

A Rhetorical Examination of Motives

On the evening of July 18, 1969, Senator Edward Kennedy was involved in a traffic accident in which a passenger Mary Jo Kopechne, died. On July 25, he described the accident to the people of Massachusetts and to a national audience.

Ling's purpose was "to examine some of the rhetorical choices Kennedy made... in his address and to suggest the possible impact of these choices on both short- and long-term audience responses." The method was a rhetorical analysis using Burke's pentad. For Ling, the speech consists of two parts. The first explains the accident, and the second discusses Kennedy's future. The function of the first is to absolve Kennedy of full responsibility for the death of Miss Kopechne; that of the second is to place responsibility for his political future in the hands of the people of Massachusetts.

Although Kennedy states he does not place blame "either on the accident or on anyone else," Ling argues that the speech is designed to portray Kennedy as a helpless victim of the scene. Ling identifies the following elements in the first part of the speech: "The scene (the events surrounding the death of Miss Kopechne), the agent (Kennedy), the act (Kennedy's failure to report the accident immediately), the agency (whatever methods were available to make such a report), and the purpose (to fulfill his legal and moral responsibilities)."

In describing the accident, Kennedy establishes the scene as the controlling element. He emphasizes that the road was unlit and unsafe, and that he nearly died: "Then water entered my lungs and I actually felt the sensation of drowning. But somehow I struggled to the surface alive." He later expresses concern that "some awful curse did actually hang over the Kennedys," thus implicating fate in the accident and portraying himself as the victim of an uncontrollable situation.

In the second part of the speech, Kennedy seeks to make the people of Massachusetts co-agents in his decision to stay in office. The pentad once again operates: "The scene (current reaction to the events of July 18), the agent (the people of Massachusetts), the act (Kennedy's decision not to resign), the agency (statement of resignation), and the purpose (to remove Kennedy from office)."

Kennedy emphasizes that "whispers" and "innuendo" constitute the scene. He says that should the people of Massachusetts lack confidence in a senator's character, "with or without justification," then that senator must resign, suggesting that the kind of people who would force his resignation are the kind of people who believe unfounded rumors. The favorable response of the people of Massachusetts showed they chose not to accept this characterization.

Ling concludes by examining the long-term effects of Kennedy's rhetorical strategies. Polls showed that close to 90 percent felt his chances of becoming president had been hurt. Ling gives three reasons. First, Kennedy presented himself as a person unable to act in extraordinary conditions, the kind of agent who is not what a president should

be. Second, it is common knowledge that advisors helped write the speech, suggesting that Kennedy's role as agent might have been manipulated. Finally, Kennedy did not explain why he and Miss Kopechne were where they were, leaving the audience wondering whether he was, in fact, responsible for the incident.

Source: David A. Ling, "A Pentadic Analysis of Senator Edward Kennedy's Address to the People of Massachusetts, July 25, 1969," *The Central States Speech Journal*, 21 (Summer 1970), 81-86.