

Analysis of excerpt from martin luther king's "why we can't wait" essay sample

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America in the 1960's was a dark, despairing environment for African Americans, or Negroes. Conditions in all areas of life were poor, chances of success were slim to none, and appreciation or acceptance in the community was barely a dream. Negroes of this time were downtrodden, disrespected, and poorly treated. In his book, "Why We Can't Wait," Martin Luther King uses historical allusion, emotive imagery, rhetorical questions, and juxtaposition to convey the negative, daunting poor social conditions of Black Americans in the 1960's.

The first literary device utilized by King in his work is historical allusion. The subject matter which he presents to achieve his rhetorical purpose of depicting the dreadful situation of blacks in 1960's America from firsthand experience is mostly historical in nature. King often references times in history in which African Americans have helped the nation greatly. He states that, "for two hundred years, without wages, black people brought to this land in slave ships and in chains, had drained swamps, built the homes, made cotton king, and helped, on whip-lashed backs, to lift this nation from colonial obscurity to commanding influence in domestic commerce and world affairs". This historical reference illustrates how black people have really been helpful to this nation, yet are receiving awful treatment in the present day. King alludes to other significant events in the history of America involving Negroes to help prove his purpose as well. Certain heroes that represent the Negroes accomplishments such as Crispus Attucks are

mentioned as well. King uses historical allusion as a literary tool to accomplish his rhetorical purpose.

Another literary device exemplified in this passage is emotive imagery. The image given by King to the reader captures the desolation and grim circumstances for the average Negro in 1960's America. However, at the same time, King expresses the underlying hope of a brighter future for Negroes taking a stand against poor treatment. For example, early in the passage, King writes, " I see a young Negro boy. He is sitting on a stoop in front of a vermin-infested apartment in Harlem. The stench of garbage is in the halls. The drunks, the jobless, the junkies...". This is an example of how King presents the state of most Negroes in America. However, as the passage progresses, King offers the underlying perseverance and fight of the Negroes for acceptance. By stating, " It was a step that rocked the richest, most powerful nation to its foundations..." King is showing that there is hope for the Negroes to change the status quo and see better days. Emotive imagery is flexibly employed by King in this passage to achieve his overall rhetorical goal.

The next literary element that King uses is rhetorical question. Martin Luther King uses rhetorical questions to provoke deep thoughts or bring up topics in his prose. One example of a rhetorical question in *Why We Can't Wait* is, " Why does misery constantly haunt the Negro?". In this instance, King is attempting to bring forth contemplation from the reader about why the Negroes deserve this treatment. This ties in to his overall rhetorical purpose

of illustrating the terrible state of affairs of Negroes in 1960's America. Rhetorical questions are one literary element used to achieve this end.

Martin Luther King makes use of juxtaposition in his work to illustrate his purpose in the work. In the opening section of the passage, King introduces two separate characters that are representative of the state of Negroes in America at the time. One is a young boy, and one is a young girl coming from different situations and backgrounds. King goes on in the text to show some of the situations of the boy and the girl as well as some things they have in common. For example, King often shows their similarities, " This boy and this girl know something of the part of history...and the boy and the girl know more than just history. They knew something about current events." The boy and the girl are in separate parts of the nation, but embody the same concept or idea. King essentially places the boy and the girl on a pedestal at the end and is comparing them to illustrate the Negroes in America as a whole. " The boy in Harlem stood up. The girl in Birmingham arose...Across the miles they joined hands, and took a firm, forward step." King brings these two characters together and uses them to depict the Negro situation in America, which is his original rhetorical purpose.