped to cleanse the public of guilt for the incident but failed to translate the event into a lesson for those involved (Ott and Aoki 496). The authors suggested Kenneth Burke’s comic frame as a remedy for this problem as this frame allows self-awareness and the ability to observe events while also participating. The comic frame shifts the emphasis from crime to stupidity and “provides motives that teach the fool—and vicariously the audience—about error so that it may be corrected rather than punished” (497). The audience must picture the wrongdoers as mistaken, not vicious, so that the humility of the perpetrator is emphasized (497). This consciousness would allow people to identify with those being punished, in this case McKinney and Henderson, and learn from their experience (496-97).

L. Paul Husselbee and Larry Elliott also used the Matthew Shepard murder as a case study in their statement analysis of two hate crimes. The authors evaluated national and regional newspaper coverage of the murders of Shepard and James Byrd Jr., a disabled African American man beaten and then dragged to death in Jasper, Texas (834). Content analysis of the articles focused on the portrayal of the communities in which the crimes occurred and the residents of those cities.

Contrary to the hypotheses of Husselbee and Elliott, the newspapers did not focus on the communities themselves or portray Jasper and Laramie in a negative light
(847). The print media centered coverage on the homicides themselves and discussed the actions and attitudes of the residents of Jasper and Laramie only in terms of efforts to “heal” in the wake of the hate crimes (844-47).

Urban Unrest

While hate crimes involve only a small portion of a community’s citizens, crises such as riots often demonstrate the anger and frustration of large numbers of residents. A verdict of not guilty in the trial of police officers accused in the beating of Rodney King incited such anger in many Los Angeles residents. Ronald N. Jacobs used narrative analysis to compare portrayals of the King beating in African American and mainstream newspapers (“Civil Society”). Congruent with other authors discussed here, Jacobs viewed crisis as an event that “demands narration” (1241) and studied the plot, characters, and genre of the newspaper stories covering the incident.

Jacobs’ analysis revealed differences in the construction of narratives between the newspapers: in the Los Angeles Times (the mainstream newspaper) the event was constructed as a “problem of police brutality, of factionalism and of political divisiveness”; in the Los Angeles Sentinel (the African American newspaper) the incident was constructed as a “problem of police brutality, of white insincerity, and of the need for African-American empowerment” (“Civil Society” 1266). The differences between the papers were accompanied by changes in the narratives over time, suggesting that the Rodney King beating was linked to other already existing social narratives, past events, and narrative genres (1266-67). This interaction of narratives is important, according to Jacobs, to understand social processes and social change as well as to interpret the stories themselves (1267).
In a later study, Jacobs analyzed newspaper and television news discourse concerning the 1992 Los Angeles uprising in terms of the genre of tragedy ("The Problem"). The author identified three tragic stories of the event that appeared in the news media: the tragedy of "urban neglect and historical repetition"; the tragedy of politics; and the tragedy of "racial division and legal paralysis" (224). These narratives, argued Jacobs, impacted the entire culture of racial representations and influenced future interpretations of events such as the Reginald Denny beating and the O.J. Simpson trial (224-25).

Jacobs contended that readers recognize the genre of tragedy in nonfiction as well as fictional texts and that tragedy is overused in the media’s writing in times of crisis ("The Problem" 236). The author advocated "genre balance" as an alternative in newswriting in which crises may be portrayed as either romantic or tragic narratives (236). Jacobs argued that since tragic narratives are destined to end in failure, the audience of these narratives is less likely to participate in a democratic society. Alternatively, if romantic narratives are occasionally used in the description of a crisis, the audience is given agency to take action through the belief that social problems may be met through political channels (236-241).

**Celebrity and Public Tragedy**

Tragic stories involving celebrities and public figures have the potential to affect people across the country because of the audience’s prior knowledge of and identification with the victims. The O.J. Simpson trial attracted unprecedented media coverage due to the brutality of the crime and the celebrity status of the suspect. Using content analysis, Kimberly A. Maxwell et al. examined newspaper coverage of the
double murder of Nicole Brown Simpson and her friend Ron Goldman, a crime for which O.J. Simpson was indicted. The authors hypothesized that the print media’s coverage of this high profile case would produce a shift in the content of the coverage from incident-focused reporting to socially-focused reporting (260). This change in coverage would involve increased mention of topics such as: law enforcement and judicial efforts related to domestic violence; domestic violence legislative actions or programs such as shelter openings; and mentions of criminal consequences for the abuser (260-61).

Maxwell et al. concluded that the celebrity status of the Simpson-Goldman murder did temporarily increase the occurrence of domestic violence reporting in the newspapers studied but did not change the character or content of the stories (269). These results suggested that most coverage of domestic violence cases continues to place responsibility on the individual victim and abuser while ignoring social factors that perpetuate violence (270).

Celebrity also played a role in the media’s response to the death of John F. Kennedy, Jr. The untimely death of yet another member of the Kennedy family seemed to garner an emotional response from people around the world. Following JFK Jr.’s fatal plane crash that also claimed the life of his wife and sister-in-law, Carolyn Kitch conducted a narrative and rhetorical analysis of news magazine content in search of mythic themes present in news coverage of the event. Kitch argued that because the Kennedy family “has been prominent and symbolically powerful in American politics” for over fifty years, JFK Jr.’s life and death were presented by the media in terms of national values, identity, and memory (294).
Three narratives emerged in Kitch’s study: JFK Jr. as an echo of his father’s unfinished presidency in the 1960s; JFK Jr. as a part of a family that has endured many sacrifices for the betterment of America; and JFK Jr. as America itself, a symbol of hope for the nation (299-303). The author suggested that these themes illustrated the role of journalism in articulating and maintaining cultural values and the tendency of journalists to place new events within already-established storylines (304).

The deaths of ordinary citizens receive equal attention to that of celebrities when their occupation is deemed fascinating and admirable as is the case for astronauts. Robert W. Kubey and Thea Peluso conducted a diffusion study that described the ways in which college-age participants learned of the 1986 explosion of the Space Shuttle Challenger. A questionnaire was used by the authors to ascertain time spent acquiring information about the tragedy through media sources, time spent talking with others about the accident, and the strength of participants’ emotional response to the incident (70). Kubey and Peluso discovered that news diffusion of this tragedy was mostly carried through interpersonal channels rather than through the mass media. This finding suggests the need in future studies of public tragedy to attempt to account for the influence of interpersonal communication on the media’s coverage of an event (71-75).

Coal miners engage in an occupation that is also notoriously dangerous, having an unfortunate history of accidents that often take the lives of many members of a tight-knit community. Trudie Richards studied the interaction between a mine owner and the media following the 1992 Westray mine explosion in Pictou County, Nova Scotia, that killed 26 miners who were trapped underground. Through interviews, Richards discovered that Curragh Incorporated, the company that owned the mine, had an
inadequate plan for dealing with the crisis and showed unwillingness to cooperate with the media and insensitivity toward families of trapped miners (340). As predicted by the author, journalists covering the event attempted to rely on human interest to tell the stories of the victims (351-60). In addition, and somewhat contrary to the findings of previous research, the media were relatively consistent in their presentation of the story within a larger social context. Decontextualization of the story was rare (363).

September 11, 2001

A public tragedy that is unparalleled in the recent memory of our nation is that of the terrorist attacks that took place on September 11, 2001. As the public struggled to recover from this tragedy and grieve for the thousands of lives lost, distinctive rhetoric was generated in the form of media coverage of the event.

Janice Hume performed a rhetorical analysis of a special section of the *New York Times* titled, “Portraits of Grief” that featured obituaries of those killed in the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Hume’s analysis focused primarily on the personal attributes of the deceased in order to reveal the cultural function of these narratives. She identified five themes in the content of the obituaries: devotion to family; passion, talents or interests outside work; a work ethic; generosity, humor and humanity; and good health or energy (169).

Hume hypothesized that these commemorations “offered up for their audience a cultural ideal, legitimizing the value of the lives of individuals” (175). In addition, these portraits of the victims illustrated a tension between different cultural values; the deceased were required to juggle work and family and to be proficient in both arenas (176). By celebrating ordinary qualities of these victims, the obituaries presented the
victims as “every American” and thus lent support to cultural myths while providing comfort for grieving family and friends (176-77).

Also using the perspective of myth, Jack Lule analyzed editorials that appeared in the *New York Times* in the aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks. Lule stated that because news is deeply rooted in the tradition of storytelling, news can also be understood as myth (277). These myths, according to Lule, were particularly important as the news organization attempted to make sense of the horrific events of September 11 (280).

After a close reading of the editorials, the author discovered “the strong sway of myth” and four myths in particular emerged: the end of innocence—everything has changed; the victims we might have been; the heroes amid the horror; and the foreboding future as horrible as it is to imagine (280). Lule pointed out that the oft present myth of the enemy is notably absent from the editorials. The editorial myths worked instead to focus the reader inwardly toward the sacrifices and suffering endured by the American people (286).

Douglas Kellner provided a dramatically differing opinion of the media’s coverage of the events of September 11, 2001. Through a frame analysis of television and radio coverage of the terrorist attacks, Kellner argued that the media encouraged “war fever” by creating a dualism between Islamic terrorism and civilization that demanded military intervention (143). The author was critical of this creation of “retaliatory feelings” by the media, stating that this framing of the event could worsen the crisis and fail to provide valid solutions and explanations for the event (144-46).

*School Violence*
Violence that is committed by youth is transformed from startling to unspeakable when it occurs within the walls of a school. The role of the media in presenting these tragedies to a shocked public is perhaps even more pronounced than is the case in the crises discussed previously. Charles E. Menifield et al. performed a content analysis of six newspapers to examine the media’s portrayal of three urban school shootings that occurred in: Washington D.C. in 1996; New York City in 1997; and Richmond, Virginia, in 1998. The media’s coverage of these shootings was compared to that of three rural school shootings that occurred in: Pearl, Mississippi, in 1997; Paducah, Kentucky, in 1997; and Jonesboro, Arkansas, in 1998. The authors hypothesized that there would be differences in the coverage of the events reflective of the public’s divergent reactions to violence occurring in those contexts (448).

Menifield et al. discovered three major trends in their analysis of the newspaper coverage of rural school shootings. With regard to headlines, the authors found that the newspapers sought to capture the attention of the audience with “glaring” headlines and then to elicit sympathy for those involved in the incident with intense pictures and captions displayed on the front page (458). The second trend that emerged in the data was an attempt in the week following the shootings to generate sympathy for survivors of the incident. Finally, the authors found that the newspaper content attempted to provide closure for the event by speculating as to why the shootings occurred (458-59).

The study revealed that the newspaper coverage of urban school shootings followed similar trends initially but was “very short and to the point” (459). These articles, according to Menifield et al., more accurately reflected the reality that urban crime is “part of our society at all levels and among different types of people” (459).
The authors proposed that, in contrast to the coverage of rural school shootings, these articles did not need to attempt to shock readers into recognizing a problem that they already perceived as commonplace.

Menifield et al. concluded that the newspapers do portray urban and rural school shootings differently and, as a result, mislead readers as to the commonality of these crimes, their severity, and consequences (459-60). By downplaying or neglecting to mention incidents of violence in urban school districts, the newspapers imply that it is not new or newsworthy and that the news organizations and the American public are already desensitized to such violence (461-62). The authors suggested that this difference in coverage reflects rather than defines how the public views and responds to crime (461).

The majority of recent studies concerning the topic of school shootings has, understandably, centered on the shootings at Columbine High School—the most deadly example of this violence. Kristen Hoerl studied the Columbine High School shootings through a close textual analysis of articles in The Denver Post that discussed the motives of the perpetrators and the response of the public to the event. Hoerl contended that Walter Fisher’s concept of the myth of the American Dream can help to explain the media’s depiction of this event (260). In recent years, this myth has suffered, according to Hoerl, because it does not “reflect people’s experiences in suburbia” amid changing demographics and lifestyles of suburban residents (261).

Newspaper coverage of the Columbine shootings served to bolster the myth of the American Dream by depicting adolescent youth, particularly Harris and Klebold, as “inherently evil monsters” (263). Hoerl postulated that the myth of monstrous youth in
suburbia was suggested by the newspaper articles so that Harris and Klebold may serve as representations of what youth should avoid becoming (271). Two different media explanations of the shootings emerged, according to Hoerl, to account for the shooters' failure to be "good products" of their suburban upbringing (264). First, and most commonly, Harris and Klebold were depicted in a "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" fashion in which they appeared perfectly normal prior to the tragedy and then suddenly revealed their "dark side" (265). Less commonly in the news stories, Harris and Klebold were depicted as "Dr. Frankenstein's Monsters," a storyline which implied that the tragedy was an unavoidable result of the threats and beatings that the shooters regularly suffered at the hands of more popular, athletic students (266).

Hoerl concluded that although this depiction of the Columbine High School shootings reaffirmed the legitimacy of the American Dream, it also served to frighten residents of suburbia throughout the nation who now suspected that these adolescent monsters were present and undetected in their communities (268). A "crisis over the hegemony of suburbia" ensued and, according to Hoerl, the audience of this tragic event was distracted from larger social issues and dilemmas that may be at the root of the violence (270).

Ronald Burns and Charles Crawford echoed Hoerl's contention that school shootings in rural areas and suburbs are particularly disturbing to Americans. These two authors studied the creation of fear among students and parents by media portrayals of high profile school shootings occurring from 1997 to 1999. According to Burns and Crawford, the school shootings were constructed as a moral panic—"a widespread public fear that evildoers were trying to harm and/or tear apart the very fabric of our

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society” (148). In the context of a moral panic, the perpetrators and their families become “folk devils” and “deviants” and are deemed outsiders, treated with hostility, and stigmatized as a threat to the community (149-50).

Reactions to the shootings, as portrayed in the media, fueled public hostility and concern about the incidents and helped to legitimize the violence as a “social problem” (Burns and Crawford 153). Burns and Crawford maintained that societal responses to these events were disproportionate to the actual threat of juvenile crime and, because of public fear, simple solutions were implemented to combat complex problems (153-55). The reaction to the events was characterized by Burns and Crawford as a triangular interaction between the media, politicians, and the general public. The interaction between the three participants “consists of a self-perpetuating cycle in which major actors involved in the situation respond in a manner which encourages subsequent action from the other groups” and encourages punitive directives to be imposed upon juveniles (159). Burns and Crawford argued that the result of this cycle is often “misdirected public policy and misguided solutions to safeguard schools” despite the possibility that the actual threat may lie elsewhere (162).

This public fear may continue in a climate of never-ending crisis according to a study of the Columbine shootings by Joshua Gunn and David E. Beard. Their work examined televised and online representations of the event and discovered a “logic of perception” they termed the “apocalyptic sublime” (199). Within this subgenre, Gunn and Beard postulated that a sense of never-ending crisis will be created so that “in popular imagination Columbine will never suffer death, but simply continue to die” (199). Unlike the traditional cultural understanding of the apocalypse, the apocalyptic
sublime replaces the sense of imminent crisis with a perpetual dwelling in end-time (200). Gunn and Beard borrowed from the writings of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant to characterize an experience with the sublime as triggering a “fight or flight response” and an “odd sense of pleasure, disorientation, and fear” (200). The apocalyptic sublime creates a “real-time” depiction of the event in which the viewer’s distance from the event is distorted and the shootings can be experienced and relived continually (202).

The apocalyptic sublime, as described by Gunn and Beard, consists of three features or phases: a group of people experience a crisis of some magnitude; a larger systemic explanation or series of explanations is offered to account for the crisis; and the explanations prolong, rather than assuage, the sense of crisis (203). In the case of the Columbine shootings, these three phases occurred simultaneously as live news coverage assumed a “roll first, ask questions later” mentality (205). Unsatisfactory explanations that were offered in the narration of the crisis included firearms sales laws, parenting skills of the perpetrator’s guardians, and violent media. These explanations served to keep the “wound” of Columbine open and to disorient and unsettle spectators thus serving the interests of the media to sustain an attentive audience (205-6).

The economic interest of the media, particularly in times of crisis, was also the focus of a study by Brendan Maguire, Georgie Ann Weatherby, and Richard A. Mathers. The authors conducted a content analysis of television evening news coverage of fourteen school shootings occurring from 1996 to 2000. In a comparison of the amount of news coverage allotted to each of the shootings, Maguire, Weatherby and Mathers discovered that violence was the dominant factor associated with the amount of
coverage afforded a story. Reports of the Columbine shootings, not surprisingly, constituted substantially more minutes of coverage than any other stories of similar school violence (467). Maguire, Weatherby and Mathers suggested several possible negative consequences of this extensive news coverage: the possibility of copycat crimes; the diversion of attention from the threat of domestic violence; the impact of fear on the school learning environment, and extreme new school security measures (470). The over-reaction of the public and school officials may be due to pervasive media attention granted to “tragic but uncommon” incidents of school violence (470).

Erica Scharrer, Lisa M. Weidman, and Kimberly L. Bissell explored the media’s portrayal of tragedies in depth in their study of newspaper coverage of the death of Princess Diana, the murder associated with the Jenny Jones show, and the shootings at Columbine High School. In media depictions of all three high-profile tragedies, the authors discovered the assignment of blame to popular media and products of popular culture (93). In the case of the Columbine shootings, the first day of coverage concentrated on traditional journalistic coverage of who, what, where, when and how, providing “blow-by-blow accounts” and “gory details” of the event (80). Beginning the day after the shootings, according to Scharrer, Weidman, and Bissell, newspaper coverage began to place blame on the media and popular culture by depicting the viewpoints of: students at Columbine and other area schools; experts such as professors, counselors and police officers; and reporters and editorial staff writers (82).

Popular culture products such as movies, television, video games, the internet, and music were implicated as “causal contributors” to Harris and Klebold’s violence (Scharrer, Weidman, and Bissell 82). Scharrer, Weidman, and Bissell contended that
attempts to explain the Columbine shootings echoed previous attempts at sense-making in the wake of school violence. Similar to other accounts of analogous events, the news articles rarely drew a “macroscopic picture” of the tragedy and often failed to acknowledge the context of broad social problems or the possibility that no sufficient explanation could be reached (86-87). The authors argued that “at the ideological level, blaming the media for the Columbine tragedy could help maintain comforting notions of social order and reassure the public of social stability” (92). The news stories advanced the explanation of popular-culture culpability in order to bring rationality to a tragedy rendered particularly senseless by “the young age of the assailants and victims, the seemingly safe setting, and the apparent glee with which Klebold and Harris perpetrated their crimes” (93).

In light of the senselessness of the shootings, the focus of several studies turned exclusively to the media’s portrayal of the two shooters. Jennifer Pass Ogle, Molly Eckman, and Catherine Amoroso Leslie studied newspaper coverage of the incident to investigate the link made by the media between appearance and the shootings. The researchers coded articles from The Denver Post and The Denver Rocky Mountain News in search of references to the appearances of the gunmen, their victims, and others implicated in or affected by the shootings.

Ogle, Eckman, and Leslie stated that “within hours” of the Columbine shootings, the media had constructed the event as an appearance-related social problem (7). Initial references to the appearances of the perpetrators came primarily from eyewitnesses to the shootings and media writers soon began to attach meaning to the boys’ appearance and establish the “black trench coat as a symbol of violence and the
Appearance began to contribute to an explanation for the event as news stories shifted their focus from what the gunmen were wearing to why they were wearing it and how that contributed to their acts of violence (14).

The attire of Harris and Klebold associated them with groups such as the Trench Coat Mafia and attributed the crime to tensions between that group and other cliques in the high school. The trench coats themselves were also implicated in facilitating the crime as they enabled the shooters to conceal weapons (14-17). Ogle, Eckman, and Leslie concluded that “appearance was presented as both a scapegoat and a solution to the Columbine problem” (25). The authors cautioned that by constructing the Columbine shootings as an appearance-related problem, meaningful public discussion of the problem and the opportunity for social change as a means of preventing future school shootings may have been hindered (25).

A focus on the appearance of Harris and Klebold is an example of a “misplaced locus of blame” postulated in an article by Daniel Thomas Cook (108). He argued that the media portrayed the perpetrators as children and were thus unwilling to describe the shootings as “willful acts of willful agents” (108). The social context and the location of the crime, according to Cook, demanded further speculation concerning the event. A “holy trinity” of explanations emerged as the media attempted to make sense of the shootings: out-of-touch parents; violent media and video games; and the accessibility of handguns (108). Harris and Klebold disrupted cultural expectations of the typical teen behavior in suburban Colorado. The media then shifted agency away from the shooters so that their peers and community could retain their conception of that suburban, white, middle-class culture (116).
This review of literature examined previous research concerning the media’s response to and portrayal of crisis and public tragedy. In general, noteworthy findings of these studies included: the ability of the media to relieve the public of culpability for tragedy as was the case in the murder of Matthew Shepard (Ott and Aoki); the capacity of the media to portray an event such as the Rodney King beating differently depending on audience (“Civil Society”); and a tendency to ignore societal factors that may contribute to public tragedies such as the frequency of domestic violence as related to the Simpson-Goldman murders (Maxwell et al.). In addition, existing research has revealed a trend in the media toward the maintenance of cultural values and tendency to place new events such as the death of JFK Jr. within exiting storylines (Kitch). Studies of the tragedy of September 11, 2001 revealed the use of myth in depictions of the event to legitimize the lives of the deceased (Hume).

With regard to school violence, this review of literature provided evidence that rural school shootings receive special attention from the media and, in the coverage of these incidents, the media attempt to provide closure for the event (Menifield et al.). Depictions of suburban school violence may also work to explain the presence of evil in suburban communities while reaffirming the legitimacy of the American Dream (Hoerl). Alternatively, the media may perpetuate a feeling of crisis by constructing the events as a moral panic (Burns and Crawford) or in the genre of the apocalyptic sublime (Gunn and Beard). Reports of school shootings often focus on the violent nature of the incident (Maguire, Weatherby, and Mathers) and tend to place blame on products of popular culture (Scharrer, Weidman, and Bissell), the appearance of the perpetrators (Ogle, Eckman, and Leslie), or the context and location of the crime (Cook).
A New Study: Scope and Justification

Although public tragedy generally, and the Columbine High School shootings specifically, have been studied in some detail by other scholars, this study is distinctive for two reasons. First, the portrayal of this incident by both major local newspapers has not been studied in depth. Although previous work has analyzed media framing of this incident, the focus of the majority of these studies was divided between local and national media or between print and electronic media. Exceptions to this statement include the study by Ogle, Eckman, and Leslie and the rhetorical analysis by Hoerl discussed in detail above. The study by Ogle, Eckman and Leslie differs from the present study in its quantitative method and in its exclusive focus on newspaper content that reflected the construction of an appearance-related problem. Although Hoerl’s inquiry is similar to the present study in method, she concentrated her analysis only on *The Denver Post* and utilized the theoretical frame of myth.

Second, this study will contribute to existing knowledge of the Columbine tragedy by applying a new theoretical framework to the study of the event. Kenneth Burke’s concept of mortification (*Grammar* 406) will be utilized to highlight the process by which the Littleton community was expunged of guilt for the tragic event. This new perspective has the potential to reveal the ways in which the local media functioned to frame the Columbine High School shootings. By focusing on the rhetorical power of the portrayal of the event, this analysis will seek to discover trends and themes in the newspaper coverage and may be able to more fully account for their significance regarding public interpretation of the event. Burke’s dramatism promises
to be especially useful in explaining how this framing of the event was essential to the community’s recovery from the tragedy.

This analysis of *The Denver Post* and *The Denver Rocky Mountain News* using the framework of Burke’s dramatism will add to existing knowledge of the Columbine High School shootings and public tragedy in general by focusing on the significance of the media’s interpretation of the tragedy for the Littleton community. The horrific nature of the event provides a unique opportunity to examine the community’s healing from the tragedy and the ways in which the local media aided in this recovery. Burke’s dramatism is especially useful in revealing the necessity and method of this healing process.

*The Texts*

This study will begin with a close analysis of the texts in order to reveal the ways in which they framed the events of the Columbine High School shootings. By employing the methods of rhetorical criticism, the role of *The Denver Post* and *The Denver Rocky Mountain News* in the interpretation of this tragedy for the Littleton, Colorado community, and surrounding areas may be ascertained. Data for this study will consist of all print material concerning the Columbine shootings contained in *The Denver Post* and *The Denver Rocky Mountain News* beginning with the first day of coverage (4/21/99) and ending with the Sunday issue of both newspapers (4/25/99).

Although defining the scope of the study in this manner will produce a large, arguably cumbersome, amount of text for analysis it is justified for two reasons. First, the purpose of the study is to analyze the text of the newspapers as one unit or voice capable of explaining the events of the tragedy. By limiting this analysis either by type
of article or by location in the newspaper, aspects of this voice are eliminated from this reading despite their presence in the community’s original reading in 1999. Secondly, by leaving the scope of the project open initially, the opportunity to later limit the data by content is left available. The project may be narrowed as it progresses to eliminate material not useful for the study. This content-based limitation will significantly reduce the amount of material to be included in this study but can only be implemented as the analysis progresses.

The Importance of Local Print Coverage

_The Denver Post_ and _The Denver Rocky Mountain News_ played a pivotal role in the interpretation of the Columbine High School shooting for the people most affected by the tragedy. For residents of Littleton and surrounding areas, these print media outlets provided a narrative of the events as well as updates concerning the status of family members and friends. Later, the newspapers also functioned to memorialize the victims, to guide survivors in the process of grieving, and to explain the event in the context of larger societal issues. For these reasons, the local print media significantly shaped the community’s awareness of and response to the tragedy and warrant special scrutiny.

The volume of articles published in these local newspapers is reflective of the careful attention the event received from these news organizations. _The Denver Post_ produced 750 articles referring to Columbine High School in the first six months following the tragedy (Hoerl) and more than 1,000 articles had appeared in _The Denver Post_ and _The Denver Rocky Mountain News_ by the first anniversary of the shootings (Ogle, Eckman, and Leslie). This extensive coverage demonstrates the impact that the
The event had on the Littleton community and the power of the tragedy to continue to have newsworthiness for months and even years after its occurrence.

The production of such a large quantity of articles concerning the shootings is significant for two reasons. First, the articles may have afforded community members and, especially, the families and friends of shooting victims an opportunity to come to terms with the details of the event and to perhaps begin to comprehend its reality. Unlike televised coverage of the event, the newspaper articles are tangible and may be experienced repeatedly and at the pace and occasion desired by the reader. Also, as compared with electronic media, the newspaper articles are less ephemeral. Grieving family members and friends could easily preserve articles they most wanted to read and reflect on them again months or years after the tragedy.

The extensive coverage of the Columbine shootings by The Denver Post and The Denver Rocky Mountain News is also significant due to the impact that it had on other news outlets. The newspapers had the "earliest and most extensive coverage and may have set the tone that other media organizations followed" (Scharrer, Weidman, and Bissell 92). The Denver Post won a Pulitzer Prize in 1999 for its coverage of the tragedy and, as recently as 2001, national broadcast news media cited The Denver Post when referring to the event (Hoerl). As a result, examination of articles published in these two newspapers will not only provide an illustration of award-winning local coverage of the event but will be representative of national coverage of the tragedy as well.
Theoretical Framework: Burke’s Dramatism

A preliminary reading of the texts suggests that Burke’s dramatistic theory has potential to illuminate these texts by explaining their capability to restore order to the Littleton community after the horrific events at Columbine High School. According to Burke, disorder, such as the Columbine incident, generates guilt which, in turn, requires a means of purification (Religion 190-93). This guilt is generated within a community when social pacts between community members are broken. Burke argued that humans are “inherently tribal” and will protect their own kind against that which is alien or members of the tribe that threaten their community, culture, or society (Grammar 130-31). The Columbine shootings are an extremely tragic example of the violation of social order.

Purification, or redemption from guilt, requires the “slaying of any motive that, for doctrinal reasons, one thinks of as unruly” (Religion 190). This slaying may be either literal or figurative and may take two forms: victimization in which guilt is projected to an outside source; or mortification in which responsibility for the disorder is taken upon oneself (Religion 190). Mortification was the process used in the case of the Columbine High School shootings and Burke’s theories will thus serve as an appropriate avenue by which to ascertain the role of local newspapers in the community’s return to order after the shootings.

Through the theoretical framework of dramatism, Burke sought to answer the question: “What is involved, when we say what people are doing and why they are doing it?” (Grammar xv). The five terms of Burke’s pentad—act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose—serve as the basis for the answering of this question. The terms of the
pentad can help reveal human motivation and, as Burke stated, "any complete statement about motives will offer some kind of answers to these five questions: what was done (act), when or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent), and how he did it (agency), and why (purpose)" (Grammar xv).

In a pentadic analysis, some discussion of the act is always necessary but the act might be reinterpreted by featuring other pentadic terms singly or in ratios (Tonn, Endress, and Diamond 230). When one term is thus featured, Burke stated that a corresponding philosophic school may be distinguished; "each school features a different one of the five terms, in developing a vocabulary designed to allow this one term full expression (as regards its resources and its temptations) with the other terms being comparatively slighted or being placed in the perspective of the featured term" (Grammar 127).

In the featuring of scene as the dominant term, the corresponding philosophic school of materialism emerges (Grammar 128). This perspective reflects a view of the world as relatively static and occurrences in the universe as explainable by physical processes. "With materialism the circumference of scene is so narrowed as to involve the reduction of action to motion" (Grammar 131). Agents functioning within this scene, therefore, have no choice as to their actions. Burke stated, "From the motivational point of view, there is implicit in the quality of a scene the quality of the action that is to take place within it. This would be another way of saying that the act will be consistent with the scene" (Grammar 6-7).

Rhetors may feature the scene to absolve themselves or others of responsibility for errors in personal judgment (Tonn, Endress, and Diamond 231). If an act is
determined to be harmful to the community, and thus sinful, some type of symbolic redemption must occur, according to Burke. Victimization is one avenue through which this symbolic cleansing may occur. Burke pointed to the "tendency to conceive of a 'perfect enemy'" thus paving the way for "catharsis by scapegoat" (Language 18). This victimization process includes "the 'natural' invitation to 'project' upon the enemy any troublesome traits of our own that we would negate" (Language 18).

An article titled, "Hunting and Heritage on Trial: A Dramatistic Debate over Tragedy, Tradition, and Territory," by Mari Boor Tonn, Valerie A. Endress, and John N. Diamond is an exemplary model of the application of dramatism to the interpretation of a tragedy by local newspapers. The focus of their inquiry was the 1988 accidental shooting of Karen Wood by a deer hunter in her wooded backyard outside of Hermon, Maine. Donald Rogerson, the accused hunter, was acquitted of all charges against him, a court decision that sparked heated debate throughout Maine. Local newspapers served as the voice for both sides of the debate and became the focus of Tonn, Endress, and Diamond's analysis.

The authors explained the acquittal of Rogerson and the intense debate that ensued in terms of Burke's pentad. The local newspapers featured the scene, according to Tonn, Endress, and Diamond, which transformed Rogerson's actions into motion and freed him of responsibility for the death of Wood. This focus on scene was made more plausible by a conflict existing in Maine between "natives" and "outsiders" (232). As an outsider, Wood invaded the "local order" (234) of the rural Maine community and disrupted the "autumn ritual," deer hunting, in which Rogerson was participating (233). Rogerson responded to the presence of Wood with the instinct of a hunter, rather than
with calculated, logical thought. "Rogerson was responding to his nature as a hunter, whereas Wood was tempting nature. She, rather than he, had violated order" (238).

This dramatistic analysis by Tonn, Endress and Diamond is a valuable illustration of the method proposed in the present study for two reasons. First, the authors used Burke’s theories to explain the healing of a community after a tragedy and the role played by local newspapers in that healing. The community was shocked by the death of Wood, a young mother new to the area, and by implications of the shooting for Rogerson. That one death, however tragic, pales in comparison to the number of lives lost within the walls of Columbine High School. The absolution of the shooters and of the local community is arguably more challenging and more vital in this case. Dramatism will be especially useful in accounting for this similar, yet more dramatic, instance of media framing.

A second reason that the work of Tonn, Endress and Diamond serves as a model for the current study relates to the texts that composed their sample. Like this study of Columbine, Tonn, Endress and Diamond examined a large number of newspaper articles in their study of Wood’s death. This broad approach allowed the authors to describe the events of the shooting as well as analyze the local media’s framing of the incident.

Summary

This chapter provided a description of the method to be used in this study of the shootings at Columbine High School. A review of previous research concerning crises and public tragedies was provided as contextualization for this inquiry. In addition, the
texts to be analyzed and the scope of this study were described. Justification was provided for the selection of local print media for analysis and the large scope and quantity of this material. Lastly, Burke's theory of dramatism was explicated so that its application in future chapters of this study may be understood. A rhetorical analysis of these newspaper texts using dramatism will commence in the next chapter of this project.
CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS: STAGES OF COVERAGE
AND RESTORATION OF ORDER

The day after the shootings at Columbine High School, a headline in Berlins’
*Tagespiegel* read “Amok in Littleton” and Iran’s state television allotted ten minutes to
the “shocking and deadly tragedy” that claimed fifteen lives in Colorado (Jensen
AA19). “How sick is the gun society in America?” asked the *Yomiuri* daily in Japan
while Australian Prime Minister John Howard said he was “sickened by the shootings
(Jensen AA19). That day, *The Denver Post* called the event a “massacre” and a
“bloodbath” (Obmascik A1) and the front page headline of *The Denver Rocky Mountain
News* read “heartbreak” (Anton A2). Eric Harris, Dylan Klebold, and thirteen of their
victims were not able to witness the grief and horror with which Littleton, the nation,
and the world reacted to this tragedy. The local newspapers played a pivotal role in the
chronicling of this event as parents, students, and teachers around the globe attempted
to understand the impossible.

This chapter is a rhetorical analysis of the local newspaper coverage of the
Columbine High School shootings. A close reading of the texts revealed three distinct
stages of reporting: 1) a focus on act: disorder in the community; 2) a focus on scene:
killers hiding in the suburbs; and 3) mortification: order is restored. Coverage moved
through these stages in the first five days after the shootings occurred. Although the
stages can easily be corresponded to issues of the newspapers, and will be in the analysis below, it is important to note that the actual transition between each stage was much more gradual and the boundaries between each stage more permeable. In the following pages, each of these stages will be described thoroughly to illuminate the means by which they functioned to restore symbolic order in the community.

A Focus on Act: Disorder in the Community

The first stage of reporting primarily encompassed the April 21 and April 22 issues of The Denver Post and The Denver Rocky Mountain News and functioned to reconstruct the event for the community. This stage in the newspaper coverage of the Columbine shootings is important with regard to the symbolic order-disorder cycle theorized by Kenneth Burke: “Order leads to guilt (for who can keep commandments!). Guilt needs redemption (for who would not be cleansed!). Redemption needs redeemer (which is to say, a victim!)” (Religion 4-5). The first stage of coverage focused on the act that disrupted the symbolic order of the Littleton community. The articles described the shootings in vividly and thus detailed the act that had broken the symbolic covenants held between community members.

The tragedy of the shootings was particularly disruptive for the idyllic communities of Littleton and Columbine High School. The shootings shattered the order existing among the 35,000 residents of this suburban town—people who tended not to lock the doors of their homes, boasted a per capita income among the highest in the nation, and sang at church on Sundays (“In Sorrow”; “Noon”; Bureau of Economic Analysis D69). Children in the community attended a high school with a drop out rate
of only 1.3% and a poverty rate of only 6.5% ("Digest of education Statistics 2000" 99; "Digest of Education Statistics 2001" 111). The students of Columbine High, mostly white and upper middle class, walked through recently-renovated halls adorned with the trophies of thirty-two statewide sports championships (Pooley).

The reality of the shootings was unbelievable, particularly in this context, and shattered the order of the community. Detailed accounts of the experiences of those inside and outside the walls of Columbine High School during the shootings comprised the content of the majority of articles published in the first two days following the shootings. By focusing on the act, this coverage served to recreate the tragedy for newspaper readers and allowed community members to experience the terror of the event.

*The Denver Post* and *The Denver Rocky Mountain News* commenced their coverage of the shootings with large, glaring headlines and candid photographs followed immediately by extremely detailed accounts of the event. Descriptions of the tragedy were constructed using numerous perspectives of people who were in diverse places during the event and involved in the shootings to varying degrees. Articles in this first stage of coverage featured information gathered from: interviews with victims of the shootings at local hospitals and by phone from inside the school; friends and family members of the fatally wounded; parents waiting at nearby Leawood Elementary School for news of their children's welfare or, later, mourning the deaths of their loved ones; law enforcement officials at the scene; and teen violence experts.
An article on the second page of April 21 issue of *The Denver Rocky Mountain News* titled, “Death Goes to School with Cold, Evil Laughter,” began with the following lines:

The two came to school Tuesday in fatigues, pipe bombs strapped to their chests and shotguns and high-powered pistols under long black coats. About 11:30 a.m. they went to work wearing masks, shredding their classmates with bullets and bombs, laughing as they went, turning Columbine High School, home of the Rebels, into the scene of the deadliest school shooting in American history. As many as 25 died—maybe even more, police said. Twenty-one were wounded, half of them critically. They were shot in the chest and back, head and legs. (Anton A2)

The vivid language used in this article by Mike Anton is typical of this stage of coverage and served to involve the community in the event by recreating the horror inside the school. Another article published that same day on the front page of *The Denver Post* mirrored this dramatic language and described the event from a variety of perspectives:

At one point a bloody boy dangled down from a second-floor window and was caught by two SWAT-team members. Another person held up a sign in a classroom window: “Help, I’m bleeding to death.”

“There are some who were killed as they were hiding under desks,” said an officer who was inside the school. “Some looked like they were
trying to crawl away. They were executed—shot in the head.”

(Obmascik A1)

Images of helpless victims trapped inside the school and the experience of entering the school after the tragedy added drama and realism to the above article.

An article titled “Dream Turns to Nightmare” underscored the stark contrast between Columbine High School before the shootings, and the same hallways one day later. In Burke’s terms, the article illustrated order transformed to disorder:

It was a shirt-sleeve day, the kind when the sun bathes pansies and tulips in a way that makes their colors seem unreal—the type of spring day that Colorado is known for.

It’s also the time of year that seems so full of promise for high school seniors. With just 17 school days left and graduation a month away, many seniors were filling out surveys for the school newspaper, giving advice to underclassmen and leaving funny notes for their siblings and friends. “Happy stuff,” the newspaper’s co-editor called it.

At the senior prom over the weekend, the white tablecloths were covered with flower petals and candles, and students slow-danced to the theme song, “The Way You Look Tonight.” (Callahan A1)

A few paragraphs later, one student recalled that as she fled those same hallways, there was “blood everywhere” and she was forced to step over bodies of dead classmates as she escaped from the school (Callahan A8). The same article detailed the last minutes of the life of teacher Dave Sanders as he lay in a “pool of blood” in a science room and the elation of parents reunited with students that survived the massacre (Callahan A8).
Both local newspapers supplemented these types of dramatic narratives with timelines of the shootings and maps of Columbine High School depicting the shooters' movements during the rampage (Obmascik A1; Hubbard A3). An entry from one of the timelines read, "1:30 p.m.: People in the choir room run out of the school under police protection. [...] An armored personnel carrier from the National Guard and two fire trucks are placed in front of the school entrance to act as a barrier for escaping students" (Hubbard A3). The events included in the timelines extended beyond the shootings to include activities of family members and friends of victims: "8:45 p.m.: Parents who gathered at Leawood Elementary for information about their children are notified of confirmed deaths" ("How the Rampage" A15).

A diagram titled "Carnage and Courage at Columbine High School" provided pictures of students, staff and rescuers accompanied by captions detailing their actions during the shootings and arrows pointing to their locations on a map of the school (A15). Teacher Kent Friesen's picture was narrated by this caption: "Friesen grabs students from the hallway and hides them in a science lab. Yanking lightbulbs to darken the hallway, he exposes himself to gunfire. He guards the door with chemical fire extinguishers while students huddle in the room" ("Carnage" A15).

The experiences of waiting parents comprised another element of this reconstruction of the event. Beside a picture of dozens of worried parents, one article read:

Suddenly, existence boiled down to what matters most. And strange kids in trench coats were threatening to take that away. The result was
the most intense moments that some 4,000 Colorado parents have ever known.

They screamed. Cried. Hyperventilated. Prayed. One woman ran through the streets in her stockings. For most, the worst that it got was not knowing. For some, the pain will be infinite. As many as two dozen kids are gone. (Finley and Olinger A14)

Karen Abbott put on paper the thoughts of one waiting mother: “They said a physics teacher was shot and I think he would have been there. His last class was physics.” (A5). The wait was long for many parents as the fear of booby-traps and pipe-bombs prevented emergency workers from recovering many of the victims. “Dozens of other parents waiting at Leawood heard the grim instructions police officers delivered about 7:30 p.m.: Go home. Get your children’s dental records, their fingerprints, anything else that could help identify them” (Abbott A5).

The day after the shootings, some students were still listed as missing, including Corey Depooter. Although some family members held out hope for his miraculous survival, Depooter’s father told The Denver Rocky Mountain News, “We know he’s dead. We know. We knew at 4 o’clock yesterday” (“Friends Left” AA5). Articles depicting the experiences of waiting and mourning parents provided a perspective from outside the walls of the school during the tragedy. The uncertainty and shock felt by these parents and family members of potential victims were feelings many newspaper readers could identify with.

Other viewpoints provided by the first stage of newspaper coverage included those of emergency workers and law enforcement officers who responded to the
unfolding emergency. Dr. Chris Colwell, an emergency physician in charge of triage at the scene, said, "It's the most difficult scene I've ever encountered. Horror would be the best way to describe it. They never addressed this in medical school" ("Triage Doctor" A11). Jefferson County Sheriff John Stone was one of the first to enter the library after the shootings and called the scene "gruesome" ("High School" A1). Detective Alex Woods who entered the school later in the evening in a search for explosives said, "There were bodies under desks, some curled up in fetal positions. Nobody was alive. It's devastating. These are just defenseless kids" (Callahan A8). The stunned reactions of emergency workers provided yet another perspective on the tragedy as, despite training in managing such situations, these professionals were brought to tears.

Articles relating the experiences of students inside the school were particularly dramatic and constituted a large majority of the Columbine coverage on April 21 and 22. Newspaper stories detailing the perspectives of Columbine High School students were imbued with emotional impact because they were relayed primarily in the students' own words. The front page article from the April 21 issue of The Denver Post provided this string of student commentary:

Byron Kirkland saw the massacre begin. "There was a girl crouched beneath a desk in the library and the guy came over and said, 'Peekaboo,' and shot her in the neck," said Kirkland, a 15-year-old sophomore. "They were hooting and hollering and getting big joy out of this."
Aaron Cohn, 15, a sophomore, said he was ducking beneath a table when he suddenly felt a gun barrel pressed to his head. A gunman said:

“All the jocks stand up. We are going to kill you,” Cohn said.

Bree Pasquale, a junior, said: “You could hear them laughing as they ran down the hallways shooting people. He put a gun in my face and said, ‘I’m doing this because people made fun of me last year.’”

(Obmascik A1)

Students commented not only on the events they witnessed, but were also asked to speculate as to the motives and identities of the shooters. Brian Anderson, who suffered a chest wound after being shot through a school window, said of Harris and Klebold, “They weren’t out to scare people. They were out to kill people” (Simpson, Booth, and Robey A14). Nicole Nowlen also witnessed the murderous intentions of Harris and Klebold. The sixteen-year-old told The Denver Rocky Mountain News that she was hiding under a table when one of the gunmen shot her nine times. The shooter then asked another student lying next to Nowlen “Are you still breathing?” before shooting him in the head (“Girl Survives” AA4).

Several articles eliminated reporter commentary all together and, instead, told the story of the shootings by cataloging student quotes. A piece titled, “Teens are Stunned Witnesses to Cold-Blooded Terror,” listed the name, age, and year in school of each student followed by a description of the tragedy in the student’s own words. Adam Foss, a senior, was quoted as saying, “We saw one kid lying on the stairs, and one was on the ground. They were just dead, purple, their eyes still open” (Carman, Callahan, and Guy A16). A few paragraphs later in the same article, Adam’s brother
Nick told The Denver Post, “I saw one of my friends with his face shot off” (Carman, Callahan, and Guy A16). In a similar article in The Denver Rocky Mountain News titled “In Their Words,” Scott Greunke recalled that as bombs shook the walls of the classroom where he was hiding, he held hands with fellow students and prayed. “I wrote a letter to my parents. I thought I was going to die. I just wrote I love them” (“In Their Words” A17).

Graphic accounts such as these from students who witnessed the horrific scene inside Columbine High School were an essential component of the description of the act. Testimony from these important participants in the event provided information about the shootings while recreating the events inside the school in minute detail. Newspaper readers were not only granted access to key facts but were also allowed to relive the tragedy alongside those affected most by the violence.

Articles in this first stage of coverage reflected the disorder created by the act. An article titled “World of Darkness” addressed this issue and asked “How could kids so comfortable, with such pretty homes, computers in their bedrooms and spare cash in their pockets, turn out so brooding, so racist, so fascist?” (Greene and Briggs A11). The Denver Rocky Mountain News ran a similar article titled “Friendly Faces Hid Kid Killers” that contrasted descriptions of Harris and Klebold as shy teens that helped teachers with computer problems with an image of “two students vicious enough to laugh during mass-murder and organized enough to build and plant dozens of explosives” (Bartels and Imse AA10). Both of these articles expressed disbelief that Harris and Klebold were hiding in and harbored by the Littleton community during the months and years leading up to the tragedy.
This first stage of newspaper coverage afforded community members with a vivid picture of the sin that had occurred inside the school. These images and descriptions were both "traumatic and traumatizing" and worked to undermine the community’s faith in humanity (Ott and Aoki 488). Only days after the shootings, the disruption was so profound that it already demanded resolution. The story of the disorder and the detailed description of the act fostered the motivation for symbolic redemption (Religion 190-91). A source must be found for the disorder; someone must be guilty for this act that had disrupted the community.

A Focus on Scene: Killers Hiding in the Suburbs

According to Burke, symbolic purification after incidents such as the Columbine High School shootings requires a "deliberate, disciplinary 'slaying'" of the source of the disorder (Religion 190). This figurative killing must take place through vicimage, either of others or of oneself (Religion 190). Initially, the newspaper coverage centered on the act itself, then shifted to focus on the scene in order to locate the source of the disorder. During the second stage of newspaper coverage, consisting largely of articles published on April 23 and April 24, the message shifted to highlight the portions of the shooters’ environment that had contributed to or enabled their actions. These elements of the scene, to be depicted in the following paragraphs, were part of the community. The articles functioned to assign guilt for the shootings to those scenic elements and thus to the Littleton community itself through a process Burke labeled mortification. Further, through an extremely negative portrayal of these scenic elements, the articles
worked to separate them from the rest of the community and thus cast out the source of the disorder.

Due to the violent nature of the tragedy, the weapons used by the perpetrators were immediately called into question. Articles during this stage of coverage described the kinds of weapons used in the attack, the means by which the shooters accessed the weapons, and speculated as to the impact of current gun control laws on the event. An article by Peter G. Chronis and David Olinger contained a diagram of the guns used in the shootings accompanied by the relative price, legal status, manufacturer, and effectiveness of each weapon (A18). An article in *The Denver Rocky Mountain News* called the TEC-9, one of the weapons used in the attack, “notorious” and pointed to its previous use in other “mass killings,” its tendency to spray bullets with “wild inaccuracy,” and its “hell fire trigger” that allows the shooter to empty a 32-round magazine in seconds and reload quickly (Crowder A29).

Accessibility of these deadly weapons proved to be one of the scenic elements at which blame was directed for the shootings. A front page article in *The Denver Post* claimed that it is “easy” for teens in the Denver metro area to purchase firearms and sent a reporter from its staff to test the black market:

“I can get you anything you want,” a 17-year-old girl said Friday afternoon on the 16th Street Mall.

Two hours later, the Post reporter met her and a 20-year-old man on the mall. As a steady stream of executives and couples on their way to dinner flowed past, the three talked about the gun in his pocket. Then they walked to a nearby building, went into a stairwell, and the tattooed
20-year-old pulled out a chrome-plated .380 ACP semiautomatic pistol.

(Eddy and Briggs A1)

These articles highlighted the fact that Harris and Klebold were able to access the weapons used in the attack within their own community. Thus, access to weapons was one of the scenic elements for which Littleton must be held responsible.

While some articles speculated about weapon use and accessibility, others wondered why the shooters’ parents weren’t aware of the troubled teens living in their homes. Bernice Berk, a child psychologist, said in an interview in The Denver Post:

How can you not know that they’re celebrating Hitler’s birthday, how can you not know they’re building bombs in the garage, that they’re going to school with swastikas on their back? The parents were either totally out to lunch or so frightened, ashamed and embarrassed, they didn’t want to confront it. (Booth, Lofholm, and Curtin AA7)

Child psychology experts interviewed in the article postulated that a “disconnect” between parents and children may be to blame: “Parents are scheduled up with jobs and their children are scheduled up with school, jobs and sports” (Booth, Lofholm, and Curtin AA7). High School psychologist Ron Lee lamented that many busy families don’t even take time to eat dinner together. “It’s the dark side of the soccer mom,” Lee said (Booth, Lofholm, and Curtin AA7).

Denver Post writer Chuck Green wondered “how the terror that stalked the hallways of Columbine High School could have been incubated” and pleaded for an explanation from the parents of Harris and Klebold (A24). Green insisted that the parents of the shooters had an “obligation” to help the community understand what had
happened inside the school. He concluded his article with a demand: “Please—talk
with us. For the others who died, and for those who might die in the future, you owe us
that much” (A24).

Another article by Diane Carman directed responsibility for the shootings at
parents throughout the community:

American culture has turned its back on children, abandoned them and
portrayed them as adversaries. We fail to listen to them, fail to
communicate with them in a meaningful way and attempt to hurry them
through adolescence in a futile, dangerous effort to force adulthood on
them too quickly. (A3)

Children who do not have supportive adults to listen to them become “dangerous
loners,” according to Carman, and “once a child believes the culture doesn’t value him,
that there’s no place for him in the world, he has nothing to lose” (A3). Inattentive
parents thus made up another portion of this disastrous scene leading up to the
Columbine shootings.

Guilt for the shootings was also directed at law enforcement officials, an
additional group of adults that played a role in the lives of Harris and Klebold before
and during the tragedy. Harris and Klebold had become acquainted with the Jefferson
County Sheriff’s Department approximately one year prior to the shootings when the
two were arrested for breaking into a vehicle (Eddy A4; Pankratz and Mitchell A4).
Articles concerning this arrest focused primarily on the perpetrators’ completion of the
Juvenile Diversion Program to which they were sentenced and the “glowing” report
with which the District Attorney discharged them from the program (Pankratz and
Mitchell A4). The termination report labeled Harris a "very bright young man" and stated, "He is intelligent enough to achieve lofty goals as long as he stays on task and remains motivated" (Pankratz and Mitchell A4). In the same report, a diversion officer wrote of Klebold: "Dylan is a bright young man who has a great deal of potential. If he is able to tap his potential and become self-motivated he should do well in life" (Pankratz and Mitchell A4).

An article titled, "Massacre Hints Missed" detailed another instance, also approximately one year before the shootings, in which police were given a glimpse of the shooters' intentions. In April, 1998, a father of a Columbine student filed a complaint with the Jefferson County Sheriff's department alleging that Harris' website contained death threats against his son (Imse and Bartels A4). The father said of his efforts to gain a response from the Jefferson County deputies, "We continually called back. They never called us, ever" (Imse and Bartels A4).

Printouts of Harris' website were given to the police, according to the father, and contained passages such as the following: "Dead people can't do many things, like argue, whine, bitch, complain, narc, rat out, criticize, or even...talk. So that means the only way to solve arguments with all of you out there...I just kill!" (Imse and Bartels A4). Harris also addressed part of his website to a student who had bumped into him in the hall and promised to "rip out two of [his] damn ribs and shove em into [his] f---ing eye balls" (Imse and Bartels A4). The descriptions contained in these articles are particularly dramatic against the backdrop of the horrific actions committed by Harris and Klebold on April 21. The inaction of law enforcement officials before the
shootings thus became part of the scene blamed for the event and guilt was further removed from the shooters and placed on this portion of the community.

One of the first details that emerged about the shooters, even while they were still inside the school, was that they were wearing trench coats and were members of a clique called the Trench Coat Mafia. The role that membership to this branch of gothic culture played in the violent actions of Harris and Klebold was soon under scrutiny. Several articles drew a parallel between alleged violent tendencies of the group as a whole and the extreme actions taken by Harris and Klebold:

Fellow students describe the shooting suspects as part of a clique of generally quiet, brooding outcasts with penchants for dark trench coats, shaved heads and militant arm bands. By several accounts, the group also is interested in the occult, mutilation, shock-rocker Marilyn Manson and Adolf Hitler. (Greene and Briggs A17).

An article titled, "Carnage puts Spotlight on Trench Coat Mafia" labeled the Trench Coat Mafia and larger gothic culture "hate groups" and claimed that gothic teens often "worship knives and tend to be violent, racist and anti-Semitic" and draw from "satanic worship and medieval European barbarity" (Greene and Briggs A17). A Lakewood police officer said of the group, "They’re easy to spot because they’re so ghastly looking. They dress that way to give the appearance of a dead body because they worship death in whatever form it happens to come in" (Greene and Briggs A17).

These negative and violent depictions of the group Harris and Klebold were most identified with added yet another scenic element to the description of the shootings. Although only a small portion of the population of Littleton belonged to the
Trench Coat Mafia or was gothic, blame rested with the community because these
groups, with their hateful beliefs and violent rituals, were allowed to exist. The ideals
that the articles portrayed as being held by goths such as Harris and Klebold were
viewed as encouraging and endorsing the extreme violence exhibited by the shooters at
Columbine High.

The perpetrators’ membership to the Trench Coat Mafia and their status within
the high school are also linked to another important element of the scene: bullying. The
Denver Rocky Mountain News published the contents of a note written by Eric Harris
the day before the shootings:

By now, it’s over. If you are reading this, my mission is complete. I
have finished revolutionizing the neoeuphoric infliction of my internal
terror.

Your children who have ridiculed me, who have chosen not to accept
me, who have treated me like I am not worth their time are dead. They
are f---ing dead. (Vaughan and Clarke A2)

In his own words, Harris echoed the fear that rang in the minds of many after the
shootings: did competition between cliques inside Columbine High School push the
shooters too far? A senior and member of the Trench Coat Mafia at Columbine High
told The Denver Post that he was constantly “terrorized” by “jocks” who called him a
“faggot” and “bashed him into lockers” (Greene A1). He said, “I can’t describe how
hard it was to get up in the morning and face that. Hell. Pure hell” (Greene A1). In
fact, the teen told the Post reporter that he was afraid to speak to her for fear that he
may be the subject of more “ridicule and torment” or even that his family may be harmed by bullies from the school (Greene A1).  

The jock clique received the most criticism in newspaper coverage of the shootings and one article noted, “by now, most of America and much of the world have heard about Columbine’s jocks” (Greene A1). One member of the Trench Coat Mafia claimed that he joined the group to find friends and to seek protection from harassment (Greene A15). He explained his experience of being singled out by the jocks: “If you didn’t dress like them, if you walked to school or rode your bike, if you didn’t get into sports and weren’t athletic, then you were an outcast. It’s that simple” (Greene A1). A female student also put it simply, “The jocks rule the school” (Callahan and Auge A1).  

This second stage of newspaper coverage identified the scenic elements that were responsible for the actions of Harris and Klebold on April 21: accessibility of weapons; inattentive parents; complacent law enforcement officials; the shooters’ membership in the Trench Coat Mafia; and bullying inside the high school. Since these scenic elements were a part of the community itself, the articles functioned to remove guilt for the shootings from Harris and Klebold and place it on the community.  

By emphasizing the aspects of the scene that had enabled the actions of the shooters, the stories told in the newspapers were able to separate them from the rest of the community and cast them out. Each of the scenic elements identified by the newspapers was given an extremely negative treatment, emphasizing the discord they created within the rest of the community. Now that these sources of disorder had been identified and purged from the rest of the community, order must be restored through a
renewal of community covenants. These covenants were described in the third and final stage of newspaper coverage.

Mortification: Order is Restored

Columbine Principal Frank DeAngelis told The Denver Post on the Saturday after the shootings that his students were ready to go back to school. “They’re ready. They want to go back to Columbine. I met with 800 or 900 students last night and they told me, ‘Do not let them take Columbine away’” (Callahan and Mitchell A2). Other signs of healing in the community included a father who, following a memorial service for his son, said, “For the families of the children who did this, we’ll pray for them. We feel no hatred against them” (Auge and Kelly A3). The source of this horrible tragedy had been identified and now the community began to focus on restoring order through renewed covenants and grieving for loved ones lost in the massacre.

This restoration of order is possible and necessary through Burke’s conception of the human as the “symbol-using animal” (Language 3). As symbol users, Burke argues, humans have invented the negative, a concept that does not exist in nature (Language 9-10). Only through language is it possible to refer to something by what it is not. The hortatory negative is of particular importance for Burke because it is the type of negative that commands rather than describes (Lake 427). In creating the hortatory negative the concept of “thou-shalt-not” is created and, thus, morality is introduced (Language 10-11). Without the negative, created by symbol use, ethics would be nonexistent and there would be no commandments to break. Burke stated, “Laws are essentially negative; ‘mine’ equals ‘not thine’; insofar as property is not
protected by the thou-shalt-not’s of either moral or civil law, it is not protected at all” (Language 11). A symbolic covenant is thus created between humans.

Through symbol use and the resulting negative, a hierarchy is created, by which humans are constantly “goaded” (Language 15). Humans are “moved by a sense of order” and “incentives” are awarded for “organization and status” (Language 15). Although this hierarchy creates the possibility of ensuing disorder, whenever the covenant of order is broken, as in the Columbine shootings, Burke argued that humans are naturally motivated to restore order. “There is a principle of perfection implicit in the nature of symbol systems; and in keeping with his nature as symbol-using animal, man is moved by this principle” (Language 17).

The third stage of newspaper coverage, consisting mostly of articles published on April 24 and April 25, accomplished two purposes for the community. First, the articles detailed the steps taken by the community to restore order and described the covenants renewed by its members. Second, the articles functioned to memorialize the victims of the shootings.

An article in The Denver Post assured community members that everyone was “forever changed” (Brovsky AA4) by this tragedy and Jefferson County District Attorney Dave Thomas pleaded:

We can’t walk away from here and wait for the next incident to occur, and then go cover that incident and not learn from this. [...] I don’t want my community to be remembered forever as the place where that terrible tragedy occurred. I want it to be known as a place where we started to change in this country” (Cobb A25).
Indeed, the third stage of newspaper coverage detailed the ways in which the community restored order by learning from the shootings and renewing the covenants of school safety, school unity, gun control, parental involvement, and police vigilance.

The articles portrayed school safety as being first on the minds of many residents of Littleton and parents and students around the country. Englewood Schools Superintendent Roscoe Davidson told The Denver Rocky Mountain News that since the shootings high schools have been “vigilant and alert” (Hubbard and Sullivan AA23). District Attorney Dave Thomas said in an interview with The Denver Rocky Mountain News, “If we cannot figure out a way to render our schools as safe harbors where our kids can learn, there is no place where anybody is safe” (Vaughan and Clarke A73). Colorado Attorney General Ken Salazar held a news conference on the Friday after the shootings and issued a reminder: 700,000 students in the state still had a month of school left (Johnston A14). Salazar stated that the unfortunate event had put the issue of school violence “on the front burner where it belongs” and announced that he would be cooperating with Colorado Governor Bill Owens to host a Colorado Summit on School Safety and Youth Violence (Johnston A14).

An article by Delbert Elliott advocated the establishment of a safe school plan in all schools (H1). He argued that the best plan “involves the whole community” and aims to “create and maintain a positive and welcoming school climate, free of drugs, violence, intimidation, and fear” (Elliott H1). A Denver Rocky Mountain News article warned, “There is no single quick fix” for school violence but preventative measures are the best solution and will require “a communitywide effort, with representation for every constituency” (Romano AA29).
Students returning to class at schools around the Denver metro area noticed “at least one conspicuous change: more police uniforms and no black trench coats” (Terwilliger A2). Prior to the shootings, many large high schools around the district employed one uniformed officer, called a school resource officer, to patrol school property. When classes resumed after the Columbine shootings, as many as three to five officers were present at each school in addition to the an increased presence by local police departments (Terwilliger A2). At Chatfield High School, near Columbine, students returning to school on the Thursday after the shootings found armed deputies guarding the front entrance (Fong A17). Douglas County School District Spokesman Bruce Caughey said of the increased security, “It’s primarily to create a sense of calm as we continue with our normal school operations” (Terwilliger A2).

In addition, trench coats were banned in some high schools around the state. Harris and Klebold had used long black coats to hide weapons and ammunition when they attacked Columbine High. A spokesman for the Cherry Creek School District explained, “At this moment in time, a student in a trench coat would be seen by some students as highly intimidating and fearful. And we have a level of concern for those students; we don’t want them to suffer any wrath as a result of what occurred” (Terwilliger A2).

As community leaders worked to end school violence, they also looked for ways to prevent bullying and ensure an atmosphere of equality among students. An article by Patricia Callahan and Karen Auge emphasized that although teasing is not a new phenomenon in schools, the extremely violent response of students who had been targets of such teasing warrants a change (A1). The article quoted a school violence
expert as saying, "I think that bullying has a big impact. I don't think it's an excuse, but in troubled kids, it can push them over the edge" (Callahan and Auge A1). Another expert told The Denver Post that although cliques are a normal part of adolescence and may "serve a protective function," school officials must be aware of tensions between groups and diffuse them before violence results (Robey A8).

The Denver Post and The Denver Rocky Mountain News depicted important changes occurring within the school district: heightened security; efforts to prevent youth violence; and attention to group interactions within schools. These articles helped to restore order to Littleton by demonstrating a renewed covenant in the community to ensure the safety of its students.

School and community safety could only be assured if accessibility of weapons was limited. An article by Michael Booth presented statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to show the seriousness of the issue: "The gun-related death rate of U.S. children under the age of 15 is nearly 12 times higher than the combined totals of 25 other wealthy, industrialized nations" (Booth A1). The article maintained that American children and parents are not "inherently worse" or "more determined to commit violence" (A1). Instead, the author argued, "Our violence is just more lethal. So it must be the availability of the means" (A19). Trisha Flynn agreed in an article in The Denver Post: "We know as well as we know our own name that this fact alone—the sheer number of guns in this country—has as much to do with the death toll at Columbine High School as any other factor. [...] The more guns you put in circulation, the more people get shot" (H2).
As a solution, Booth suggested licensing and registration of all firearms and emphasized, “U.S. and international child advocates say that it would horrify them if gun laws did not change in the wake of the Columbine shootings” (A19). Flynn argued that although “pundits, politicians and experts” have been wary of the issue of gun legislation since the Columbine shootings, the event demanded action (H2). She quoted former President Lyndon Johnson to conclude her article: “What in the name of conscience will it take to pass a truly effective gun-control law? Now in this new hour of tragedy, let us spell out our grief in constructive action” (H2). These articles advocated policy changes that would limit accessibility to weapons. Regardless of the actions of lawmakers, merely the suggestion of change helped to restore a sense of order to the Littleton community and ensure a renewed covenant of safety for children and adults alike.

Law enforcement officials vowed to learn from their experiences inside Columbine High and renewed their covenant to protect the community. An article by Gary Massaro granted Denver Police Captain Vince DiManna the opportunity to explain the actions of his officers on the day of the shootings (AA28). The article emphasized the uniqueness of the situation police met when they responded to the first 911 call that day: “Guns and grenades, carnage and confusion confronted police as they entered the killing zone of Columbine High School on Tuesday. The school was littered with dozens of homemade bombs, bloody bodies and hysterical students in hiding—each one a potential killer” (Massaro AA28). In his own words DiManna explained:
Most of the bombs were on the stairs. Were there timers on them?

Was there a trip wire running on the top of the carpet waiting for someone to shuffle his foot into it? We had to check each one.

Then we find kids: kids hiding in walk-in coolers, kids hiding in restrooms, kids hiding in classrooms. We’ve got to get these kids out. They’re in shock. So we have to lead them out, past the bombs. We have to tell them to hold hands, hold someone’s belt, hold anything so we stay in line. (Massaro AA28)

The article also detailed testimony from Los Angeles County sheriff’s deputies, called in to evaluate the incident, who confirmed that local officers had followed appropriate procedures for securing the shooting site. Sergeant Jack Ewell told The Denver Rocky Mountain News, “They were as quick as any SWAT team. I know it’s very tragic some students were killed. But from a SWAT side, we look how many they were able to save” (Massaro AA28). Local law enforcement agencies thus worked to restore order to the community by justifying their actions during the shootings and affirming their commitment to future community safety.

Parents within the community also renewed their promise to their children to be attentive and to make caring for their families a top priority. In the wake of the tragedy, the community vowed to form and maintain “strong ties” among its members (Sprengelmeyer AA10). Reverend Joel Miller told The Denver Rocky Mountain News, “Adults played a role in the tragedy because they haven’t been setting a good enough example about how to get along” (Sprengelmeyer AA10). Miller emphasized that Littleton has been held together by young people in the community. He said, “If we’re
going to honor our children, we know we have to make better neighbors with one another” (Sprenelmeyer AA10).

An article by Guy Kelly compared the Columbine shootings to other public tragedies and emphasized that in violent events such as these, the whole community is victimized (AA26). Gene Allen, a retired journalist who covered the Oklahoma City bombing, told Kelly, “You have to understand, this is not something that happened to someone else. This is something that happened to all of us” (Kelly AA26). Another article described the difficulty community members will inevitably experience in dealing with the death of children: “We expect the death of our parents, we accept the death of our spouse, but we reject the death of our child” (Fong AA3). These articles accentuated the need for a renewed covenant of community unity and highlighted the importance of family. Images of grieving parents created urgency in community members to devote renewed energy to their homes and children.

The formation of these new covenants signaled the restoration of order in the community. This restoration of order and purgation of guilt was necessary before the grieving process could begin. The stages of newspaper coverage described the act, placed guilt for the shootings on the scene, and restored order to the community through mortification. Because responsibility for the disorder had been placed on an appropriate vessel, Littleton could now begin the grieving process and turn their focus to remembering those killed in the tragedy.

Local newspapers aided in this process as they offered a forum for memorializing the victims. The Denver Rocky Mountain News published a thirty-two page special section in its Sunday issue titled, “Day of Remembrance” that featured...
poignant descriptions of each of the victims, testimonials from witnesses to the tragedy, and a picture diary of the event. For example:

Daniel was the kind of kid who wasn’t afraid of hugging his parents, who earned straight A’s the past two quarters of school, who was just as comfortable with a microscope as he was on skis.

Corey was not a shy kid. He liked to talk; he loved adventure. He and his best friend traveled all the way to Oklahoma to fish. Bass fishing was his latest passion. He was hoping to talk his grandfather into buying a boat so the two of them could go fishing.

Steven wanted to become a Navy pilot—F-14s were his bird of choice. He also loved a good game of soccer. He had played the game since he was 5 and had developed a kick so powerful he could send his opponents sprawling with a speeding ball. ("Shrine of Memories"

In addition to helping the community remember the lives of those killed in the Columbine shootings, the newspapers also gave readers evidence and assurance that the community was healing. In an article titled “Victim Vows ‘To Get Better’” shooting victim Makai Hall told The Denver Post upon his release from St Anthony Central Hospital, “I want people to know I’m going to get better. I’m not going to let this bring me down. I’m going to use it to motivate myself” (“Victim Vows” A6). Another Columbine student also showed signs of recovery: “Bree Pasquale ended a four-day span of sleeplessness Friday, dodging the nightmares of bullets and bombs during a three hour nap. For the first time since a monster held a shotgun to her head and told
her she was next to die, she ate a full meal Friday” (“Student Takes” A32). The Columbine High School Senior Senate looked to the future in a letter published in The Denver Rocky Mountain News:

We, the students of Columbine High School, would like to tell the world that we have not, are not, and never will succumb to the hate and violence that has recently dampened the fabric of our school. Our hearts and minds can never forget the recent event, but our souls will always carry the pride and love that we have for CHS. The sores that afflict us will heal through the faith we have in each other. [...] We are stronger than any one person can ever fully realize. Our strength radiates from our teachers and community who believe in us, and because the history of our school has embedded in us the strength of each and every class before. (“From the Senior” AA17).

These articles reflected the restoration of symbolic order and the resulting ability of the community to memorialize lost loved ones and make plans and promises for the future. Burke’s cycle of order and disorder, created by human symbol use, has been shown to manifest itself in the case of the Columbine High School shootings. The local newspapers helped to restore order to the Littleton community.

Summary

This rhetorical analysis of five days of local newspaper coverage of the Columbine shootings has demonstrated the contribution that local newspapers made to the symbolic restoration of order in the Littleton community after the tragedy. Order
was restored through three stages of reporting: 1) a focus on act: disorder in the community; 2) a focus on scene: killers hiding in suburbs; and 3) mortification: order is restored. The newspaper articles helped the community identify with the sin that had occurred, labeled the source of the disorder and eradicated it from the community, detailed renewed community covenants and memorialized the victims to reflect the formation of a new order.

In the next chapter of this project, a more detailed summary of the findings and importance of this project will be presented. In addition, the shortcomings of this study will be noted and suggestions for future research will be provided.
CHAPTER 5

AFTER COLUMBINE: CONCLUSIONS
AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Nearly five years after the tragedy at Columbine High School, Darrell Scott appeared on NBC's *The Today Show*. In an interview with Katie Couric, Scott spoke with tears in his eyes of his daughter Rachel, killed by the gunmen on April 20, 1999. The occasion for Scott’s appearance on the morning news program was the February 26, 2004 release by Jefferson County authorities of thousands of pieces of evidence from the shootings ("Columbine Evidence"). A total of 10,418 separate items were on display and included murder weapons, the black trench coats worn by the shooters, bullet fragments, the chairs and tables where people died, and a message board put up in a school window that still reads in blue marker, “1 bleeding to death” ("Columbine Killers" A1). Scott said, after a private viewing of the evidence held for families of victims, “It was the first time my wife and I had seen the gun that actually killed Rachel” ("Police Had" par. 10).

As families of shooting victims are still seeking closure and grieving the losses they experienced on April 20, 1999, this study has also reached its conclusion. This final chapter of this project will provide a detailed summary of the findings of the study, describe the significance of this work and its limitations, and offer suggestions for future research.
Summary of Findings

Years after Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold began a massacre that resulted in thirteen deaths and ended with their own suicides, the event still grips the hearts and minds of the nation. The purpose of this study was to illuminate one aspect of this tragedy: the role that local newspapers played in the healing of the Littleton community after the event. To accomplish that aim, the event was described in detail and then contextualized with information concerning the surrounding community, Columbine High School, and the lives of the perpetrators. A review of relevant literature and description of the theoretical framework of Kenneth Burke’s dramatism provided the necessary background for the present inquiry.

A rhetorical analysis of five days of coverage of the event by The Denver Post and The Denver Rocky Mountain News revealed that the local newspapers functioned to restore symbolic order to the Littleton community through three stages of reporting: 1) a focus on act: disorder in the community; 2) a focus on scene: killers hiding in the suburbs; and 3) mortification: order is restored. In the course of these stages, the newspaper articles helped the community identify with the sin that had occurred, labeled the source of the disorder and eradicated it from the community, detailed renewed community covenants and memorialized the victims to reflect the formation of a new order.

The first stage of newspaper coverage afforded community members with a vivid picture of the sin that occurred inside the school through vivid language, dramatic first-hand accounts by parents, emergency workers and students, and timelines and diagrams of the chronology of the event. These images and descriptions, contained in
the newspapers on April 21 and 22, created an extreme sense of disorder in the community and demanded resolution through symbolic purification.

The second stage of newspaper coverage, encompassing the April 23 and 24 issues of the newspapers identified the scenic elements that were responsible for the actions of Harris and Klebold: accessibility of weapons; complacent law enforcement officials; inattentive parents; the shooters' membership to the Trench Coat Mafia; and bullying that some students received. Since these scenic elements were a part of the community itself, Littleton was thus accepting blame for the actions of Harris and Klebold and the resulting disorder in the community. The symbolic purification that must occur, according to Burke, was achieved in this case through mortification.

By vilifying the aspects of the scene that had enabled the actions of the shooters, the community was able to cast them out. Each of the scenic elements identified by the newspapers was given an extremely negative treatment, emphasizing the discord they created within the rest of the community. Now that these sources of disorder had been identified and purged from the rest of the community, order must be restored through a renewal of community covenants.

The April 24 and 25 issues of The Denver Post and The Denver Rocky Mountain News constituted the third stage of coverage. Articles during this stage accomplished two purposes for the community. First, the articles detailed the steps taken by the community to restore order and described the covenants renewed by its members: school safety; school unity; gun control; parental involvement; and police vigilance. Second, the articles functioned to memorialize the victims of the shootings. The cycle of order and disorder theorized by Burke was demonstrated in the newspaper coverage.

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of the Columbine High School shootings. *The Denver Post* and *The Denver Rocky Mountain News* played an important role in the restoration of order and the healing of the community.

In summary, three primary conclusions were reached in this study. First, local newspaper coverage of the Columbine High School shootings, an event that generated disorder within the community, changed in tone and content through the course of three distinct stages. Second, the progression of the coverage through those stages reflected and hastened the restoration of symbolic order in the community. Third, print media, specifically newspapers, have the potential to extend beyond the chronicling of a tragic event to describe and interpret it in a way that helps the injured community heal after tragedy.

**Significance and Contributions**

This study is significant because it is the first to examine coverage of the Columbine High School shootings by *The Denver Post* and *The Denver Rocky Mountain News* within the theoretical framework of Burke’s dramatism. This method of analysis proved to be particularly useful in demonstrating the ways in which the local newspaper coverage functioned to restore order to the community. By examining articles published in both major Denver newspapers, this study was able to analyze a sample of texts that more closely resembled those actually read by Littleton residents immediately after the shootings. Replicating, as much as possible, the perspective of the local community was imperative for reconstruction of the community’s reaction to the tragedy. The application of Burke’s dramatism to these texts provided a fitting
framework to explain the situation out of which the articles emerged and the need of the community to locate and purge the source of the disorder.

This study is also significant because of its applicability to other areas of inquiry. The capacity of local newspapers to restore order to the Littleton community after the Columbine shootings may be extended to future studies of tragic events. The three stage pattern of newspaper coverage identified here has versatility in that it may be applied to studies of print and electronic media, local and national media, and events with global or local impacts. The three stages of coverage offer a practical application of a portion of Kenneth Burke’s theory of dramatism, and, as such, may assist or encourage other scholars in the use of his ideas. In addition, this explanation of these stages creates the opportunity for expansion by other scholars who apply them to different tragic events, study a broader scope of time, or find support for them in the work of other rhetorical theorists.

In a more narrow sense, this study has contributed to knowledge of the worst school shooting in United States history and has reflected the significance of this event for those involved and for the nation. The Columbine High School shootings have served as an exemplar in many discussions about gun control, bullying, youth violence, and graphic media. In this study, however, the shootings served as an example of the positive power of the media, to shape a community’s reaction to the tragic event. This study is important because it provides not only a detailed account of the horrific event, but also describes the courageous steps taken by the Littleton community to move forward.
Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The method and outcomes of this study are subject to three limitations. First, this study did not attempt to account for environmental factors that may have influenced the interpretation of newspaper content by community members such as the degree to which readers were affected by the tragedy, readers' use of interpersonal communication channels, and the role of other print and electronic media content in the description and interpretation of the event. All of these sources of information and interaction formed the complex cultural milieu that surrounded the event and may also have acted in important ways to hasten or hinder the restoration of community order.

Future studies could examine the role of these environmental factors by expanding the rhetorical analysis conducted here to include other print and electronic media content that was available to Littleton residents during the same five day time frame. Studies of this type may ascertain whether the stages of coverage discovered in the local newspapers were also present in coverage of the event by other forms of media. Additionally, future research should supplement examination of the relevant texts with interviews with the families of victims. Information gleaned from interviews may add important information to the results of future studies concerning recovery from the tragedy and the importance of other environmental factors in the process.

In addition, this study did not compare similarities or differences in the portrayals of the event by the *The Denver Post* and *The Denver Rocky Mountain News* or attempt to draw conclusions about the differing readerships of the newspapers. Because the newspapers were viewed in this study as one voice in the interpretation of the event, possible differences in their coverage of the shootings were not the focus of
the present inquiry. Future research in this area would be well served to use a quantitative method such as content analysis and may reveal differences in the content or theme of the coverage existing between the newspapers and possibly related to differing target audiences.

Finally, although this study made claims about the media's framing of the event, it did not attempt to judge the actual effect that this portrayal may have had on the audience of the newspapers. Rather, the stages of coverage that were demonstrated and the resulting restoration of order in the community are based exclusively on the content of the newspapers themselves. Future research could enhance a rhetorical or quantitative analysis of relevant texts with the inclusion of other measures of actual media effects.

Other opportunities for future research stemming from the results of the current study include a rhetorical or content analysis of national media coverage of the Columbine shootings to reveal whether Burke's order-disorder cycle is also reproduced there. Because the event was traumatic for people around the world as well as for Littleton, it is likely that some restoration of order was also necessary for the larger national and global communities. Researchers could also extend this study by expanding its scope chronologically. Analysis of the local newspaper coverage that continued for weeks and years after the tragedy may reveal more stages in the healing process or a continuation of the stages explicated here. Additionally, an analysis of local newspaper texts with a narrower focus on specific types of content such as advertisements, editorial content or front page stories, may add a further dimension to the current project.
Conclusion

This project has examined one aspect of a tragic event with complex beginnings and far-reaching effects. Burke’s dramatism has helped to illuminate the process by which order was restored to the Littleton community with the aid of coverage of the shootings by *The Denver Post* and *The Denver Rocky Mountain News*. Although this study has reached its conclusion, it is important to note that, even five years after the tragedy, there are no easy answers. The results of this study in no way diminish the weight of the grief that is still a part of the lives of the family members and friends of the fifteen victims of the Columbine High School shootings:

They know what it’s like to walk into their child’s room and find nothing but silence. They know what it is to scoop pajamas from the floor, to bury their faces in the folds of cotton, to breathe deep.

To say that Kelly Fleming loved to write poetry cannot begin to convey the sudden beauty of her bashful smile. To say that Dan Rohrbough was a good son, that Steve Curnow loved *Star Wars* and that Cassie Bernall loved God cannot capture the sweetness of their laughter or the realization they will never again hug their parents and know that, in that place and for that moment, they are safe. In the collection of facts, in the black-and-white yearbook photos are only glimpses of the adults they never had a chance to become. ("Shrine of Memories"

These statements express why, even five years later, there are still so many more questions than answers.
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