In *Rhetoric of Motives* Kenneth Burke introduces the concept of identification in rhetoric. To begin he cites examples in literature and poetry in which identification occurs. Burke views rhetoric as “an essential function in language” (p. 43). Language, according to Burke, is symbolic. For this reason Burke discusses the importance of image, because “imagery invites us to respond in accordance with its nature” (p. 17). The nature of image, and what it represents appeals to the audience, and acts as a point of motivation. This occurs because language is symbolic, and using symbolic language as a “means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols” (p. 43) leads to the speaker understanding how to appeal to people that respond to these types of images and symbols within them.

He uses Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric as the art of persuasion, but builds on that definition by reminding readers that rhetoric is also the “study of the means of persuasion available for any given situation” (p. 46). Rhetoric serves a function. This definition allows for him to bring in identification. Identification, according to Burke, takes place in rhetoric and specifically occurs when the speaker attempts to use terminology, or specific words, that allow for the audience to identify with the speaker. In short, the purpose of identification is for the audience and the speaker to have interests that align, either by the speaker persuading the audience, or by the audience identifying with the speaker’s interest.

The persuasion that takes place by way of identification is intended to bring about action. There should be motivation created by the speaker that pushes the audience members to action. This occurs through consubstantiality, which is when one person is “substantially one” with another person based on aligning interests. Each person will still have their own motives, and be unique, which makes them separate while achieving consubstantiality.

Consubstantiality, and one’s uniqueness remaining are important to identification because it is through the retained uniqueness, despite aligned interests and possibly motives, that identification occurs. Burke writes about the rhetoric that occurs in literature and poetry not because it persuades an audience, but because identification occurs. This means of persuasion is important, according to Burke, not only because persuasion occurs, but also because it creates meaning. Where there is meaning there is persuasion, and I think this is how or why Burke justifies the existence of rhetoric in literature and poetry.

In thinking about the “so what” of all this I found myself thinking about why symbols are important. In short, they’re important not only because language is symbolic, but also because people respond to the symbols. Understanding this function of language and this use of symbolic language and images helps one understand rhetoric and its function in making meaning in addition to persuading. When thinking of identification in this way, or as part of this understanding of both language and how to use symbolic language effectively within rhetoric it is clear that identification is an important concept to understand, and recognize in all places rhetoric exists. The trouble I had with all of this is that identification is not linear, as it can occur in division or as a complement of division due to consubstantiality.