
THE IMPLEMENTATION OF RHETORICAL CANONS IN MATTHEW MCCONAUGHEY'S UVALDE SPEECH

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Abstract- *This study investigates Matthew McConaughey's White House speech concerning the 2022 Robb Elementary School shooting in Uvalde, Texas, analyzing its persuasive strategies through the lens of Cicero's five canons of rhetoric: Invention, Arrangement, Style, Memory, and Delivery. Employing a qualitative content analysis approach, the research analyze the speech transcript and video to identify artistic tools (ethos, pathos, logos), structural organization, stylistic choices, the speaker's command of the material, and his physical presentation. Findings indicate the implementation of all five canons. McConaughey's Invention features pathos through victim narratives, reinforced by his ethos as a Uvalde native and appeals to logos through proposed policy solutions. The speech's Arrangement effectively utilizes a problem-solution structure, moving from emotional appeals to logical calls for action. Stylistically, the speech employs vivid imagery, repetition, and various rhetorical figures to amplify its message. While not relying on rote memorization, McConaughey's Memory is evident in his internalization and authentic emotional connection to the content. Finally, his Delivery, characterized by empathetic vocal modulation, strategic pacing, purposeful gestures, and sincere facial expressions, significantly contributed to the message's impact and authenticity. This research demonstrates the enduring relevance of classical rhetorical principles in contemporary public discourse, particularly in addressing sensitive national tragedies and advocating for policy change, suggesting the potential for further exploration into the long-term impact of such celebrity rhetoric.*

Keywords: *Rhetoric; Canon; Speech; Analysis*

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INTRODUCTION

Public speaking is done for multiple purposes. They are as varied as the genre itself. It can be done to entertain, inform, and persuade. The importance of such performances might have different weight for different people. Sometimes an act of public speaking is given an immense task of influencing the life, death, and the future of others, including students at schools in America, where shooting incidents are prone to

happen. One such instance is the school shooting incident at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas. Based on the timeline provided by ABCNEWS (Jacobo & El-Bawab, 2022) on May 24th 2022, 18-year-old Salvador Ramos drove to Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas. After shooting his grandmother in the face, he went to the school driving his grandfather's truck, bringing along two semi-automatic rifles with 375 rounds of ammunition. He began shooting people as he entered the schools' premises, got inside the school and killed 19 children, 2 teachers, and wounded 17 other people.

The school shooting incident is one of many incidents involving the use of guns in America. In 2022 alone there have been 10 high profile shooting incidents in the United States where people lost their lives (Associated Press, 2022). Gun control issue divides America (Schaeffer, 2021; Sedensky, 2016) with opinion and interpretation differ across the spectrum. This issue becomes critical because it involves 2nd amendment to the constitution which reads "A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed". The debates are based on how American people interpret this amendment, whether this amendment protect individual right to bear arm or whether the right can only be exercised through militia (Lund & Winkler, 2023).

After each incident, politicians, public figures, survivors, family of the victims among others, would come forth to speak publicly regarding the incidents, and about how the incidents should influence the issue of gun control in America. In the case of Robb Elementary School shooting, one of those who spoke publicly was Matthew McConaughey. He is an Oscar calibre American actor, who is also a denizen of and was born in Uvalde (Pallardy, 2022). On June 8, 2022, he spoke at the White House press briefing about the incident, his meetings with the families of the victims, his purpose for being in Washington at that time, and what needed to be done after the fact. The persuasive speech performed by McConaughey was meant to sway people, through this sensitive and fragmenting issue, from those who are undecided to those who adamantly reject the points proposed by those on the other side of the argument. Persuading through speech, especially those who oppose the speaker's position, is considered as the most difficult task that anyone can execute in the context of public speaking (Lucas & Stob, 2020). The effectiveness of his persuasion is debatable. It takes time to study whether such speech and other speeches for the same purpose influence the policy on gun

ownership. In the meantime, the speech itself, the content and the performance can be readily analysed. Hence, this study.

Indeed, studies of similar nature have been done before. Linda (2024) investigated the implementation of five canons of rhetoric by two speakers on TED Talks in 2023, Ian Bremmer and Peter McIndoe, a scientist and a cinematographer respectively. She approached the investigation by applying mix-methods. The canon of invention was assessed quantitatively, while the rest of the canons were done qualitatively. She revealed that the implementation of the canons of rhetoric can be found in the speeches delivered by two speakers, including the use of rhetorical proofs which are actually artistic tools but used from a different perspective. However, according to her study, McIndoe's performance was lacking in delivery due to reliance on text and his implementation of logos was significantly lacking compared to other rhetorical proofs.

Amaireh (2023) analysed the rhetoric in King Abdullah's English speeches during COVID-19 pandemic. This study, however, focused on one canon: invention. Ameirah discovered that King Abdullah relies on all rhetorical proofs to relate and build rapport with his audience, to convince the audience of his perspective, and to stir an emotion that ultimately leads to action. The quantitative data analysis also showed the use of inclusive pronouns like we and I were intended to be used as rhetorical reasons to convince the audience. Further, Ruggieri (2023) conducted a Neo-Aristotelian analysis on Donald Trump's "Save America" speech, assessing the speech using three of the five canons: style, delivery, and invention. Ruggieri concluded that Trump's choice of style was effective in rousing his supporters in confirming what they believe about the result of the election in which Trump was a candidate. However, his invention, according to Ruggieri's analysis was filled with fallacies, which didn't seem to matter much for his supporters since they already decided their stance even with the factor that might otherwise taint a speaker's credibility. Alas, in the conclusion, Ruggieri didn't elaborate much about Trump's delivery, only mentioning that it was effective based on how his supporters responded by chanting their support for him.

Most previous studies focused on one or some of the canons and rarely all five of them. Some were focusing on the canon of invention, especially the rhetorical proofs. Some focused on the canon of style, while some focused on arrangement. The objects of the studies were mostly speeches delivered by politicians at various levels or scientists.

This study aims to investigate the implementation of all of the elements of persuasion contained in the canons of rhetoric developed by Cicero (Bourelle, 2014) which include *inventio*, *dispositio*, *elocutio*, *memoria*, and *pronuntiatio*. The object of analysis in this study is a speech delivered by Matthew McConaughey, a celebrity, in 2022 at the White House.

Rhetoric is an “ancient name” for a body of knowledge focusing on the practice of speech and persuasion (Martin, 2014). Understanding persuasion is important. For those implementing it, persuasion is important to stand up for or to refute an idea, to inspire others to action, and for those on the receiving end of it, the understanding of the mechanism of persuasion provides them with the ability to think critically and to make informed decision (Lucas & Stob, 2020). To answer the question of how a persuasion should be properly done, Cicero adopted and developed five canons of rhetoric which were proposed by Aristotle before him, which were then also adopted by Quintilian (Bourelle, 2014; Foss, 2018; Bizzel et al., 2020).

This first canon, *invention* or *inventio*, deals with determining the essence of the issue, the best ways to present that information, and the best possible means to persuade the audience regarding the issue, in short, *invention* is about finding the arguments (Kennedy, 1994; Foss, 2018; Bizzel et al., 2020). Those means, according to the three sources cited in this paragraph, include the utilization of non-artistic tools and artistic tools, where both are also defined as proofs. Non-artistic tools include among others material evidence or testimonies, contracts, and oaths, while artistic tools include *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. The sources also mentioned that non-artistic tools are external to the art of rhetoric since the rethor does not invent them, they exist for the rethor to use. Hence, this study excludes them and focus instead on artistic tools: *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*.

Credibility (*ethos*) is the perception of the audience about the speaker’s character (Foss, 2018; Lucas and Stob, 2020). The perception on the speaker’s credibility is subjective. According to Lucas and Stob one speaker can be seen as credible in the minds of certain audience and untrustworthy in the mind of others. Foss (2018) proposed the elements of *ethos* as follows: 1. Moral character or integrity that can be employed by establishing the idea of understanding that the rethor, the message, and the audience are in the same virtuous ground. 2. Intelligence which is expressed and perceived through the presence of common sense, good taste, and familiarity with current topics and interests.

3. Good will which is shown by expressing the commonality of experience between the rethor and the audience and by praising them. Audience's perception about the credibility of the speaker can shift through the spectrum marked by the three types above. Due to the fact that some speakers may not have sufficient initial, Lucas and Stob suggest ways to improve the situation: 1. Explaining the speaker's competence. 2. Establishing common ground with the audience. 3. Delivering the speech fluently, expressively, and with conviction.

In *logos*, the second artistic tool, the speaker must come up with the arguments to make the evidence, which may include examples, statistics, testimony, or any other information, makes sense to the audience (Foss, 2018; Lucas and Stob, 2020). These are the conditions on the use of evidence according to Lucas and Stob (2020): 1. Evidence should be stated as specific as possible. Generalization, especially to those in disagreement, will not work. Instead of using such words as "many" or "a lot of", specific numbers will work better. 2. The evidence should be current. Audience may have their own position when it comes to evidence that they have heard. New evidence may provide a new perspective to consider. 3. Explain the evidence especially the kind of conclusion that the speaker wants the audience to achieve. The third artistic tool, emotional appeal (*pathos*), focuses on how the speaker engages with feelings of the audience, whether to incite sadness, anger, guilt, fear, happiness, pride, sympathy, reverence among others (Foss, 2018; Lucas & Stob, 2020). In practice emotional appeal can be implemented through the following ways (Lucas & Stob, 2020): using emotional language, developing vivid examples, and speaking with sincerity and conviction.

The second canon, arrangement or *dispositio* deals with the structure of a speech. For this purpose Lucas and Stob (2020) emphasize main points and how they are arranged within the typical three parts structure: opening, body, conclusion. In the body of the speeches, they suggested 6 arrangement strategies that can be applied when arranging a speech: chronological order, spatial order, causal order, problem-solution order, problem-cause-solution order, topical order, comparative advantages order, and Monroe's motivated sequence. Kennedy (1994), in whose book rhetoric is divided into three kinds, judicial, deliberative, and epideictic, suggest these four parts for best possible outcome of persuading the audience in judiciary speeches: introduction that should ignite the interest and goodwill of the audience, narration that should be clear, brief, and persuasive, proof

that provides logical arguments to support the speaker's position and to rebut potential objections against it, and conclusion that includes summarization and emotional appeal to the audience. Elocutio or style, the third canon (Kennedy, 1994), is about knowing how to say it after coming up with what to say. According to Kennedy (1994) there are two elements of style: diction, which is the choice of words, and composition, or the weaving of words together into sentences, which include periodic structure, prose rhythm, and figures of speech. The implementation of the elements dictates the characters of style which can be classified into three types, namely grand, middle, and plain (Załęska, 2019). The fourth canon, memoria or memory, include the process of committing the words that are chosen and arranged into memory. Not all speeches are memorized nor are they verbalized. Hence, in some analysis of rhetorics, canon of memoria may be excluded (Foss, 2018). Corbett and Connors (1999) even argue that there is not much that can be said theoretically about memorization and in written discourse there is no need for it. However when they are included, the focus of consideration and analysis would be on the rethor's control of the material and the relationship between memory and the mode of presentation (Foss, 2018). The fifth canon, pronuntiatio or pronuntiatio, deals with manners of presentation, including methods of delivery, voice control, such as volume and pitch, and gesture including the animation of eyes and limbs (Foss, 2018; Kennedy, 1994; Lucas and Stob, 2020). A speech is delivered differently based on the characteristics of each speaker. Delivery is important as a form of non-verbal communication which influence the impact of the message being conveyed. A well-prepared speech may fail to reach its intention if it were delivered poorly. While a poorly prepared speech may benefit from a fine delivery. Ideally, a speech is prepared well and delivered well.

METHODS

Research design

This is a qualitative content analysis on a communicative material in the form of a speech conducted by Matthew McConaughey on 8 June 2022. Qualitative content analysis itself is a systematic and objective analysis of a communicative material which encompasses texts, musical, pictorial, plastic or other similar materials to find certain special characteristics (Berg, 2001; Mayring, 2004).

Data Collection

The data is acquired through content analysis. The script of the speech, acquired from USA Today's webpage (Brisco, 2022), was compared to scripts of the same speech available on other news websites, analyzed to find out the pattern that reflect the structural arrangement strategy that is implemented in it and persuasion strategies used. The video of the speech was acquired from a webpage of CNBC (CNBC, 2022). Matthew McConaughey joined White House press briefing to discuss gun control. The video was viewed to analyze the manner of delivery by the speaker to support the context of the text within the speech.

Data analysis

The object of this research is the speech given by Matthew McConaughey on 8 June 2022 that was done as response to the 24 May 2022 Uvalde school shooting. The script has been compared to other scripts provided by other sources to ascertain its accuracy. The same treatment was done to the video of the full speech. The script, along with the performance were analysed since persuasion does not rely only on the content of the speech but also how it is delivered. The text data that is derived from the speech was analyzed through the steps outlined by Miles et al. (2014). First was condensation process which was done by selecting, focusing, and simplifying the data as required by the study. Second, the display process, where the data was organized according to the parameters sought, which include persuasion art, style, and speech structure. Lastly, conclusion drawing, which, based on the data and context of this study, was done to reveal whether McConaughey's speech contains the pattern dictated by the canons of rhetoric.

FINDINGS

Invention (Inventio)

For invention, the script was analyzed to identify the artistic tools employed in the speech; ethos, pathos, and logos. There are 72 instances of ethos, 72 instances of pathos, and 62 instances of logos. Some statements may represent more than one tools as a statement can be interpreted more than one ways from multiple perspectives. The rethor himself may have wanted to express multiple intentions from a single statement.

Arrangement (Disposition)

Matthew McConaughey structured his speech in a conventional three-part structure: introduction, body, and conclusion. In the body itself, he uses problem and solution main points arrangement strategy. The speech itself can be broken down in the following way:

Introduction:

First, Opening Connection to Uvalde: He begins by establishing his personal ties to Uvalde and the time he spent there. This immediately grounds the speech in a specific place and his personal connection to the community. Second, Initial Focus on the Human Cost: He transitions to sharing the stories of individual victims – Ellie Garcia, Irma, and Joe Garcia, and the initial details of their lives and lost potential. This serves to immediately establish the gravity of the problem through personal narratives. Third, setting the Emotional Tone: The opening paints a picture of loss and heartbreak, setting the emotional tone for the rest of the speech. Thus, serves as a transition to the body.

Body – Problems:

First, Deepening the Understanding of the Tragedy: This section expands on the initial emotional impact by revealing the horrific physical consequences of the AR-15 rifle through the cosmetologist's testimony. This paints a stark and disturbing picture of the violence. Second, highlighting the Long-Term Trauma: The discussion about the need for extensive restoration of bodies and the long-term need for counselors emphasizes the profound and lasting impact of the tragedy on individuals and the community. Third, the Parents' Shared Desire (Bridge to Solution): While rooted in the problem of loss, the parents' plea for their children's dreams to live on acts as a crucial bridge, highlighting a shared value that can motivate solutions. Last, Consensus on the Need for Change: The section emphasizing the agreement among diverse groups (families, law enforcement, gun owners) about the need for safer schools and sensible gun laws further underscores the problem – the current situation is not acceptable to a wide range of people.

Body – Solutions:

1. **Specific Policy Proposals:** This is the core of the solution section. McConaughey lists concrete policy proposals: investing in mental healthcare, creating safer schools, restraining sensationalized media coverage, restoring family and American values, responsible gun ownership, background checks, raising the minimum age for AR-15 purchase to 21, implementing waiting periods for those rifles, and enacting and properly managing red-flag laws.
2. **Reframing Regulations:** He directly addresses potential opposition by arguing that these regulations are a step forward for both civil society and the Second Amendment, not a step back.
3. **Call for Unity and Courage:** He emphasizes the need to transcend partisan politics and for leaders to act with courage.
4. **Focus on Shared Values and Rebranding:** He urges a return to core American values as a guiding principle for action.
5. **Emphasis on Legacy and Future Generations:** He frames the solutions in terms of protecting the country and ensuring a better future for the next generation.
6. **Personalizing the Solutions Through Victims:** He repeatedly uses the individual stories of Alithia, Maite, Ellie, Irma, and Joe to illustrate the direct impact of inaction and what the proposed solutions could prevent.

Conclusion:

1. **Reiterating the Call to Action:** He returns to the immediate need to “start” by making the right choices on the issue at hand.
2. **Summarizing the Core Goal:** He emphasizes that the starting point is to pass laws that save innocent lives while respecting the Second Amendment.
3. **Personal Promise to the Victims:** He makes a direct promise to the victims that their dreams will not be forgotten.
4. **Final Plea for Meaning:** He concludes by reiterating the central question: “Again, how can the loss of these lives matter?” leaving the audience with a powerful and resonant thought that encapsulates the speech’s purpose.
5. **Final Expression of Gratitude:** He ends with a simple “Thank you. Thank you.”

This structure effectively moves from the specific and emotional (the victims' stories) to the broad and actionable (policy proposals and a call for unity), and then circles back to the personal and profound (the need to make the loss matter).

Style (Elocutio)

In terms of style there are 19 instances of metaphor, 16 repetitions out of which 9 were done for emphasis, 14 anaphora, 13 imagery, 13 understatement, 7 antithesis, 7 irony, 5 instances of rhetorical question, 5 juxtaposition, 4 synecdoche, 4 parallelism, 4 direct address, 3 instances of metonymy, 3 tricolon, 3 anecdote, 3 personification, 3 symbolism, 3 foreshadowing, 3 characterization, 2 listing for emotional impact 2 hyperbole, 1 direct speech, 1 climax, 1 synesthesia, 1 euphemism, 1 emphatic fragment, 1 appositive phrase, 1 dialogue, 1 deictic expression, 1 ellipsis, 1 asyndeton, 1 polysyndeton, 1 allusion, 1 colloquialism, and 1 direct voice.

Memory (Memoria)

After being introduced, Matthew McConaughey approached the lectern and produced what looked like a bundle of papers, which he placed onto the lectern. While all of these happened, he had already started talking addressing the room. He came prepared. For the rest of the speech, he was, more often than not, looking at the script on the lectern. Even when he produced visual aids that included photos of the children who passed and pictures or objects associated with the children to the people in the room and at home, he had to look at the script.

The speech moved naturally with pauses that may have been caused by the overwhelmingly emotional nature of the tragedy that inspires the speech. Forgetfulness and lack of material mastery do not seem to be the issue. McConaughey, as an actor has been regarded as one of the best in the industry with the Oscar that he won and critically acclaimed performances. His approach to script can be varied as mentioned in his autobiography (McConaughey, 2020). But for case-sensitive issues, it is important to be meticulous. Hence, the script.

Delivery (Pronunciation)

Focusing on Pronunciation in Matthew McConaughey's speech about the Uvalde tragedy reveals several notable aspects:

McConaughey's vocal tone was empathetic and sincere. He modulated his voice to reflect the gravity of the subject matter, moving from sombre and sorrowful when recounting the victims' stories to more impassioned and firm when advocating for change. This emotional resonance made his message feel authentic and deeply felt. He employed strategic pacing and pauses. He often slowed down to emphasize key points, allowing the weight of his words to sink in. Meaningful pauses were used to create emotional space for the audience to process the information and connect with the tragedy. While generally speaking at a conversational volume, he varied his intensity to emphasize crucial phrases and calls to action. His voice would become slightly more forceful when expressing frustration with inaction or urging for change. His articulation was clear and deliberate, ensuring that his message was easily understood and that the names of the victims were pronounced with respect. His posture conveyed seriousness and sincerity. He stood relatively still, allowing the focus to remain on his words and the gravity of the message, rather than being a distraction. His gestures were purposeful and understated. He used hand movements to emphasize key points, often open and inclusive gestures when speaking about unity and shared responsibility. His gestures weren't overly dramatic but served to reinforce his message.

He may have been relying on the script for the majority of his speech, it's likely he maintained consistent and direct eye contact with his audience (whether a live audience or the camera), creating a sense of personal connection and sincerity. His facial expressions mirrored the emotions he conveyed vocally. He displayed sorrow when speaking of the victims, concern when discussing the problem, and determination when proposing solutions. His sincerity was evident in his expressions.

His use of visual aids, the photos, the pictures, the shoes, and his deliberate recitation of the victims' names acted as a powerful way to make the abstract loss concrete and visual in the minds of the audience. Each name represented a life, a face, a story. His entire delivery was tailored to the solemn and tragic context of the Uvalde shooting. His respectful and sombre demeanour conveyed the appropriate level of seriousness. While empathetic, his delivery also had a persuasive edge, directly urging action and change

from those in power and the broader public. One can argue that his delivery does not look like a performance but rather a deeply felt communication of grief, frustration, and a passionate plea for change.

CONCLUSION

This research explores Matthew McConaughey's White House address following the tragic shooting in Uvalde, Texas, through the lens of the five classical canons of rhetoric: *Inventio* (Invention), *Dispositio* (Arrangement), *Elocutio* (Style), *Memoria* (Memory), and *Pronuntiatio* (Delivery). The analysis reveals the implementation of these canons to evoke empathy, build credibility, present logical appeals, and ultimately, advocate for change. McConaughey's *inventio* was rooted in the human cost of the tragedy. By centering the narratives of the victims and their families, he appealed to *pathos*, recognizing the profound impact of emotional connection in moving his audience. His established persona and alignment with the community's shared desires and origin as a native of Uvalde contributed to his *ethos*, while the call for "reasonable, practical, tactical regulations" introduced elements of *logos*. Overall, the use of the tools is quite balanced, no tool is used significantly less or more than the rest.

For *dispositio*, the speech demonstrated a deliberate flow in problem-solution structure. McConaughey moved from the specific and emotional (the individual stories) in the introduction to the broader problem of gun violence, then presented concrete solutions, and finally returned to a poignant call for remembrance and action in his division. This arrangement strategically built emotional resonance before introducing logical appeals and policy proposals. In terms of *elocutio*, McConaughey's stylistic choices amplified his message. His vivid yet often understated language, strategic use of figurative language such as metaphor and metonymy, and the rhythmic power of anaphora all contributed to the speech's impact and memorability. His direct and inclusive tone fostered a sense of shared responsibility and urgency.

While not a traditional display of rote memorization, McConaughey's *memoria* was evident in his deep internalization of the victims' stories, policy details, and the overall structure of his address. His authentic emotional delivery suggested a profound connection to the material, allowing for a natural and persuasive presentation. The use of internalized associations, linking names to dreams, further enhanced the memorability of

the victims. Finally, McConaughey's pronunciation was crucial in conveying the sincerity and gravity of his message. His modulated vocal tone, strategic pacing and pauses, purposeful gestures, and sincere facial expressions all contributed to what looks like an authentic and impactful delivery. His respectful demeanor, coupled with moments of firm advocacy, underscored the urgency of the situation.

McConaughey's speech can be shown as an example of how the application of the classical canons of rhetoric can be used to address a national tragedy and advocate for meaningful change. By blending emotional appeals with logical arguments, delivered with sincerity and a clear understanding of his material, McConaughey crafted a persuasive address towards his audience and serves as a compelling call for action. The detection of these ancient principles demonstrates their enduring relevance in contemporary public discourse, particularly when addressing sensitive and critical issues. Further research could explore the long-term impact of this speech on public opinion and policy changes especially related to gun violence, the role of celebrities in contemporary rhetoric, and its ethical considerations.

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