

The argument of a king by martin luther religion essay



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While Martin Luther King Jr.'s audience, the white clergymen, accused him of his protests being unwise, untimely, and extreme, he effectively constructs an acceptable Christian definition of "just" and "unjust" laws, as well as what nonviolent direct action should entail by the use of an assortment of rhetorical techniques.

In his inspirational literary piece, "Letter from Birmingham Jail", Dr. King addresses not only the 8 white Alabama clergymen, but also a larger array of citizens, explaining his views on the evils of segregation. He was aware of the clergymen's lack of interest in how civil rights activists were breaking laws instead of handling the matter in a lawful, controlled manner. This led him to devising a more brilliant strategy for his rebuttal rather than an aggressive confrontation. He also knew that his words would be ignored, because all white clergymen and most religious non-supporters saw him as an inferior human being. Too often, arguments fail to bring about any type of understanding to the opposing side because each group has an assortment of important ideas that circle the basis of an argument from two different ends of the spectrum but very rarely tie together. Dr. King, therefore, realized that he must relinquish the role of an anti-segregationist and instead write in such a manner that would portray him as a righteous man with similar views and characteristics with that of his target audience, which, in this case, were the clergymen and other white members. He employs Aristotle's three means of persuasion, ethos, pathos, and logos, to accomplish this task.

Discussing whether or not a law should be followed on the grounds of its virtue requires the individual to be one whom is worthy of explaining such

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matters. Rather than coming out directly and arguing that the clergymen were wrong, which would illustrate King in the same likes as other anti-segregationists, he takes a much more sensible approach to his opponents to show his readiness of discussing these matters in good nature and maturity. Dr. King's effective use of rhetorical technique begins with the opening line. He states, " My Dear Fellow Clergymen" (King 213). This form of salutation completes two objectives. Firstly, it addresses the men who he disagrees with in a warm, welcoming fashion. The use of the word " Fellow" also creates a bond between King and his addressees, instead of separating them and making his letter seem quite offensive. The two aforementioned methods of using an affable type of welcoming set King's letter up to be a logical discussion, rather than a customary dispute in opposition to the clergymen's views. King employs this method further into his letter when he identifies the men as " men of genuine good will" (King 214). King states that he understands their viewpoint on the subject at hand and acknowledges them as men with good intentions before he explains why he disagrees. If King instead accused these white clergymen, who happen to be heavily influenced by religion, of any act of sinfulness, he could have potentially lost their interest and respect exceptionally early in his letter. Another remarkable strategy used in King's letter, also found in his opening excerpt, is the following: " While confined here in Birmingham city jail..." (King 213). Rather than being interpreted as a meaningless introduction, it illustrates the readers' interpretations of a cold, isolated, and unfeeling jail cell. Constructing this idea early into the minds of his addressees reminds them throughout the entire letter of where King is expressing these deep,

emotional feelings from, while they correspond from a significantly relaxed atmosphere.

Having the foundation of his argument set in place, King begins to explain the hardship of African Americans in the South, and how despite their repeated efforts, they continuously fail to achieve recognized civil rights. He discusses the “ unjust” laws keeping African Americans from the rights that they long to attain. Further into the letter, King introduces the reader to his assertion that unjust laws should not be obeyed faithfully; he explains, “ Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in a tragic effort to live in monologue rather than dialogue” (King 216). Using the phrase “ Southern lands”, rather than explaining that it is the African American community experiencing these troubles, effectively directs the reader into realizing that the hardships are not only felt by a small group of people, but rather the entire South. The aforesaid passage builds a strong logical appeal: if, in a specific populace, a person’s opinions are heard and acknowledged, then the possibility opens up of the laws in that region being unjust and in need of alteration. King is delicately persuading his addressees to concur with his impending arguments toward, what were at the time, the current segregation laws. Doing so will successfully rid the reader of any “ disagreement barrier” when he writes “ You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern” (King 218). Dr. King strives to display a mellow comprehension on a matter in which he lived to fight for, while simultaneously sympathizing with the sentiment of his opposition.

The logical and emotional appeal displayed in King's thoughtfully planned out reasoning attracts the reader further into wanting to consider the remains of his argument. A major occurrence in King's letter that signifies his use of logical persuasion is seen with his quote from St. Augustine, an early bishop of the Christian Church who deeply influenced the spirit of Christianity for many centuries, where he explains, " an unjust law is no law at all" (King 218). Before delving into the subject of just and unjust laws, however, King mentions that he strongly agrees with obeying just laws. Doing so creates another ethical bond with his addressees, which happen to be the men in charge of protecting laws, showing them that he also happens to be an individual with good intentions. This quote also draws a connection between King and St. Augustine, almost explaining that if the Saint were still alive, he would support King's endeavors. This is an important passage to note due to the fact that King's addressees were strongly influenced by religion at the time, therefore, making connections through religious correspondence was a legitimate form of communicating his ideas. The use of several occurrences when Christians broke unjust laws and resisted unreasonable rules because of their belief in God attempts to make a connection between King's actions and those of early Christians. This effectively portrays King's ethical characteristics to his audience; placing him above the standards of what many white readers would see him as. Bringing religion into his argument forces the clergymen to re-evaluate their statement about the impropriety of disobeying segregation laws because it would be out of the question for them to argue against King's biblical correlations.

Although there appear to be a large display of literary techniques used by Dr. Martin Luther King to gain respect and approval from his addressees, one may argue against many of King's ideals. One of which would be his main argument; the use of nonviolent direct action. The concern of the efficacy of nonviolent direct action arises, and ideas begin to develop on whether or not violence is actually needed in order to communicate one's viewpoint. As with anything else in the world, no action is guaranteed to work every time.

Although nonviolence does have its drawbacks, as seen in Burma and China, it has a relatively strong effectiveness. There have been dramatic improvements in civil and political rights over the past two decades, and nonviolent action has played a crucial role in this transition, including the downfall of dictatorships in Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Nonviolent struggles in recent decades have not only led to significant political and social reforms advancing the cause of human rights, but have also even toppled repressive regimes from power and forced leaders to change the very nature of their governance. As a result, nonviolent resistance has been evolving from an informal strategy associated with religious or ethical principles into an insightful, even institutionalized, method of resistance. One may also argue against King's religious references, stating that these analogies wouldn't apply to those persons who were not as heavily involved with religious, or, happened to be a part of a group aside from Christians. In such case, King emotionally appeals to every true American when he finishes his letter off discussing World War II. He reminds the reader that everything Hitler did was considered lawful at the time, and that aiding the Jewish civilians in German-controlled regions was deemed unlawful. This example from King is one that touches the hearts of <https://assignbuster.com/the-argument-of-a-king-by-martin-luther-religion-essay/>

many, since at the time WWII had recently ended yet still rested in the thoughts of every American. Drawing such a comparison was an extremely effective, however delicate, way for King to emotionally persuade, and show that, religious or not, the act of killing another human being can never be established as lawful.

King was quite aware of the white clergymen's use of several caustic messages of altercation underlying the very sophisticated words that were used to compile their public statement that inspired him to write this letter. He therefore took it upon himself to strike back with a similarly professional tone, addressing both what the clergymen claimed and the implications they overlooked in their views. His ability to compose a logical, even-tempered, argument, with such anger and frustration hidden deep in his heart, truly gains him the respect of the reader. With this acquired respect, he therefore is able to justifiably express his views on just and unjust laws. His addressees, who have already been swayed both expressively and plausibly, are pushed even further into creating a whole-hearted bond with a man who many considered an inferior human being. It is by this extraordinary display of writing and technique that King is able to communicate his viewpoints in a way that is both rational and nonviolent.