AIDS is a deadly disease that could potentially affect a large amount of the population if they are uniformed of its risks. On August 19th, 1992, Mary Fisher addressed this issue at the Republican National Convention. It was at this event in Houston, Texas where she expressed her feelings through a speech that served as a warning to the American public. The rhetorical choices that Mary Fisher makes help to explicitly illustrate her thoughts and experiences. The specific language she uses not only causes her audience to become more aware of AIDS, but it also serves as an indicator of her worldview as she tells of her own experiences with this disease.

Through recognizing the key terms that are used, as well as the words that cluster around them, the critic can reveal the rhetor’s “terministic screens”, or elements that contribute to how the rhetor sees the world. This concept is the basis for Kenneth Burke’s cluster method of criticism. Using this method the critic will seek out key terms used by the rhetor, and furthermore look for supporting terms that cluster around them. As I conduct this criticism, I hope to become more aware of how the language used by Fisher reflects her views toward the AIDS virus. Words can be identified as key terms through the frequency and intensity with which they are used, and in addition to this, I found that the key terms I selected served a purpose in explaining Fisher’s overall view of the issue.
As I conducted a cluster criticism of Mary Fisher’s speech on AIDS, I recognized some key terms that emerged to represent four different areas of the issue she was presenting. First of all, I noticed the terms HIV/AIDS as the cause for concern. Silence is the key term that overall tells what we are doing in response to this issue. However, the concept of being at risk shows the reality of the predicament we are in. Finally, the word children emerges as a key term showing her concern for the lives of future generations. Throughout my criticism I will analyze these key terms by studying the supporting words that cluster around them, and then I will be able to discover their significance toward the rhetor’s worldview.

**ANALYSIS**

The first key term that I am going to analyze is HIV/AIDS. There are quite a few terms that cluster around HIV/AIDS regarding the danger of the virus. Some of those words used by Fisher include dead, dying, infected, epidemic, and present danger. These words obviously present the negative impact of AIDS, and the extent to which it harms people. Using the concept of present danger makes AIDS seems even more urgent and harmful. The use of these terms gets the audience all on the same page that AIDS is a very negative concept. Furthermore, there are terms clustering around HIV/AIDS that focus the danger on people such as AIDS community, stereotypes, and human. By referring to the affected group as an AIDS community, Fisher makes it seem like the virus is plaguing a larger group. Also, stereotypes can be associated with AIDS because many people may make assumptions without knowing the facts. Fisher also asks her audience, “Are you human?” (2). Through asking this question and using the word human, she is trying to get people to realize that being human is all it takes to be at risk for AIDS.
The key term of *silence* is representative of how Americans are responding to the AIDS issue. There are times when Fisher refers to it as a “shroud of silence”. Some words that cluster around silence in terms of things that accompany it are *weep, grieve, alone, and fear*. She is trying to express that being silent on this issue does not result in any positive feelings. This silence refers to the way those affected by AIDS can feel when there is nothing being done to help the situation. There are other words that cluster around silence that convey how it is a negative force between those with the virus and those without. All of these words can be found in a single sentence that Fisher used. She states, “We have killed each other with our ignorance, our prejudice, and our silence” (2). This sentence is speaking out to the population that is living without AIDS, and telling us that our lack of knowledge can really hurt the people who are suffering if we do not take a role in the fight against AIDS or AIDS awareness. Fisher’s word choices applying to silence function to make the audience vividly aware of the feelings of those with AIDS, and perhaps some of her own feelings as she too was battling with the disease.

In order to inform the audience of the reality of HIV/AIDS, Mary Fisher frequently uses the key term, *at risk*. Mainly the context of this is to describe who is at risk, and her main point is making people aware that everyone is at risk. She uses words such as *family, community, race, and religion* as examples of the different groupings of people who are at risk. While all of those words can probably hit home with anyone, she really targets the emotions of the American public when she speaks about the young people. While there are many diseases that primarily affect older people, Fisher makes it clear that AIDS has the potential to harm “the bodies of the young. Young men. Young
women. Young parents. Young children” (3). Here she also makes references to her own children, and she is probably aware that her real life story will cause the audience to feel that the risk is even more severe as they witness her own concern. Through using words that can encompass all members of the population, Fisher spreads awareness that everyone is at risk.

While the final key term was mentioned in conjunction with being at risk, it is still something that Fisher continues to elaborate on throughout her message. This key term is children. She makes references to children in several different ways. One word that clusters around it is orphans, and she doesn’t want her children to become that way. Using this word choice help the audience members visualize what a poor circumstance like this would be like for themselves. While the word orphans shows what could potentially happen to children who lose their parents to AIDS, the term family represents what makes life fulfilling and what people hope they don’t have to lose. Fisher presents this idea when she says, “My family has been a rock of support” (3). Some other terms clustering around children include courage, strength, leadership, and hope. These are all things that Fisher believes that her children provide for her, or could provide in the future. She just hopes that they will have a safe environment some day where they can exercise these qualities without the fear of HIV/AIDS. These words can serve her goal of spreading awareness by appealing to so many people with children.

**CONCLUSION**

In Mary Fisher’s Address to the Republican National Convention, she aims to increase the awareness of HIV/AIDS in America. While looking at her speech through a Burkean Cluster Criticism, the critic can gain insight into Mary Fisher’s worldview by
studying her word choices. This can be achieved through identifying key terms, and then finding supporting words that cluster around them. While I found that what I selected as key terms revealed an aspect of the situation such as the cause or the peoples’ response to the issue, they specific words also tell me something about Mary Fisher.

First of all, when Fisher backs up the key term, *silence*, with many negative words such as *grieve, alone, and fear*, we can see that maybe silence is something that she is personally afraid of, and she wants it to end. In other words, we can gain insight into her personal experiences or feelings she has had. Furthermore, we can see what Mary Fisher values. When she uses the word *children* so frequently and associates it with *courage, strength, and hope*, we can see that she values children very much and we have proof of this when she provides anecdotes about her own family. Children are also her source of motivation, along with having the knowledge that we are a nation *at risk*. Because she knows the negative role the AIDS issue has played in her life, she is highly motivated to create a better environment for others through creating awareness that everyone is at risk. Using the term *HIV/AIDS* in association with death and *dying* warns the American people that the virus is truly a reality. Through the words Fisher uses, we can see that her speech can go beyond creating AIDS awareness, but it reveals her own attitudes and values as well.