



Interpreting Logical and Emotional Appeals – “Letter from Birmingham Jail” Grade Seven

Carefully read through the background information and the excerpt from “Letter from Birmingham Jail” by Martin Luther King, Jr. Answer the questions that follow.

During nonviolent demonstrations for racial equality in Birmingham, Alabama, Martin Luther King, Jr. was arrested and jailed for eight days. He wrote this letter to white clergymen to explain his actions and to answer those people who urged him to call off the demonstrations he had begun. In the letter, he responds to his critics who claim that he and other African-Americans should wait for the federal, state, and local governments to make changes.

Analyzing Logical Appeals

King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” uses logical and emotional appeals to influence its readers. *Logos* loosely translates to “logic.” A logical appeal depends on reasoning and evidence, appealing more to the audience’s intellect than their emotions. Logical reasoning depends on the following:

- facts as evidence
- research
- tradition
- reliance on authority
- cause/effect
- effective metaphors

King writes the following, using a logical appeal:

One may well ask: “How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?” The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that “an unjust law is no law at all.”

Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? 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. To put it in terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: 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.... Segregation is not only politically, economically, and sociologically unsound, it is morally wrong and sinful.



King's Use of Reliance on Authority

1. King cites two authorities highly respected by educated and moral people, St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. Research St. Augustine on the Internet. (A good search engine is alltheweb.com.) One of St. Augustine's statements is quoted above. Find another statement Augustine wrote that would support King's position and write it.
2. Research St. Thomas Aquinas on the Web. Write one of his statements or beliefs that would support Martin Luther King's position.
3. Explain in a sentence or two why King would use these two men as references.

King's Use of Facts as Evidence

King argues that two types of law exist: just and unjust. He further states that he advocates "obeying just laws." Write three laws that to you seem just and explain why you think they are just.

4. Just Law _____
Explanation _____
5. Just Law _____
Explanation _____
6. Just Law _____
Explanation _____
7. Would these laws fit King's definition of a just law? Justify your answer.

Write two laws that you think are unjust and explain why you think they are unjust.

8. Unjust Law _____
Explanation _____
9. Unjust Law _____
Explanation _____

Analyzing Emotional Appeal

An emotional appeal is an appeal to *pathos*, which in Greek loosely translates to “pain.” Most people respond to emotion, but the writer must be careful to use this appeal wisely and fairly. The writer’s aim should not be to manipulate the reader through emotions but to appeal to needs that all humans have in common:

- physical needs (life and health)
- psychological needs (a person’s need for love and respect)
- social needs (the need for freedom, for respect, for acceptance)

In using an emotional appeal, the writer will employ a friendlier, more relaxed tone.

King writes these words using a highly effective emotional appeal.

Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, “Wait.” 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 Funtown 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-country 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.

This passage is composed of only two sentences. The rhetorical techniques King uses in the second very long sentence create the emotional appeal.

1. Give an example of the repetition of a clause. What is the effect of this repetition?



2. Cite three words that could be considered vivid diction.

_____ , _____ , _____

a. Do these words have positive or negative connotations?

b. How do these words make you feel?

3. One metaphor in the passage is “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.”

a. What is the “airtight cage”?

b. What feeling is created through the use of this comparison?

4. Quote another metaphor in the passage.

5. Cite two references to groups of people whose situation arouses pity.

a.

b.

6. Give two examples of alliteration for effect.

a.

b.

c. How does the alliteration add to the emotional appeal?