

# Rhetorical devices, figurative language and effects in benjamin banneker's letter...

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## **Analysis**

In Benjamin Banneker's letter to Thomas Jefferson he argues that he wants slavery to be discontinued. Banneker expresses this by using the rhetorical strategies; repetition, irony, and pathos. His purpose is to connect with Thomas Jefferson in order for him to take part in abolishing slavery. He seems to have a concerned and somewhat respectful tone but it can also be interpreted as sarcastic. His writing appeals to civil rights activists, abolitionists, or people of higher position in society.

### **Rhetorical Devices/Figurative Language & Effects:**

Benjamin Banneker uses the rhetorical strategy repetition of the word "sir" to show how urgent this matter of abolishing slavery is and that action needs to be taken. When Benjamin uses the repetition of the word "sir" it shows respect towards Thomas Jefferson which allows the reader to notice that Jefferson is a respected person and also that he had a certain amount of authority in society. Furthermore the use of repetition also highlights the shift from the tone being concerned and respectful to sarcastic, as if saying that Jefferson has a higher position in society but is not using it to the best of his ability. The repetition of the word "sir" shows that's the issue of slavery is very important and Banneker stresses this. Not only is it important, but it is also urgent and needs to be resolved.

Another rhetorical strategy that Banneker uses to express his attitude toward slavery and bring this issue to the attention of Thomas Jefferson is irony. Banneker uses irony in his writing by suggesting that Thomas Jefferson has been there through the process of slavery and has seen the torture that

comes along with it, but yet he has done nothing to change it. This then shows how concerned about the issue Banneker is and how it is critical that Jefferson sees to taking action. Banneker also uses irony by basically calling Jefferson a hypocrite because he is preaching the constitution but he clearly is not taking a stand in the efforts of defending what those words stand for to make the country better. Also the fact that he himself is a slave owner but talks poorly of others who own slaves. He chooses to pretend as if it wasn't an issue and continue with the way things are.

Banneker uses the rhetorical strategy pathos to get Thomas Jefferson to see the issue of slavery from his point of view and maybe possibly even convince him to work towards abolishing it. When using pathos he tries to identify with Jefferson and his position in society and tries to say that he knows it took a lot to get to the position he is. Banneker also uses pathos to describe the conditions of slavery and how harsh they are. By doing this he wanted Thomas Jefferson to relate with the slaves on a personal level and put himself in their shoes so he can somewhat comprehend what it must be like for them. This emphasizes to Thomas Jefferson that slavery is unjust and should be stopped.

### **Textual Evidence/Support/Examples:**

#### **Repetition:**

“ Sir, suffer me to recall to your mind that time in...” (line 1)

“ This sir, was a time in which you clearly saw into the injustice... it was now, sir...” (lines 15-21)

“ Here, sir, was a time in which...” (line 26)

“...but sir, how pitiable it is to reflect that although you were...” (line 30-31)

“ Sir, I suppose that your knowledge...” (line 42)

Irony:

“... Look back I entreat you on the variety to which you were exposed; reflect on that time in which every human aid appeared unavailable...” (lines 4-7)

“... that you publicly held forth this true and valuable doctrine, which is worthy to be recorded and remembered in all succeeding ages. “ We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, and that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” (lines 19-25)

...” but sir how pitiable is it to reflect that although you were so fully convinced of the benevolence of the Father of mankind and of his equal and impartial distribution of those rights and privileges which he had conferred upon them, that you should at the same time counteract his mercies in detaining by fraud and violence...” (lines 30-37)

Pathos:

“...the British Crown were exerted with every powerful effort in order to reduce you to a State of Servitude, look back I entreat you on the variety of dangers to which you were exposed...” (lines 2-5)

“ ...horrors of its conditions...” (line 17)

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“...under groaning captivity and cruel oppression...” (line 37-38)

“...with kindness and benevolence towards them...” (line 50-51)

**Significance/Connection:**

Benjamin Banneker argues his position against slavery to Thomas Jefferson in the hopes of persuading him to help. He does this by using the rhetorical strategies; repetition, irony, and pathos. He demonstrates the urgency of the issue by having a concerned tone but also makes it evident that he is very well educated being as it was displayed through his writing because he was speaking to a person of higher class, but his writing could also appeal to abolitionists. Similarly to the event of the holocaust, Banneker was trying to work towards a common goal to abolish slavery with the help of Thomas Jefferson. Likewise in the holocaust, Jan Karski made many attempts to expose Hitler's plan of genocide to the public and help them see how he was doing wrong.