
A Rhetorical Analysis of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Letter to Napoleon III

In her Letter to Napoleon III, the brilliant author Elizabeth Barrett Browning, requests a hopeful pardon on behalf of her contemporary Victor Hugo for his arguably seditious novel *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. In writing this personal letter, she intends to impress on the emperor that forgiving Hugo will improve his own approval from the citizens. Through her gentle tone and focus on her audience's needs of how he will benefit from her advice, she effectively establishes a sense of urgency for Napoleon to act sooner than later.

Already from the opening paragraphs of the letter, Browning strokes Napoleon's ego to convince him to shift to her point of view. By professing that she read "a book called the 'Contemplations' of a man who has sinned deeply against [Napoleon] in [Hugo's] political writings," she cleverly makes concessions to Napoleon that Hugo's decision to speak poorly of the leader was provocative, so the emperor's upcoming punishment of Hugo was not shocking. This use of procatalsis establishes her credibility in arguing a point because it shows that she is fair, yet still comes to the conclusion that Hugo should be excused. In fact, this usage compounds on why Hugo should be released because she does not argue single-mindedly for Hugo's freedom; she instead demonstrates complex knowledge by realizing that Hugo performed a bad deed but still deserves freedom. Seeing through Napoleon's perspective is likely to convince him to listen to her. Browning's other confession that "[she has] no personal knowledge of this man and certainly [she does] not come now to make his apology" further proves her point that she is balanced, which emphasizes that Hugo should be free. With the intention that Napoleon can see through her perspective that neither of them even know Hugo, the underlying message is conveyed that there are more factors in determining his fate of freedom or banishment.

Browning shifts from establishing her credibility to explaining reasons that Hugo's sin should be forgiven. She employs anaphora to clarify and make Napoleon consider how Hugo's banishment could affect himself because as the supreme leader, Napoleon cares more about what the people think of him. As a result, the main points of Browning's essay focuses on the advantages for Napoleon and not so much Hugo, which ironically, Napoleon's ego is exactly the basis for Hugo's punishment in that it would hurt the people's opinion of Napoleon. The repetition of "What touches you" three times reminds Napoleon that being an emperor is the business of being widely admired and therefore listened to. He cannot just banish all who oppose him, but instead, if he accepts his opponents, he will appear a more logical leader. This holds truth because Napoleon does not want to be remembered as an intolerant leader over a

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single derogatory comment; rather, he would prefer being the modest, freedom-granting leader. In addition, the diction “touch” forces Napoleon to consider his fears as a ruler because low approval equates to him not being able to accomplish his agenda effectively. “Touch” even implies sensitivity such that the success of his reign can be factored by little things such as his response to political opponents. This way, he is forced to consider freeing Hugo.

To enforce her message, Browning introduces a shock factor. Her usage of a paradox “It is, indeed, precisely because he cannot be excused that, I think, he might worthily be forgiven” tips the shock factor. The suggestion to accept disrespect is so unheard of in these times of emperors and empresses that Napoleon would have mistrusted his eyes and had to read this line again. However, it is exactly because this line is so surprising that Napoleon will remember this advice. Shortly before her conclusion, Browning also displays scesis onomaton in “Forgive this enemy, this accuser, this traducer. Disprove him by your generosity” to once again prove that no matter how vile the deed is, if Napoleon pardons Hugo, the former will endure in history as a generous, confident leader. This strategy actually works exponentially as if the worse the libel, the better Napoleon will be admired.

In the final analysis, it is apparent that Browning persuasively justifies her premise to Napoleon III that saving Hugo from ridicule is just as crucial in saving his own reputation. Through the use of pathos, repetition, and analogy, she decisively convinces Napoleon that the only option is to pardon Hugo sooner than later. As a result, understanding the techniques of argumentation Browning uses in this letter still holds significance in the modern world because it is important to consider how a proposition will benefit the reader, thus increasing the likelihood of the suggestion being followed through.

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