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Martin Luther King Jr. “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” essay

“We will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.”(Martin Luther King Jr., I Have a Dream). Martin Luther King Jr. uses an idealistic and elegant approach in his writing. He used descriptive words to get his point across and to inspire readers to stand up for what they believe in. On April 16th, 1963 he used metaphoric and inspiring words to relate to the Clergymen and to gain their help in his cause. He was sent to jail during a peaceful protest in what he calls “the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States.” Birmingham, unfortunately, was known for its racial injustice and bombings. While slavery was outlawed and in many states segregation was and still is frowned upon, especially by those in the north, there remained some states that are so steeped in segregation that they cannot see the wrongs that have been committed. In “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. used stylistic devices such as metaphors, connotative language, and strategic support in order to open the church leaders’ eyes to racial injustice and convince them to take action against it.

Martin Luther King Jr.’s work used metaphoric symbolization to paint a picture, in a sense, for the Clergyman to help prove his point. Metaphors are figures of speech that do not use the words like or as. While metaphors are filled with pretty words and images if they are not used correctly they could end up giving you the opposite effect. It takes a lot of practice to be able to use metaphors at correct times. King had years of experience using metaphors and it reflects in his work. When King went to high school in Atlanta, Booker T. Washington High School, he became known for his public speaking skills. During his junior year, he won first prize in an oral speech presentation context. His elocutionist skills would help him greatly in the future. His clear use of metaphors helped him to get his point across to the Clergymen in his letter from the dusty, dank cell in the Birmingham Jail.

One example of metaphors that he used in that letter is “I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and that when they fail in this purpose they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress.”(Letter from a Birmingham Jail, April 16th 1963, paragraph 20.) He used this metaphor to tell the Clergymen about how they can never move forward, socially, if the segregation and prejudice isn’t put to a stop. He used the metaphor of a dam to show how the flow of social progression is being blocked. I believe he added this in to convince the Clergymen that if they do not destroy this dam, then they will be stuck in the same age and state of mind that they were in. He told them that because of that they can’t move forward.

He also used the metaphor “Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.”(Letter from a Birmingham Jail, April 16th 1963, paragraph 39.) This quote speaks of hope. “Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away” meant that he hopes that the feelings of sadness you get when being racially prejudiced against, will no longer happen. “…(T)he deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear drenched communities…” meant that the misunderstanding that we are not all created equal and the misconception that those of lighter skin are superior to those of darker colors, will be lifted from their communities that fear what injustice will happen to them next whether that be a hateful slur or a bombing. “…(I)n some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty,” meant that he hopes that in some time, implying that he knows it will not be instant, “(T)he radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty,” or that both races, whether light or dark will be able to play, talk, and form a brotherly bond with each other in a beautiful equalized manner, one in which they know that all men are created equal. He used this sentence to show how, no matter how dark the world looked right then, the light of a better tomorrow was there also. He was trying to convince the Clergymen how he thought that when segregation is gone that world will be a lighter, happier world. He used his knowledge of words to tell the Clergymen how he thought without segregation we could have a brighter tomorrow. But words are not all you need to convince someone to become emotionally invested in something this big.

King used his vast understanding of the feelings attached to words to get his audience to feel something. All good persuasive essays require pathos. “Persuasion is clearly a sort of demonstration, since we are most fully persuaded when we consider a thing to have been demonstrated…Secondly, persuasion may come through the hearers, when the speech stirs their emotions.”(Aristotle’s Rhetoric.) People’s emotions effect whether or not they will act on something. People rely on their emotions to tell them whether things are right or wrong, urgent or not. King used a keen word choice to invoke the feeling that something needs to be done.

Take the sentence, for example, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”(Letter from a Birmingham Jail, April 16th 1963, paragraph 4.) In this sentence King tried to invoke feelings of urgency and fear. He tried to make you imagine that segregation was a spider’s web and that it was sticking to us. We can feel the tremble of a spider drawing near. It had a negative and fearful connotative meaning that was meant to stir the audience into action.

Another example is in the paragraph “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 seen hate filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six year old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Fun town is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; 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?"; when you take a cross county drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored"; when your first name becomes "nigger," your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John," and your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs."; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness"--then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair.”(Letter from a Birmingham Jail, April 16th 1963, paragraph 12.) This is a large example. In it he was trying to express his feelings of concern, fear, and inequality. He wanted the readers to read this and sympathize with him and imagine, “What if?” “What if it was me or mine that was subject to such profanities and sadness?” He wanted to grab the reader’s emotions so that he can appeal to the reader’s more ethical side. He had hoped that the person perusing his article would read that and try to imagine that pain he would go through and then try to end it. He also used these words to show his frustration that the events transcribed were still taking place. With the appeal to emotions you need support though.

Like with all good arguments, speeches, works, and people, you need something to support them; in this case King used strategic support. You could even compare persuasive arguments to palafitte. Palafitte are houses that are built above the ground on poles. They also go by the name Pile Dwellings and Stilt Houses. These houses are made to lessen the damage of floods. What if you were to get rid of those stilts? The house would come crashing down. Without proper support the house, or your argument, would fall down.

One example of his supreme support skills is in paragraphs 12-18 where he is talking about just and unjust laws. King supported his thoughts on unjust laws by giving the definition of just and unjust laws. “A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law.”(Letter from a Birmingham Jail, April 16th 1963, paragraph 13.) Definitions are effective in persuasive essays because they give support to what that person is trying to say. By giving the definition they are empowering themselves to use the word and the definition to get their point across.

Quoting people is another good way to pursued someone. In “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” King quoteed St. Thomas Aquinas, Martin Buber, and Paul Tillich. Everything King had quoted them on is relevant and supported what he was trying to say. In his letter he refers to St. Thomas Aquinas’s beliefs by saying, “An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority.”(Letter from a Birmingham Jail, April 16th 1963, paragraph 13.) He then supported how he feels about this by quoting Martin Buber’s thoughts on segregation, “Segregation, to use the terminology of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, substitutes an "I it" relationship for an "I thou" relationship and ends up relegating persons to the status of things. Hence segregation is not only politically, economically and sociologically unsound, it is morally wrong and sinful.”(Letter from a Birmingham Jail, April 16th 1963, paragraph 13.) He used Paul Tillich’s thoughts to then clarify what he believe a sin to be by saying, “Paul Tillich has said that sin is separation.”(Letter from a Birmingham Jail, April 16th 1963, paragraph 13.) Without the support he had given his readers might have gotten confused on what he was trying to iterate. They could have different thoughts on what counts as sinful and what counts as just or unjust laws. Proper support is a great thing to have in essays because it helps you to, not only get your point across, but also get the audience thinking.

With the help of metaphors, connotative language, and support, King has helped lead his generations and the ones after him, to a subsequently brighter future. One in which we can all stand hand in hand in the fight for equalization. He used his knowledge of how to properly execute metaphors and connotative language to get the audience thinking and feeling. Then he added in the right amount of support to help convince his peers and other readers that his ideas are morally and ethically correct. He worked towards a better tomorrow through words. Just think of all the possibilities. What if one essay could change the world. King has shown us time and time again that it can. Always remember: “If you can’t fly, then run, if you can’t run, then walk, if you can’t walk, then crawl, but whatever you do, you have to keep moving forward.”(Martin Luther King Jr.)