

Analysis of martin luther king's "letter from birmingham jail"

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Martin Luther King Jr, an civil rights activist, fought for the rights of African Americans in 1963. King organized various non-violent demonstrations in Birmingham, Alabama that resulted in his arrest. While in jail, King received a letter from eight Alabama clergyman explaining their distress and opposition to King and his followers actions.

This letter occasioned his reply and caused King to write a persuasive letter justifying his actions and presence in Birmingham. Although King's reply was addressed to the Alabama clergyman, its target audience was the " white moderate".

King understood that if he gained support from the average, indifferent white American that the civil rights movement would reach it's goals much faster. In his letter King effectively manipulates language to strengthen his counter argument against the complaints of the clergyman and successfully address the " white moderate". In the letter King automatically sets an urgent but non-aggressive tone. It benefits King to present the argument in an ethical non-blaming manner.

When writing his letter, King considered his target audience. If he had written in an attacking, aggressive manner the purpose of his essay would have been lost.

The clergyman and " white moderate" would feel attacked and not want to support King's cause. The use of eloquent language and not placing blame on any one group of people increases the effectiveness of King's argument greatly. Throughout the letter King enhances his credibility by using biblical

analogies to set a commonplace between himself and the clergyman and also the church-going, white southerner.

King applies this rhetorical tool by stating what has happened in the past, "... just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ..."(King).

King compares himself to, a prophet of the eight century BC, Apostle Paul. Paul left his homeland to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ, just as, King himself left Atlanta for Birmingham in order to carry the gospel of freedom beyond his hometown. King incorporates this analogy to legitimize his presence in Birmingham. By using a biblical analogy King creates a common place between himself and the clergyman. A place where they can relate to a common idea, and have an understanding of what King was trying accomplish while he was in Birmingham.

The readers of King's letter, eight clergymen, study the bible and respect it. They have deeply studied what apostles accomplished in the past and appreciate that their actions were for the greater good of mankind. If they compare King to the apostles, they would put more trust into his actions. Due to the religious background many "white moderates" possess, when they hear words such as "gospel" or "Jesus Christ" they automatically assume what King is speaking of is good natured and morally ethical.

They understand the terms that King uses. By constructing a commonplace by using biblical analogies King gains the respect of the clergyman and "white moderate" by letting the commonality of their religious background make King appear to be good natured and respectable.

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An emotional antidote about, "...the stinging darts of segregation"(King). influences the clergyman's conscious molding them into a more persuadable state and initiate an emotional uprising from the average white southerner.

King uses antagonizing pathos through his antidote of a father and his young daughter, "...your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can not go to a public amusement park advised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told Funtown is closed to color children..."(King). The antidote addresses all aspects of racism, abuse, and segregation that African Americans endure on a daily bases. King directs attention to the antidote by using long fluent syntax structure and colorful imagery.

The clergyman of Alabama may or may not know the harsh realities of society's cruelty towards the African American race.

By reading King's histrionic, and touching antidote the clergyman may become enlightened for the first time. King also targets parents, by targeting the "white moderate". Parents could put themselves in that situation and understand how hard it must be for African Americans. King creates sympathy and with sympathy comes action. By including the empathetic antidote King informs the possibly unaware clergyman and inflames the emotions and sympathy of the average man in hopes of getting them to act.

Logic builds the back bone to King's argument, it shows that he is educated, informed, and not acting purely on emotion; the use of facts as rhetorical tools persuades through reason and strengthens Kings argument.

By constructing a logical argument he is able to state his ambitions and ideas clearly and effectively. He gives specific examples to why he took action in Birmingham, " In any nonviolent campaign there are four steps: 1) collection of the facts to determine whether injustices are alive..."(King).

This gives the clergyman and " white moderate" understanding of the reason why King took direct action and organized rebellious demonstrations in Birmingham. They are informed that he is not purely acting out of anger and frustration. Also through cause and effect, King persuades through reason. For example, when arguing the need for civil unrest King indicates that demonstrations were an effect of unjust laws.

Such logic appeals to every audience because they are accepted facts. By using logic to develop his letter, he strengthens it and addresses issues in a direct manner.

Through powerful language Martin Luther King has changed the social structure of America. His logical, non threatening appeal is what makes his letter so effective. However, when combined with pathos from his dramatic antidote King's argument becomes even stronger.

His words are forever referred to and analyzed because of their strength and deeper meaning. Words are the most powerful drug used by mankind to provoke action. They are easy to speak, but the echoes are truly endless.