
Rhetorical Analysis Of The Letter From Birmingham Jail By Martin Luther King Jr

Martin Luther King Jr. in 1963 addresses his letter referred to as the “Letter from Birmingham Jail” to the eight white clergy men who made it known to the public that his actions, which took place in Birmingham, Alabama were incriminating at that time in history. Although, he knows in the back of his mind that they see his activities as “unwise and untimely” he decides to be rational in his tone of voice throughout his response to the publicized criticism facing him. He notes that an event like this doesn’t occur much as he lacks the time to deal with it, but this is in an attempt to show the authorities who are white that black protesters are not law breakers and can work with each other on “patient and reasonable terms”. With that, this essay analyzes how Martin Luther King Jr. uses emotional, ethical, and logical appeals in “Letter from Birmingham Jail” to its full potential in order for the audience to understand the oppression African American people endured in order to defend his strategy of using nonviolent resistance to end racism within in the community itself.

To begin with, this letter written 56 years ago paints a picture with the quote “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” and stands up to the test of time holding its value acting as a line of “defense of peaceful civil disobedience and direct action”. With that, King sought out racial justice but the so called “white moderates” acted as a road block for change, given he exclaimed that those who voiced agreement with the goals of civil rights but instead wanted a “negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice”. By this, he is letting it be known that he no longer views the clergy men of 1963 as the moral force it once was due to their lack of interest in making social justice part of their message to faith. As a Baptist minister, King’s knowledge when it comes to Christianity is unmatched, which comes to play in his letter, nonetheless. Being compelled to respond to injustice whenever and wherever, he compares his work to the Christians in the bible and mentions Apostle Paul.

By comparing the protestors to the Christians, it places the role of enemies of freedom upon those who criticize him. This use of symbolism creates a connection that represents a moral and ethical connection between the opposing sides. Through an attempt to communicate with the clergy men via dialogue, the reader is reminded by King that codes revolving around religion are above laws of the land; however, this is not the case and remarks “Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice, or will we be extremists for the cause of justice?”. Going off of that, he reminds people that the laws put in place are unjust given the fact that those people are forced to follow rules that they had no role in whatsoever in making. Keeping the ball rolling, he informs

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people that the protestors are without a doubt American citizens, preventing them from being an outsider of their own country and goes on to showcase that racial injustice is occurring not only in Birmingham, Alabama but instead the entirety of the United States of America.

In addition, Martin Luther King Jr highlights the idea of racial injustice by laying out the logistics of the situation taking place that are affecting African Americans. By presenting examples of police brutality to lynchings he refers to this as the “air-tight cage of poverty”. This humanizes African Americans by focusing on the emotional and psychological pain that segregation is inflicting upon them. Going off of that, he then goes on to describe how he has to explain this racial inequality to his daughter and displays his human side of a politicized issue. Diving head first into the conversation between the two, he recalls seeing “ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky”.

All in all, in the Letter from Birmingham Jail, Martin Luther King Jr. through the use of his language and content, that are underlined by his structure put together a while in a jail cell that shaped the future to what it is today. Going off of that, it is without a doubt that every word written by him was thought-out and served its purpose with a religious and spiritual understanding behind it; however, he still does go onto apologize for the length of it through the wording of “I'm afraid it is much too long to take your precious time”. He explains that being in jail with the lack of a comfortable desk is the result of “long thoughts and... long prayers”. With that, the response to the clergy men for his actions had led to him not only identifying their misconceptions but on top of that justifying the reasoning behind the civil disobedience taking place. Despite the backlash faced, he remained calm, cool, and collected at all times refraining from ranting or using obscene language to say the least. As oppose to taking it out on the clergy men he does so in a manner aimed at targeting racism itself after his argument by writing “If I have said anything in this letter that overstates the truth and indicates an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me. If I have said anything that understates the truth and indicates my having a patience that allows me to settle for anything less than brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me”. Taking a step back and analyzing the writing style, he is poetic with the use of metaphors and does so in a way that is meant to move the reader emotionally and appeal to them.

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