

Letter from a Birmingham Jail: The Rhetorical Analysis

At the peak of the Civil War Movement in America on April 12th, 1963, eight Alabama clergymen made a public statement announcing that Dr. Martin Luther King's protests in the streets should end because they promote "hatred and violence" (par. 5). The clergymen condemn using nonviolent disobedience to obtain civil rights for the black people in Birmingham and believe that if whites and blacks come together to discuss this issue, there will be a better outcome for everyone. They also believed that Dr. King was just an "outsider" who wanted to stir up trouble in Birmingham (par. 3). During the time that the clergymen released their statement, Dr. Martin Luther King was in a Birmingham jail; arrested for protesting. While in his cell, Dr. King wrote "*Letter From a Birmingham Jail*" to inform the clergymen that he had a right to be in Birmingham and there are moral, just, and deserving reasons behind his actions. He uses rhetorical devices to persuade not only them, but the rest of the American people through the use of ethos (credibility), pathos (emotions), and logos (reason). By using these various devices, Dr. King is able to effectively convey his letter to his audience and gain the support needed for the Civil War Movement.

During the 1960s in America, Dr. King served as the president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The SCLC, which operates in every southern state with its headquarters residing in Atlanta, Georgia, was formed to help push the abolishment of segregation and to end the oppression of blacks using nonviolent tactics. There are 85 affiliated organizations across the south and one of them is the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR). Dr. King along with the rest of the SCLC decided to come to Birmingham and assist ACMHR once a group member asked them to help engage in a nonviolent direct action program if necessary. Birmingham especially needed a call to action during this time since there was a strong prevalence of the KKK and brutality from the police officers and other law officials. Dr. King referred to Birmingham as "America's worst city for racism" and made it his goal to bring justice and peace to all of its people, not only for the state but for the rest of the country.

In order to strengthen his argument and increase his credibility, Dr. King uses various forms of rhetorical devices in his letter. He uses parallelism when he says, "But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; ...when you have to concoct an answer for a five year old son who is asking: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?" (383). The repeated use of "when you" emphasizes the countless ways blacks have been mistreated. The use of parallelism really etches into the audience's mind the seemingly never-ending hardships blacks face and the repetition makes it seem like a regular routine they endure. Dr. King also includes metaphors in his letter such as when he says he sees "twenty million Negro

brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society.” (383). This metaphor paints a visual picture in the audience’s mind of the oppression they go through that seems to have no door to escape. They are forced to look at the privileges and freedoms that the white people in their community have, and there is no way for them to achieve it. Also, by saying they are confined in an airtight cage, it dehumanizes the blacks and subjects them to animals without any rights. Since Dr. King used multiple rhetorical devices in his letter, the audience views his argument as more credible since he has personal experience with seeing the injustice blacks endure. By his use of parallelism and metaphors, the audience has a better understanding of Dr. King’s argument and therefore can sympathize with him and support his ultimate goal.

Dr. King is also able to grasp the reader’s attention and allow them to sympathize with what black people have endured throughout America with the use of pathos. By vividly describing the violence, injustice, and brutality Dr. King has witnessed or experienced, the audience is able to better understand the issue at hand and therefore will more likely side with his standpoints and actions as opposed to the clergymen. In response to the clergymen’s opinion that the Birmingham police are keeping order and preventing violence, Dr. King says, “I doubt that you would have so warmly commended the policemen if you had seen its dogs sinking their teeth into unarmed, nonviolent Negroes.” it clearly broadcasts the image in the reader’s mind (391). Using the words “sinking their teeth”, “unarmed”, and “nonviolent” causes the audience to truly see the inhumane brutality behind the police’s actions towards people who are peacefully protesting. The people are able to see that while the police claim they are providing protection for the community, they are actually only doing harm. Dr. King also tells his audience that discrimination and segregation affects everyone when he says, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly” (380). This shows that everyone, regardless of race, is affected by the injustice occurring in the 1960s. If a group of people is oppressed, the rest of the population cannot progress or succeed. Knowing this, the audience will be more inclined to contribute to the social change. Dr. King puts the effect of segregation and racism on society as a whole into perspective and the readers are now able to see this barrier that keeps society from advancing too. From his use of pathos, the reader is able to better agree with the point being made and better able to sympathize with Dr. King and the millions of other people that experience this injustice. If Dr. King hadn’t chosen phrases and sentences that appeal to the reader’s emotions, he wouldn’t have received such strong support and understanding behind his actions and everyone else’s during the Civil Rights Movement. The audience was therefore more inclined to sympathize with the blacks and the treatment they have received than the clergymen and the government officials.

To effectively have the clergymen and the rest of the American people believe and side with his arguments, Dr. King must have sufficient facts and reason. In order to do this, he uses logos when he says, “There have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than in any other city in this nation. These are the hard, brutal, and unbelievable facts.” (381). By providing his audience with unarguable facts that

provide evidence of the excessive violence in Birmingham, Dr. King not only improves his credibility and trust, but enhances his overall argument.

Dr. Martin Luther King was an extremely prominent and influential member of the Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s. He was able to effectively show the American people the injustices the black community faced, why nonviolent protests were crucial to the movement, and what needed to be changed to bring equality and peace to America. Without his use of rhetorical devices, his audience would not be able to truly grasp the argument he was conveying, thus the Civil Rights Movement wouldn't be as successful and monumental as it ended up being. Using ethos, pathos, and logos made his letter more credible, logical, and better to understand and sympathize with. If Dr. King had not written such a strong and effective letter from the use of rhetorical devices, the strength of the Civil Rights Movement uproar and momentum that it is remembered today would be diminished.