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MLK Rhetorical Analysis

During the 1960s, African American anger culminated into a black rights movement dedicated to ending segregation. Despite the movement's peaceful origins, critics urged Martin Luther King Jr. and his followers to negotiate with local leaders instead of taking to the streets. In "Letter from Birmingham Jail," King responds to the concerns of the eight clergymen, who feared that an extremist leading a nonviolent approach was not the best way to achieve equal rights. By highlighting the morality of the African American community, King establishes his ethos to justify his direct nonviolent agenda while proving that black equality is inevitable.

King is quick to bolster his credibility by using point of view to contrast the righteous African American community to the lax clergymen. The first two sentences of paragraph 14 begin with a collective, third person perspective. King uses the pronoun "we" to represent a patient, reasonable African American community that has waited for "more than 340 years for their God-given rights." However, two sentences later, King begins to list a series of injustices blacks face on a daily basis in the second person perspective. His repeated usage of the word "you" creates an accusatory tone that isolates the clergymen as single individuals in society who are so far removed from the African American struggle that they can turn a blind eye to the "hate filled policemen who kill black brothers and sisters." In stark contrast to King, who has served as a upright figure during this movement, the clergymen have rejected the Christian principles of

love and equality. This sets up a false dichotomy for King's reader: they must either stand with the virtuous African Americans or the indifferent clergymen. To further the divide between the clergymen and black Americans, King includes an anaphora. He begins several sentences with the phrase "when you" followed by active verbs to vividly describe the torture his people have faced. The clergymen have never been trapped in a "cage of poverty," nor have they had to watch "vicious mobs lynch" loved ones. This repetitive structure emphasises that African Americans are caught in a never ending cycle of discrimination. On the other hand, the clergymen are sheltered in the churches, away from the dangers of the street. Showing that his critics are shielded from the rest of Birmingham, King presents himself a courageous leader, braving the front lines of the moment. Thus, his shift in point of view aided by an anaphora creates an effect that makes King's readers side with the upstanding black citizens instead of the clergymen who are content with maintaining an unjust status quo.

After discrediting the clergymen with an anaphora, King uses the same device to justify the nonviolent marches and demonstrations happening in Birmingham. The clergymen refer to this form of protest as "extreme," as they would much rather prefer negotiations led by local leaders. In paragraph 31, King specifically disputes this claim by repeating the phrase "will we be extremists." The repetition serves to associate the peaceful approach championed by King with "love" and as an "extension of justice." On the contrary, the local negotiations suggested by the clergy promote "hate" and are an "extension of injustice." By juxtaposing the two proposed options, King makes his approach seem more viable and one that is more representative of American ideals. At the same time, he turns the negative connotation underlying the word "extremists" and makes it one that is positive by naming other "extremists" such as Abraham

Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, and Socrates. All of these men, like King, had ideas that were “wise and untimely,” but now those ideas are widely implemented in modern society. Although repetition does legitimize King’s choice of protest, it is greatly enhanced by his appeal to religion as he lists good Christian men as extremists too. If the clergymen were to criticize King’s nonviolent marches and sit-ins, they would be challenging Amos, Martin Luther, John Bunyan and Jesus, men who King considers to be “extremists of love and justice.” Because these Christian founders supported “love, truth, and goodness,” the clergy are forced to concede that King’s actions fall in line with the Christian doctrine, while their inaction does not. By first using an anaphora to stress the peaceful origins of his movement, MLK then bolsters his credence by naming prominent religious figures who would have agreed with the way in which he handled racial matters in Birmingham.

MLK makes a religious appeal using God’s will to make it clear to the clergymen that whether they stand with or against African Americans, it is inevitable blacks will be viewed as equals under the law. King builds up to finally mentioning God, the final judge of morality, after first explaining the contributions of messenger Paul to prophet Amos to Jesus Christ. After going up the scale of the Christian religious pyramid, King opens paragraph 41 with “the judgment of God is upon the church as never before.” Here, MLK is putting the movement in the eyes of God because he is the only one that can change the clergymen’s mindset. King is positive that blacks will attain freedom because “the eternal will of God is in our echoing demands.” God wants the black man to be free; it would be the clergymen’s detriment to not support their fellow black brothers. King then goes on to list that as more and more people lend their support to his movement, the more people are “outright disgusted” by the church. If God wants all men to be

free, why are the clergymen not carrying out his demands on Earth? King purposely chooses to mention God toward the closing of the argument to add guilt to the clergymen and to eliminate any lingering doubts they have: if God says it so, the black man will be free. The religious appeals culminate and lend themselves to a tone of urgency. Unless the church wishes to “be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century,” it must make a decision. The dichotomy King presented in paragraph 14 (stand with the African Americans or with the church) is now a matter of time and morality. Hence, MLK’s appeal to religion and urgent tone render the clergymen with only one viable option and make them realize that equality for all, black or white, is unavoidable.

Just as King’s nonviolent campaign includes four basic steps, his letter includes four powerful uses of rhetoric to justify his leadership and choice of protest. After creating a divide between the lax clergymen and the reasonable African American community, King uses repetition to emphasize that his “extremist” actions stem from love and justice. He then goes on to list religious extremists, and then finally creates an urgent tone when explaining God’s wishes. With each form of rhetoric, King’s ethos is heightened, forcing the clergymen to admit that King and his moral followers are one step closer to attaining black equality through their peaceful protests.