

Allusions and respectful tone in banneker's letter to jefferson

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From the late 1700s to the mid-1800s is when slavery saw the largest growth in racial injustice. Innocent men, women, and children were forced into hard manual labor with unhumanitarian working conditions in which many would face malicious abuse by their “ slave owners.” During this time of suffering there were not nearly enough people advocating for the lives of these slaves, but Benjamin Banneker, a slave justice activist fought for the abolishment of slavery. When evaluating American history, we see basic hypocrisy in The Declaration of Independence where Thomas Jefferson declared, “ all men are created equal,” yet him and the other writers still owned slaves. In the pursuit towards justice, Banneker writes to the secretary of state, Thomas Jefferson, arguing against slavery by asking Jefferson to remember just how much pain the British rule brought, using allusions, and by maintaining a respectful tone.

Banneker opens the letter by diverting Jefferson back to his experience with British tyranny to remind him just how painful it was. Immediately he asks Jefferson to recall the time when, “ the arms and tyranny of the British Crown were exerted with every powerful effort to reduce you to a State of Servitude,” (2-4). The use of this personification becomes so crucial to Banneker’s argument because the validity of it makes Jefferson feel his freedom being taken right out from under his feet again. By using this essential emotional appeal he shows that Colonial Americans fought for many of the same issues that the current slaves are fighting for. With this comparison of the British rule and slavery, he gains the audience’s sympathy and attention by enlightening them with a struggle everyone in that period would understand. Also within this paragraph, Banneker asks Jefferson to

reflect on the time, “ in which every human aid appeared unavailable, and in which even hope and fortitude wore the aspect of inability to the conflict,” (6-8). The repetition of “ in which” shows that the British rule was a time of suffering where many lost hope since there was indeed no help coming.

Instead of continuing listing the similarities between the oppression that the British rule brought and the oppression of the slaves, Banneker contrasts this darkness by explaining, “ you cannot but be led,” to a feeling of appreciation at the freedom you received, and “ you cannot but acknowledge,” that freedom is a gift from heaven (9-14). The repetition of “ you cannot,” forces Jefferson to accept that he much rather prefers he newfound gift of freedom. Overall, Banneker’s request of asking Jefferson to remember the pain that the British rule brought was central to his argument because it helped Jefferson realize how much hypocrisy he held within his position on slavery.

Next Banneker creates an allusion to The Declaration of Independence, which was a result of the British rule. For the reason that The Declaration of Independence was written by Jefferson himself, Banneker brings attention to the specific part of the Declaration stating, “ All men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” (21-25). During this time of slavery and the oppressed made up for a large percentages of the population, Banneker uses this allusion to show Jefferson just how inaccurate his document was. All men were not created equal. All men did not have concrete rights and liberty. This is so effective to his argument because he uses this allusion to try and evoke a sense of guilt from the audience; guilt that he wrote all of these things into the Declaration, but wasn’t following

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through on any of them. Banneker creates an additional allusion to the biblical figure Job - a righteous man who endured much suffering - who begged to, " put your souls in their souls stead," (49-50). The idea behind stepping into one's shoes is to get a better look into what they're going through, so that is what Banneker wants Jefferson to do himself. He believes that the only way to truly understand the predicament of the slaves' was for Jefferson to put himself into the slaves' position. Banneker gains ultimate effectiveness behind his argument by mentioning the bible and citing a biblical figure since many Americans believed in a Godly figure. Additionally, using biblical citations helps provide a sense of religious and emotional appeal which in turn strengthens an argument because religion is a great way to be credible. In hindsight, by creating allusions within his letter to Thomas Jefferson, Banneker strengthens his argument because they evoke feelings of guilt from the audience and provide biblical evidence to why Jefferson needed to create an act to end slavery in America.

Besides Banneker's implied remembrance to the British reign and his created allusions, he also maintains a respectful tone throughout his letter to earn the audience's highest regard. If the speaker started off his argument being utterly bashful in his tone, then the reader would most likely withdraw from any form of compromise or persuasion from Banneker. So instead, he addresses the audience, Thomas Jefferson, as " sir." He starts off the beginning of each paragraph with, " sir," followed by a reference to the audience himself. For example the first sentence starts out with, " Sir, suffer me to recall to your mind that time in which the arms and tyranny of the British Crown," (1-2) the use of Sir not only helps to capture Jefferson's

attention but it makes Jefferson feel like more of an authoritative figure because Banneker asked permission to remember that moment. This is effective to Banneker's argument because it doesn't make Jefferson feel any less than Banneker. Another example, in paragraph two, he addressed Jefferson by, " This sir, was a time in which you saw into the injustice of a state of slavery," (15-16). The use of " sir" helps to capture the reader's attention and then lead them into the rest of the argument. Specifically, in this part of the letter, the use of Banneker's respectful tone helps to generate a positive response from Jefferson because it makes him feel good about his past actions. Without this positive respectful tone, Banneker would not have had a shot at Jefferson's consideration because at this time Banneker was much lower in social status than Jefferson.