In today’s culture, we are constantly bombarded with the subject of global warming. Environmentalists lobby for change; researchers struggle to find alternative sources of energy; and businessmen try to sell as many solar panels as they possibly can. Resistance against oil drilling, however, is far from new. John McPhee wrote what he learned about the effects of oil drilling in his compelling 1986 essay about the renowned geologist John David Love. He does an excellent job of convincing the reader to oppose drilling and save both the human race and the environment in his essay, “A Name I Do Not Know.” He proves Love credible on the topic by exemplifying Love’s many accomplishments, from his lectures as a pure scientist to defend the environment to his discoveries of wealth in exploitable rock. He shows that Love has personally had experience with both passionate environmentalists as well as avaricious businessmen.

He begins the essay with appeals to our emotional nature through a combined use of imagery and comparison. He recounts his journey across Utah with Love where they visit a power plant named “Jim Bridger.” He narrates the history of the region with vivid imagery as he goes from the Cenozoic Era to the present day. He describes the various flora and fauna, the oak, elm and pine trees, the pressure caused by the falling vegetation, and the erosion of the mud on top from the streams of water and the blasts of wind. Then comes Jim Bridger, whose image is quite the opposite. He describes him as a large rat, that every few hours, awkwardly lurches back so traumatically that the dirt underneath immediately became slate. Through the use of imagery in this comparison, McPhee clearly makes his point to the reader—that these industrial machines are everything we don’t want. After visiting Jim Bridger, the two continue to travel, and before long, McPhee makes another comparison of this fashion. He describes the 46 million year history of Lake Gosiute, from its ancient twelve-foot crocodiles to its bowfins, dogfish, and bony tongues. He then switches to a discussion on the various methods of drilling, all of which “destroy the face of the earth.” Through the use of this vivid comparison, McPhee incites a somewhat guilty feeling within readers that support such oil drilling.

His imagery and comparison pairs well with another important aspect of McPhee’s essay, his use of irony. McPhee establishes an idea that it is the people who cause the destruction to the environment that complain the most about it. He sees seagulls when he and Lock first enter Utah, and mentions how the Mormon traffic in Utah do not seem intent on saving the birds that saved them. He jabs at our dependence on automobiles despite its destructive effects. Later, when the two visit the Yellowstone National Park, he mentions how a scientist he met there had formulated a law, “The volume of the complaints varies inversely with the number of miles per gallon attained by the vehicles that bring people to the park.” McPhee jabs at our lack of concern about the environment and our simultaneous expectation that there shouldn’t be any problems, and again, makes us feel guilty about our ignorance.

McPhee knows as well as us that these emotional appeals won’t convince everybody, and that some people require cold, hard, logic. His main tactic is his use of cause/effect analysis. Multiple times, he describes the chain of events that were neglected in the planning of these large industrial projects. His first is the effects of the sodium-rich trona that is brought up due to the drilling in Lake Gosiute. He explains how this drilling releases more than two tons of trona into the Green River per day. The sodium causes lakes downstream to turn into chemical lakes, and a lot of it ends up with poor farmers in Mexico. The sodium also bleaches the land and ends up in the drinking water for the farmers nearby. By explaining this chain of effects, he appeals to our logical side as well, making us worry for our own health as well. He uses this cause/effect analysis again when he discusses his visit to Yellowstone. When McPhee picks up some sooty black uraninite and asks Lock if it was dangerously reactive, Lock responds disappointedly, “What is ‘dangerously reactive’? … We have no real standards. We don’t know. All I can say is the cancer rate here is very high.” Through the use of this cause/effect analysis, McPhee shows that the drilling is causing cancer in the area, but also that we have relatively little experience, and that our careless experimentation with such dangerous materials only endangers the world we live in.

John McPhee masterfully presents his argument against oil drilling by engaging a variety of rhetorical devices and structures such as exemplification, imagery, comparison, irony, and cause/effect analysis. He establishes his credibility and appeals to the reader’s brain as well as their heart. In a time period where oil drilling was a major industry, he convinces many that oil drilling is dangerous, and that we should be pushing for a cleaner alternative to save both ourselves as well as our beautiful environment.