

Frederick douglass rhetoric analysis

Profession, Writer



Whenever injustice exists in society, it becomes the responsibility of others to step forward in defense of the oppressed. If this action does not occur, then the injustice will remain and innocent people will suffer. In order to preserve equality, sometimes people must take a risk in order to reveal the truth and uphold justice. Individuals throughout history, such as the founding fathers, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr. , have faced this peril in the pursuit of freedom.

In 1845, Frederick Douglass published *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, in order to do just that- to establish the truth behind slavery and advocate for freedom. In his narrative, Douglass uses diction, structure, imagery, and other stylistic elements to persuade people of the evils that slavery inflicts on both sides of society. In order to reveal the truth behind slavery, Douglass demonstrates his point through his use of diction and structure. Through his diction, Douglass uses words to illustrate the barbarity and inhumanity of slavery.

For instance, Douglass describes slaveholders as “ human flesh-mongers” and their actions as “ fiendish barbarity” (Douglass, 21, 27). By using words such as these, Douglass shows his contempt for those responsible and informs the reader of the cruelty of slavery. He compares the slaveholders to barbarians, revealing them as the height of cruelty and wickedness. In addition, after watching the white men heartlessly rank slaves with swine and thoughtlessly divide families, he “ saw more clearly than ever the brutalizing effects of slavery upon both the slave and the slaveholder” (Douglass, 58).

Douglass uses the word brutalizing to show how the power of owning another person turned the white brutal and inhuman. That they could commit these malicious acts on fellow human beings becomes incomprehensible, and he successfully communicates the terrible effects of slavery. In addition to his diction, Douglass uses structure to show how the barbarity of enslavement first turned him into a slave, and how that same inhumanity set him free. After about nine chapters detailing his slave life, he says, “ You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man. (Douglass, 75) He then goes on to describe the turning point for him that sparked his quest for freedom. By structuring his narrative this way, he reveals both sides- how slavery broke him “ in body, soul, and spirit” (Douglass, 73) and how it eventually “ rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom” within him (Douglass, 80). In doing so, he gives the reader an insight into how he became himself, and reinforces the evils of slavery in the way it shapes a man’s life. Douglass’ use of diction and structure effectively persuades the reader of the barbarity and inhumanity that comes as a result of slavery.

To continue his persuasion, Douglass uses selection of detail and different tones to make his view known. When describing some aspects of slavery, Douglass’ use of detail opens society’s eyes to injustice. In one case, when describing the whipping of his Aunt Hester, he includes details that encompass sight- “ the warm, red blood... came dripping to the floor,” sound- “ amid heart-rending shrieks,” and emotion- “ I was so horror-stricken... I hid myself in a closet” (Douglass, 24).

By including facts covering many senses, he provides the reader a chance to piece together the scene, giving them perspective. If society has all the details, it becomes easier for them to pass an accurate judgment of slavery. His detail, or lack thereof, also contributes to his use of tone- in particular, one of coolness and detachment. When describing incidents involving himself, he seems as if relating the story of another- “ scarce a week passed without his whipping me. I was seldom free from a sore back” (Douglass, 70).

While he neither over or under exaggerates the situation, he seldom tells of his own emotions and disgust regarding his punishments, and he shows his contempt without appearing exceedingly emotional. By keeping a cooler tone, Douglass avoids writing hot with emotion and reestablishes his credibility. Douglass also uses a tone of despair to persuade of injustice. In one passage, he pours out his heart, “ O God, save me! God deliver me! ... Why am I a slave? ”(Douglass, 74). Through his touching supplication the reader better understands him.

His despairing tone displays how slavery truly broke him down and pushed him into misery. Douglass’ use of detail and tone sincerely convinces one of slavery’s evils. In addition to stylistic elements used thus far, Douglass also uses both imagery and syntax to portray the horrors of slavery. To begin with, he uses imagery by personifying slavery: “ there stood slavery, a stern reality, glaring frightfully upon us, -its robes already crimsoned with the blood of millions, and even now feasting itself greedily upon our own flesh. (Douglass, 90) By depicting slavery this way, he gives it power and emphasis, causing slaves to appear powerless beneath slavery’s influence. The mental representation he renders reveals once more the involuntary,

villainous enslavement and that the effects of slavery are evil and need to cease. Along with personification, Douglass uses a metaphor to illustrate the terrible effects of slavery on his mistress- “ Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me...Under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness” (Douglass, 51).

While her heart did not truly become stone, this illustration helps to reveal how the responsibility of owning another human being corrupted her. By using a metaphor, the comparison between her temperament before and after owning a slave becomes a harsher, more stark reality of slavery’s evil influence. Along with imagery, Douglass’ use of syntax provides description and effectively helps to portray slavery’s harms.

After escaping to the north, Douglass describes the thoughts running through his mind: “ let him place himself in my situation- without home or friends- without money or credit- wanting shelter, and no one to give it- wanting bread, and no money to buy it,... - perfectly helpless both as to the means of defense and means of escape, ... - I say, let him be placed in this most trying situation, - the situation in which I was placed,- then, and not till then, will he fully appreciate the hardships of, and know how to sympathize with, the toil-worn and whip-scarred fugitive slave” (Douglass, 110).

The choppy flow of this sentence, filled with breaks in thought, makes him seem breathless and reflects his panic as a runaway slave. This shows that slavery, which has instilled deep fear into the hearts of slaves, makes adjustment in a free world difficult for fugitives. To convince society of the harm that slavery wreaks on both the slave and slaveholder, Frederick

Douglass uses many literary elements in his narrative to convey his message.

Overcoming many difficulties and prejudice against him, Douglass published his narrative, despite numerous risks, to persuade society of slavery's evils. Engaged in pleading the importance of freedom, his narrative, read across the world, stands as a witness to the struggles required to pursue freedom. All through history, courageous individuals have stood up in the face of adversity to protect the rights of others. Today, where freedoms are threatened across the world, people can still make a difference, like Douglass' narrative, and unify people in a worthy cause to defend liberty.