

Speaking with Agency: Disabilities and Spaces in Draper's *Out of My Mind*

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Introduction

Behind any act is a motive, as rhetorician Burke reminds us. Humans are all motivated by something, whether for positive or negative reasons. In Sharon Draper's young adult novel, *Out of My Mind*, eleven-year-old Melody has a way with words that she shares with the reader, despite the fact she cannot speak at the beginning of the book. The physical effects of cerebral palsy hinder her from verbally expressing her intelligence, thoughts, and feelings to the people around her, often making her an outsider in the spaces she is a part of, such as her "inclusion" classrooms. With a motive to speak, she receives a Medi-Talker communication device and is then able to express herself verbally; however, not everyone in the book's spaces fully accept her due to their own attitudes and motives. Burke, author of *A Grammar of Motives*, explains people's motives through a theory he terms "dramatism." In examining particular moments of *Out of My Mind* dramatically, we can see several things: an exploration of motives helps the audience see scenes from a variety of perspectives; looking at different characters' perspectives reveals their differing motives; and an understanding of those varied motives helps the audience better understand Melody—a young adult character with a disability—as she interacts with the narrative's spaces and the people within them.

Literature Review

A brief discussion of dramatism will support the analysis of motives within the narrative's spaces. Burke notes that dramatism "invites one to consider the matter of motives in a perspective that...treats language and thought primarily as modes of action."¹ David Blakesley, in *The Elements of Dramatism*, elaborates on Burke by saying that dramatism "stresses the function of language as symbolic action as one way to study human relations and the imputing of motives."² My analysis of key scenes in *Out of My Mind* reveals that the characters' motives and perceptions of Melody (or individuals with disabilities) are what drives them to perform their acts—verbal and physical—in relationship to Melody. The dramatiastic analysis further allows the reader to consider how the various characters change (or stay the same) throughout the novel. Within the concept of dramatism, Burke implements a group of terms he calls the pentad, consisting of five principles: Act, Scene, Agent, Purpose, and Agency (referred to as Means in this essay). The pentad's purpose is to distinguish the motive behind any act while answering the questions: "what was done (act), when or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent), how he did it ([means]), and why (purpose)."³ Figure One provides Burke's definition for each principle:

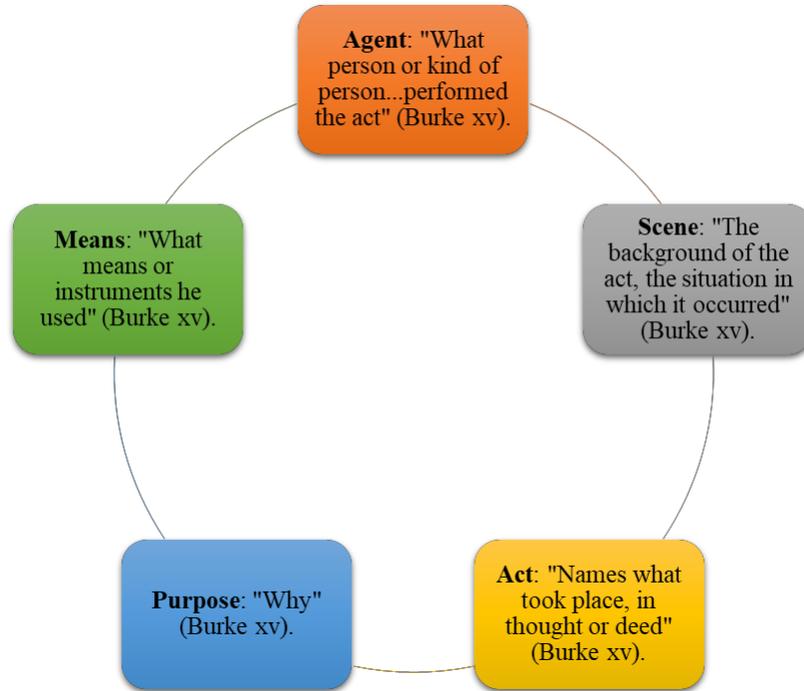


Figure One: Kenneth Burke's Pentad Terms & Definitions

These questions and the pentad can help readers to not only break down and identify the various aspects of the selected moment of who or what is functioning in each element, but also, better understand the motive of the agent(s) involved and how insight from the pentad contributes to the overall text. Our understanding of a scene may also shift when considering who or what may fit within the different elements of the pentad. For example, Figures Two, Three, and Four position several people as agents (or co-agents) in their respective pentads: Mrs. Billups (Melody's third grade teacher), Melody and her classmates, and Mrs. Brooks (Melody's mother); however, the audience will see how the characters will learn more about each other as the scene unfolds and their motives are revealed.

While Burke's theory handles the primary focus of exploring characters' motives, Karen Coats discusses the value of young adult (YA) literature. Coats stresses that authors should build on the established genre of literature for young readers by teaching them the experiences and lessons that they might face beyond the pages of books in the real world. In her article, "Young Adult Literature: Growing Up, In Theory," Coats explores how young adult literature (YA) should be a "viable destination literature" rather than "a house you pass on the way" towards what is considered "adult literature."⁴ She supports her claim by stating that "if we believe that literature has something to say about what it means to be human...then we ought to approach YA literature with the same careful scrutiny..."⁵ These ideas from Coats reveal the unrecognized importance of YA literature to adolescents not only to discover their place in the world, but also expose them to life's experiences and life lessons that they will likely face and how to persevere through them. Coats and Burke (through Blakesley's wording) share similar thoughts about how characters are "constructed through their actions"⁶ to "study human relations and the imputing of motives"⁷ in literature, especially YA literature. In addition, Coats points out that "unpacking [prefabricated subject positions] last is often the most disturbing for readers, as in

doing so they unearth unconscious prejudices that filter in our ways of perceiving the world.”⁸ One “prefabricated subject position” explored in Draper’s novel is prejudice towards individuals with disabilities; however, allowing young readers to engage these topics through literature can help them recognize and put an end to prejudice towards any person around them.

Lastly, pulling in Margaret Price’s thoughts about disability discourse and rhetoric provides more insight of how Melody navigates the spaces she finds herself in and finding a way to express herself. As a whole, Price’s *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* strives to “pay attention to the structures that govern educational contexts, including not only those structures explicitly marked as being ‘for’ disabled people...but also those that are implicitly marked as being ‘for’ everyone, including the ‘normal’ operations of spaces such as classrooms...”⁹ The scenes I explore in this essay are both set in classrooms at Melody’s school, Spaulding Street Elementary. One scene takes place in a special education classroom and the other in an inclusion classroom. By choosing these two educational settings, viewing a scene that is considered a space “explicitly marked as being ‘for’ disabled people” and one marked as “implicitly marked as being ‘for’ everyone,” the audience sees not only how Melody is treated (and mistreated) within spaces marked as “everyone,” but also in spaces considered “‘for’ disabled people.” In the chapter, “Listening to the Subject of Mental Disability: Intersections of Academic and Medical Discourses,” Price provides her own definition of “rhetoric” as “the ways we communicate with each other, not only in writing or by speaking, but also in visual ways, like pictures, or even in subtle ways like the expressions on our faces or the attitudes we bring to each other.”¹⁰ Melody’s method of rhetoric comes through her Medi-Talker. A fictional name for an actual communication device for individuals with disabilities, the Medi-Talker, which Melody receives in Chapter Fifteen, has pre-programmed phrases and responses. In addition, the Medi-Talker has a keyboard feature for Melody to create responses. The Medi-Talker is a crucial component in Melody’s journey to (in some ways, quite literally) find her voice in the novel. Using dramatism, I analyze two scenes, a “pre-Medi-Talker” scene and a “post Medi-Talker” scene. By doing so, I show how the novel illustrates Price’s definition, both through the characters’ perceptions towards Melody in special education and inclusion classrooms, as well as Melody’s rhetorical methods before and after receiving the Medi-Talker.

Out of My Mind’s Pentads

My goal in using Burke’s pentads is to explore how space is working within the novel and how Melody is included/excluded by her classmates and teacher within different classrooms spaces.

First Scene—without Medi-Talker

For my pre-Medi-Talker scene, I chose a flashback from Melody’s “unraveled” third grade year in Room H-5, a special education classroom.¹¹ Throughout the school year, the special education teacher, Mrs. Billups plays the same children’s songs, including “Old MacDonald Had a Farm” and “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,” as well as going over the alphabet with the students daily. The students, especially Melody, had progressed past such simple content long before. The children reached their tolerance limit with Mrs. Billups’ teaching and cause an uproar in the room. Melody’s mother, Mrs. Brooks, comes to the school and gets into a heated argument with Mrs. Billups about her perceptions of the children. Mrs. Billups ends up quitting her job after spring break.

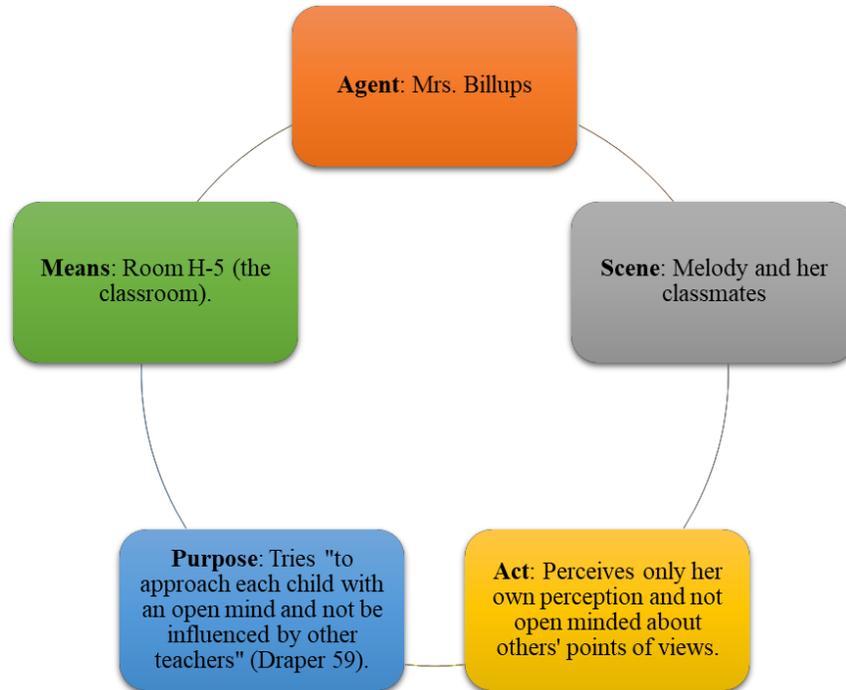


Figure Two: Pre-Medi-Talker Scene (Chapter 7 pg. 53-60)

I began to explore the scene by placing her Mrs. Billups as the agent, as depicted in Figure Two. While the scene is normally the space that the characters find themselves within, Mrs. Billups actually appears to view Melody and her classmates as part of the scenery, not as agents. She later tells Melody’s mother that she believes “these children” need a “constant review” of the “basics” since “they don't retain information like the rest of us.”¹² By using the phrases “these children” and “like the rest of us,” Mrs. Billups excludes the students in who she considers as “the rest of us”¹³ because of their disabilities, disregarding them as human beings. The classroom, instead of being the scene that allows the students to grow in their learning, serves as Mrs. Billups’ means to perform her act: imposing her vision and understanding of the students upon them, tying back to the idea of students as scenery. While she says her purpose is “to approach each child with an open mind,” she actually closes her mind to the students’ sense of themselves as agents. Mrs. Billups refuses to even look over the past teachers’ notes as a means to “not be influenced by other teachers.”¹⁴ Mrs. Billups’ acts of relying only her own perception and not being open minded about others’ point of views defeats the whole purpose of having an “open mind.” Through examining Mrs. Billups as the agent, we see that she views herself as helping her students by reviewing past concepts for them to learn new material; however, the pentad uncovers her true motives by analyzing her perception of the students as scenery rather than agents, her logic behind her purpose, and the way she uses the privacy of her classroom as a means of performing her acts.

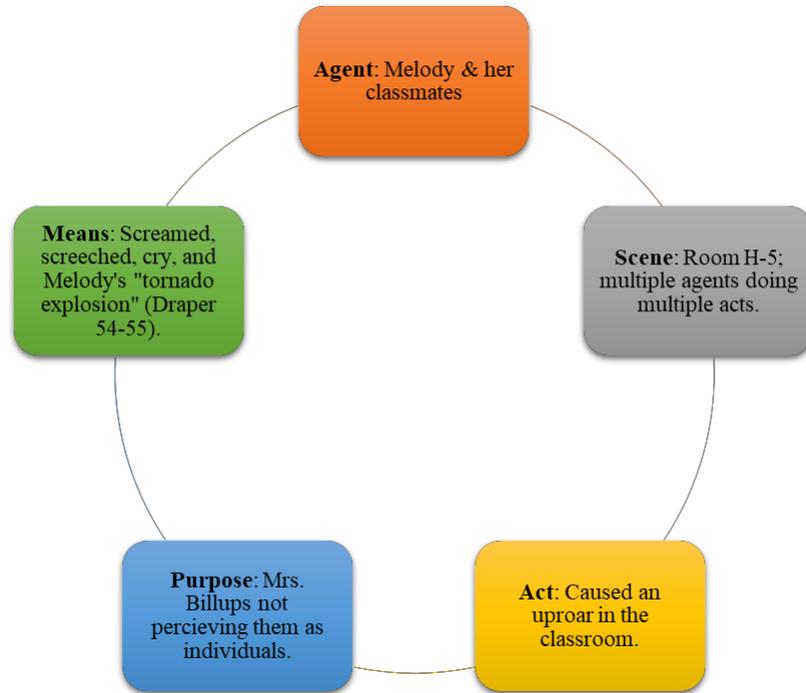


Figure Three: Pre-Medi-Talker Scene (Chapter 7 pg. 53-60)

Mrs. Billups' vision of the scene is not well received by the students in her class. In placing Melody and her classmates as co-agents in the agent position, we can interpret the scene differently, viewing how they react to Mrs. Billups' motives by performing multiple acts of their own. While the students/agents are still within the scene, they are not the scene that Mrs. Billups perceives them to be—they are agent themselves. Their acts of causing an uproar not only puts an end to the monotonous routine Mrs. Billups has established, but also show her that they are individuals despite their disabilities. While Melody is not able to communicate her thoughts and opinions verbally, she “can make a lot of noise”¹⁵ to express boredom and rebellion through one of her “tornado explosions” that involves flailing, jerking, and kicking¹⁶ while her fellow classmates follow suit through their crying, hollering, and so on. When the reader and the author see the students as agents rather than how Mrs. Billups sees them, they learn that because a student has a disability does not mean that they are not, as Mrs. Billups states, different from “the rest of us” and should be excluded¹⁷; instead, they are just as much human as people without disabilities, deserving of inclusion within our classrooms and in our society. While they may need educational resources for them to help them in their learning, they have the same ability to grow and succeed both in and outside the classroom, despite their disability. Analyzing the students as full co-agents show that they want to express their feelings and concerns in a such way so that they are heard. This dramatic analysis shows how the students do not define themselves by their disabilities, despite Mrs. Billups' act of inflicting her opposing perceptions on them.

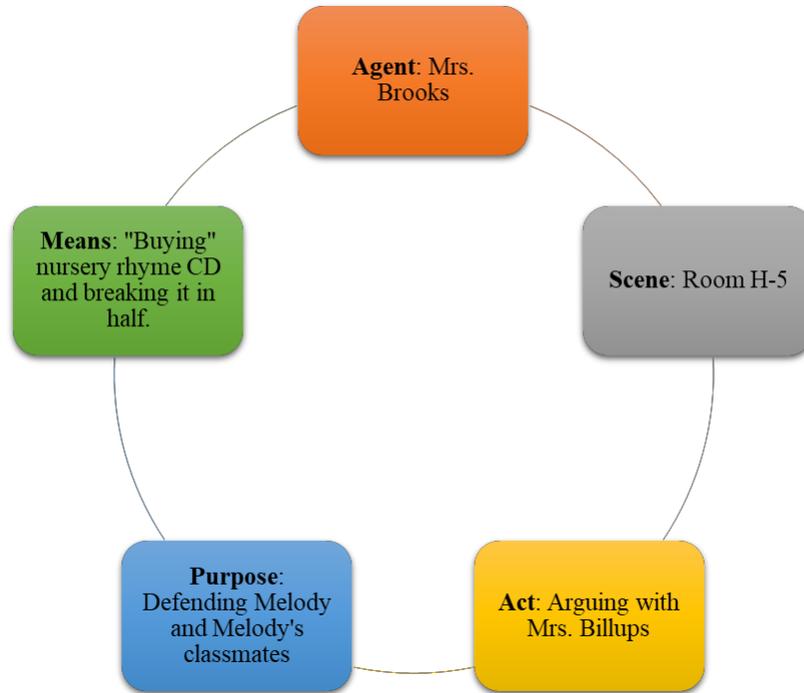


Figure Four: Pre-Medi-Talker Scene (Chapter 7 pg. 53-60)

Now with Mrs. Brooks at the scene, she becomes the advocate and acting agent on Melody and the students' behalf. Her act includes raising several concerns, one being the fact that Mrs. Billups tells her that "Parents are not always realistic when it comes to these children" and that "Melody *does* have mental and physical limitations...You have to learn to accept that."¹⁸ These statements make Mrs. Brooks angry, seeing how Mrs. Billups has no true passion in helping the students reach their full potential in their learning and expanding their horizons in finding methods of learning that fits each student, such as Melody's love of audio books; however, Mrs. Brooks knows that Mrs. Billups sees through and exploits her irrational "open mind" perception, since she does not take the past teachers' and parents' considerations into account when teaching her students. In other words, Mrs. Brooks can tell Mrs. Billups' purpose does not reflect the true passion of an educator that encourages her students to grow in their learning.

Second Scene—with Medi-Talker

Now we transition the post Medi-Talker scene which takes place after the Whiz Kids national competition (similar to a scholars' bowl competition) that Melody is supposed to go on, but events conspire to make her miss the trip. Melody is upset that she missed a once in a lifetime opportunity.

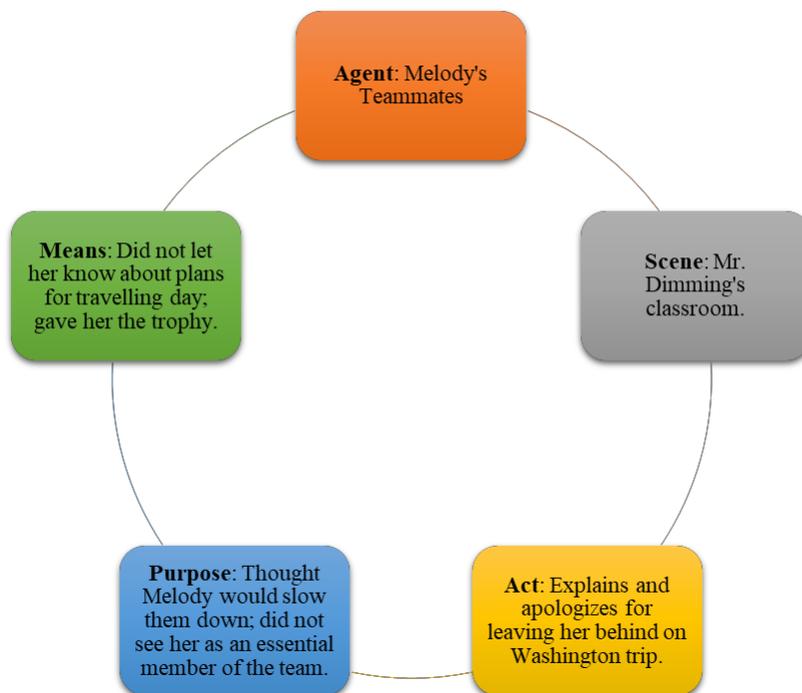


Figure Five: Post Medi-Talker Scene (Chapter 32 pg. 288-292)

Her teammates, serving as the co-agents in Figure Five, met her in Mr. Dimming's classroom (the scene), and apologize for what happened the day of the flight (act). While her teammates admit that they did not invite Melody to breakfast since they "figured [she'd] slow [them] down because [she] have to be fed and stuff,"¹⁹ they learned about the cancelled flight upon their arrival to the airport and did not call Melody and her family about the earlier flight. In terms of means, her teammates seized an unplanned opportunity to exclude Melody, even though doing so had not been their original purpose; the team later regretted their act. Despite how intelligent Melody is and how much she contributes to the Whiz Kids team, her teammates (at the time) did not see Melody as an essential member of the team but rather a roadblock for their chance at winning the national competition. Using the pentad as a lens, we can see her teammates learning that, like what was discussed with Figure Two, a disability does not hinder one's abilities. As their means of apologizing, they offered Melody the ninth-place trophy they received; however, they will receive something far better: their perception as Melody as an agent.

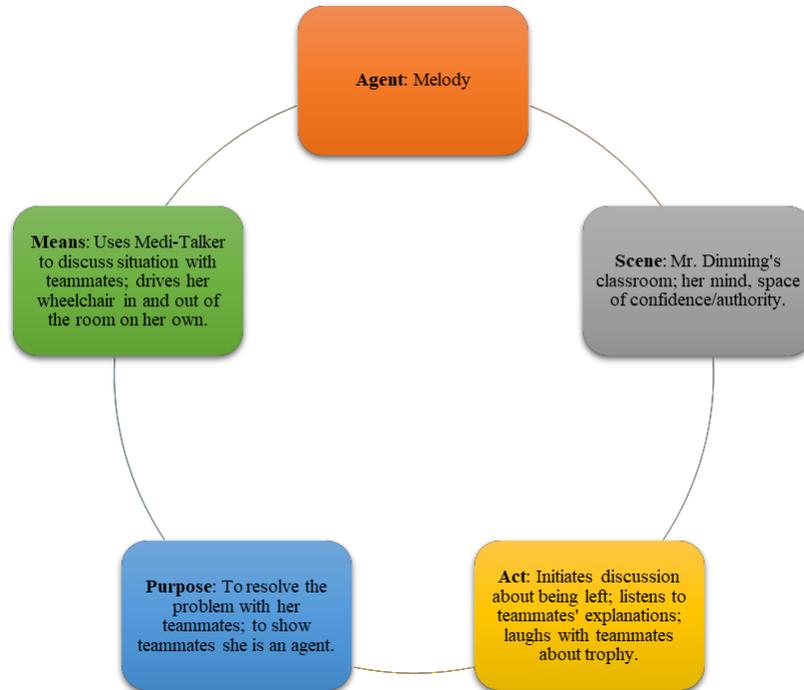


Figure Six: Post Medi-Talker Scene (Chapter 32 pg. 288-292)

In Figure Six, Melody again resides as the agent, but unlike the pentad in Figure Three, Melody has a way to verbally communicate: her Medi-Talker. Melody shows that she is an agent in a variety of ways. First, she drives her wheelchair into Mr. Dimming's room (normally, she has an aide pushing her wheelchair from class to class), showing that she has the boldness to face her teammates despite what they did to her. Second, she initiates the discussion with her teammates through her Medi-Talker, asking questions and even roasting yet being honest towards a student by recalling an earlier moment from the book. Third, rather than being angry and being spiteful with them, she turns down their offer of receiving the trophy and ends up leading the class in laughing, showing she forgives them and is included by laughing *with* them rather than being the one *being laughed at*. Finally, just as she comes in, she drives herself out of the classroom once the matter is resolved. For Melody, her purpose is not only resolving the conflict amongst her teammates, but also showing them that despite her *disabilities*, she has the *abilities* to be an agent for herself and speak her mind.

Conclusion

Whether positive or negative, everyone has a motive when performing an act, and repositioning the pentad on different agents can help to reveal their various motives. Melody strives towards her abilities despite her disability in any space she finds herself in, and for the characters around Melody, the reader sees that while some remain set in their negative perceptions about individuals with disabilities, other characters are open to changing their perceptions so that they are more geared towards inclusion because of Melody. Characters that did not know Melody well only saw her disability and excluded her; however, when they include her and value her for who she truly is, they realize that a person, especially Melody, is

not defined by their disability. They changed their focus to her abilities, not just her knowledge or her witty comebacks, but her kindness and compassion for those around her.

While everyone deserves to be treated with respect and are all equally human, dramatic analysis can teach us more about space and respecting individuals with disabilities, whether or not they have unrevealed gifts like Melody. Placing individuals with disabilities in the agent position helps us acknowledge their perceptions of society to work towards a more inclusive and universal world *together*. Looking at their acts as purposeful can help us better understand their motives and how we can support them in any way. Seeing how they can use a variety of means to get their points across shows how often society underestimates them and sees this as a learning point in perceiving them more as human and less by their disabilities. Our understanding of them changes when we see them in different spaces, including spaces that lack universal design and how they may not be able to navigate the space as easily as individuals without disabilities can. Examining their purposes for their acts can change our understanding of them, especially if their purposes are desiring to be included and appreciated by the people around them. Unfortunately, attempts at excluding individuals with disabilities will be made, but being aware of the attempts allows the audience to be advocates for inclusion and work together toward a solution. As a future educator, I hope to take what I learned from this essay and Draper's novel to do my best helping each student reach their potential.

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- ¹ Burke, Kenneth. *A Grammar of Motives*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969. xxii.
- ² Blakesley, David. *The Elements of Dramatism*. New York: Pearson Education, Inc., 2002. 196.
- ³ Burke xv.
- ⁴ Coats, Karen. "Young Adult Literature: Growing Up, In Theory." *Handbook of Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature*. Ed. Karen Coats, Patricia Enciso, and Christine A. Jenkins Shelby A. Wolf. New York: Routledge, 2011. 317.
- ⁵ Coats 318.
- ⁶ Coats 318.
- ⁷ Blakesley 196.
- ⁸ Coats 318.
- ⁹ Price, Margaret, and Tobin Siebers. *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life*. University of Michigan Press, 2011. 28.
- ¹⁰ Price 25.
- ¹¹ Draper, Sharon M. *Out of My Mind*. 1st ed., Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2010. 53.
- ¹² Draper 56.
- ¹³ Draper 56.
- ¹⁴ Draper 59.
- ¹⁵ Draper 54.
- ¹⁶ Draper 55.
- ¹⁷ Draper 56.
- ¹⁸ Draper 58.
- ¹⁹ Draper 290.