



MLK Letter from Birmingham Jail Analysis

Mrs. Jamison
AP Language

Credits to *Classical Rhetoric* by Robert Connors

The Letter...

- Unusually Long:
 - 50 paragraphs totaling about 7000 words.
 - Usually, an open letter for publication would be much shorter than this one; if King had planned to give this as a speech it would have taken about an hour.
 - King admitted that if he had not been in a jail cell, “it would have been much shorter... but what else can one do when he is alone in a narrow jail cell, other than write long letters, think long thoughts, and pray long prayers.”

Analyzing the Arrangement...

- We are examining a piece that has already been written, trying to determine how many parts there are in the whole, where each part starts and ends, and how the parts are interrelated, and then we *speculate about why the author chose to organize the piece in the way that he did.*
- We must consider the subject, the occasion, the audience, and the purpose (rhetorical triangle...)

Judicial Rhetoric

- “Letter From Bham Jail” is an instance of judicial rhetoric – a justification of one’s actions.
- Letter was written in response to a published statement by eight clergymen from Alabama, and in the first sentence of the letter of response, King says “While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities ‘unwise and untimely.’”
- King then says, in the last sentence of that introductory paragraph, that, “I want to try to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.”
- King has already started to establish a tone of respect and reason.

How to start....

- Look for the major divisions of the letter – for the parts that would be marked with Roman numerals in a formal outline.
- We will start with the traditional *Introduction, Body, and Conclusion*, or, as Aristotle called them, the *Beginning, Middle and End*.



Introduction...

- The first paragraph constitutes the introduction. This four-sentence paragraph seems short, but it fits for the letter genre.
- Most people would establish their credentials, or *ethos*, in the intro, but King was so well-known that he didn't have to here.

Classical Introduction (Exordium)

- Establish good will
- Summarize the writer's approach to the topic
- Lay the groundwork for an argument that the subject has been misunderstood or misrepresented
- Present credentials

Classical Introduction (Exordium)

King will loosely follow the classical argumentative pattern of *exordium* (introduction), *expositio* (exposition), *confirmatio* (argument), *confutatio* (rebuttal), and *peroratio* (conclusion); but rather than construct the "Letter" along a single line of argument, he weaves these five argumentative moments into a larger structure whose general argument takes its shape from the clergymen's letter.

Conclusion...

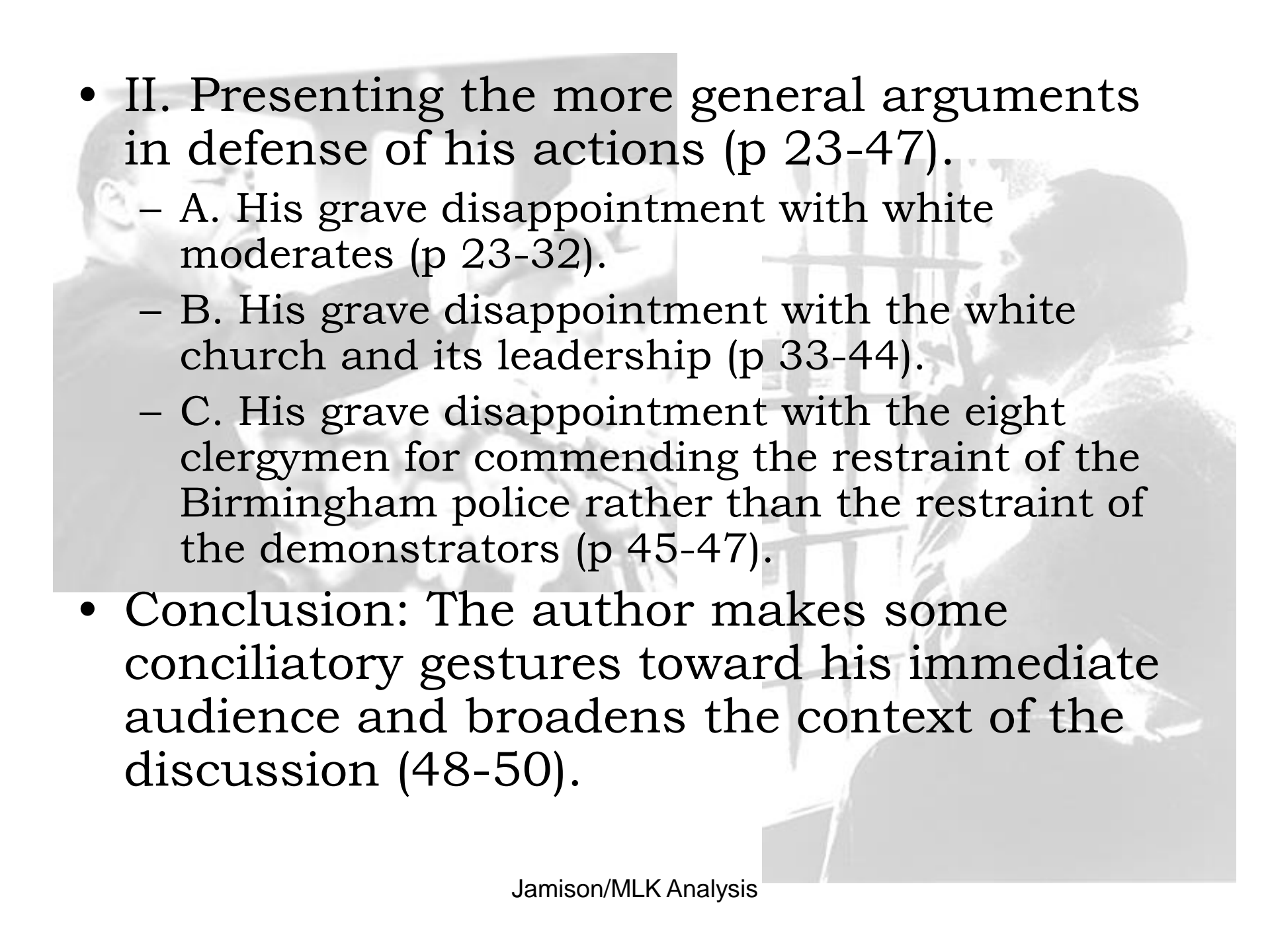
- The conclusion consists of the last three paragraphs, where the author is winding down his discussion.
- There are subtle touches of emotion and clear attempts to further establish and reinforce his ethos – gestures of good will, humility, and ingratiation.
- These concluding paragraphs leave the reader with a tone of peacefulness and hopefulness.

The Body Paragraphs...

- Made up of two major, Roman-numeral divisions: the section in which the author answers the specific questions asked by the clergymen in their public statement (p 2-22) and;
- The section in which the author presents his more general arguments in defense of his actions (p 23-47).

An Example Outline...

- I. Answering the specific questions asked by clergymen
 - A. First question: Why did you come to Bham? (P 2-4)
 - B. Second question: Why did you resort to demonstrations instead of negotiations? (P 5-11)
 - C. Third question: Are not your actions untimely? (P 12-14)
 - D. Fourth question: How can you justify breaking the law? (P 15-22)

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- II. Presenting the more general arguments in defense of his actions (p 23-47).
 - A. His grave disappointment with white moderates (p 23-32).
 - B. His grave disappointment with the white church and its leadership (p 33-44).
 - C. His grave disappointment with the eight clergymen for commending the restraint of the Birmingham police rather than the restraint of the demonstrators (p 45-47).
 - Conclusion: The author makes some conciliatory gestures toward his immediate audience and broadens the context of the discussion (48-50).

Structure...

- Is one of *refutation* first, then of *confirmation*.
- He might have chosen to reverse the order, placing the general, positive arguments first.
- Why do you think he chose to write the letter the way that he did?

The Classica Apologia

- This is not a rambling discourse, but rather a well-organized argument.
- It steadily moves forward instead of eddying chaotically.
- The success of this incredible act of communication is due almost as much to the way it was organized as to the soundness of the argument and the eloquence of the style.

MLK's Style...

- Like all rhetorical choices, stylistic decisions have multiple effects.
 - Rational: Logos
 - Emotions: Pathos
 - Ethical: Ethos

Appeals

Please identify ethos, logos, and pathos.

While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities "unwise and untimely." Seldom do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would have little time for anything other than such correspondence in the course of the day, and I would have no time for constructive work. But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statements in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.

Appeals

Please identify ethos, logos, and pathos.

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. 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. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.

Appeals

Please identify ethos, logos, and pathos.

Let us consider a more concrete example of just and unjust laws. An unjust law is a code that a numerical or power majority group compels a minority group to obey but does not make binding on itself. This is difference made legal. By the same token, a just law is a code that a majority compels a minority to follow and that it is willing to follow itself. This is sameness made legal.

Appeals

Please identify ethos, logos, and pathos.

We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward gaining political independence, but we stiff creep at horse-and-buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging dart 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,

Appeals

Please identify ethos, logos, and pathos.

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-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.

Appeals

Please identify ethos, logos, and pathos.

Yes, these questions are still in my mind. In deep disappointment I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love. Yes, I love the church. How could I do otherwise? I am in the rather unique position of being the son, the grandson and the great-grandson of preachers. Yes, I see the church as the body of Christ. But, oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and through fear of being nonconformists.



Allusions...

- King often refers to other famous men whom he expects his readers to recognize.
- These allusions are effective in both logos and pathos, and they also help to establish King's credibility – his ethos.

Allusions...

- King puts himself into a great tradition of protest beginning with Socrates, referred to three times, and extending down through primarily Christian history, from the early prophets to Christ himself, to Paul, to Aquinas, Augustine, Martin Luther, and Bunyan.
- King also quotes or paraphrases Reinhold Niebuhr, Martin Buber, and Paul Tillich, leading modern spokesmen from both Christian and Jewish faiths.
 - What is the effect of his allusions?
 - MLK, who was potentially suspected as an outsider, a rabble-rouser, even a criminal, reveals himself to be educated, wise, and widely read.
 - The allusions help King to establish an ethos of wisdom and erudition.

Metaphor

- King's style is also marked by his use of metaphors drawn from:
 - Contemporary technology;
 - Darkness and light;
 - Medical metaphor;
 - Modern technology.
- Darkness/Light: The present system and segregation are characterized as being *down* and *dark*, while the hope for the future involves rising and coming into the *light*.
- The black people live in a *dark shadow* and must *rise from the dark depths*.
- The nations of Africa are moving forward with “jet-like” speed while we go at a “horse and buggy” rate.
- Segregation is a “disease” and later a boil that must be exposed to the healing sun (light).



Metaphor

- What is the effect of his extensive use of metaphor?

Like all rhetorical choices, the stylistic decision to use metaphor affects King's image: the archetypal references create the image of a sincere man of deep feeling who is fundamentally like the reader and who has confidence in both his own moral judgment and in the inevitability of a better tomorrow.

King further establishes his ethos through metaphor.

Tone and diction



- Choice in diction: His salutation
- His use of phrases that show his respect for the reader
- His use of personal pronouns
- What is the effect of this choice of diction?
 - MLK's choice in diction helps to create conciliatory tone that establishes his respect for his reader and his quiet confidence in his position.