Essay Analysis: Frederick Douglass: “The Destiny of Colored Americans”

Inquire: Rhetorical Analysis in Action

Overview

Rhetorical analysis is the analysis of the rhetorical situation of a text. It can help you understand how a writer is appealing to his or her audience and how they go about accomplishing their purpose. It can be used to gain a deeper understanding of the purpose of nearly any written text. Rhetorical analysis can also offer great insight into how the author uses rhetorical appeals to help accomplish his or her purpose.

Big Question: How does Frederick Douglass use rhetorical appeals in “The Destiny of Colored Americans?”

Watch: The Life of Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass is an American hero of the abolitionist movement. An escaped slave, he became a profoundly important voice of activism in his writings and public speaking. He is perhaps best known for his 1845 autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, which is a text widely taught in high school classrooms to this day.

At the age of six, Douglass was separated from all family and sent to a plantation by himself to work as a slave. He eventually was “given” to a family who taught him the alphabet before they hired him out to another person. Douglass spent much of his free time using the Bible to teach other slaves to read. When his educational efforts became widely known at around the age of 16, he was sent to a man who whipped him brutally.

He attempted to escape this man’s abuse several times, and he finally succeeded in 1838 when he fled to New York to live with an abolitionist. Douglass was soon married and moved to Massachusetts, where he began telling the story of his life in slavery and his escape to abolitionist crowds.

After time spent traveling abroad, Douglass returned to the United States and began publishing a newsletter titled *The North Star*. At this time, he also began committing himself to the women’s rights movement in addition to his work as an abolitionist. He was the only African American to attend the Seneca Falls Convention.

Douglass’ experiences in learning to read and teaching others to read gave him a deep respect for the written word. His writings are rich with allusion and rhetorical devices. The essay of this lesson’s focus is
entitled “The Destiny of Colored Americans.” It offers a great chance to examine the dynamic relationship between ethos, pathos, and logos, and how they work together to help a writer accomplish the purpose of a text.

Consider as you read: if you endured physical suffering simply because you wanted to teach others to read, how passionate would you be about ensuring that all people receive an education?

Read: Frederick Douglass’ “The Destiny of Colored Americans”

Overview

Nearly every text can be analyzed using the rhetorical situation. Texts that have a clear, rhetorical purpose are especially rich in their rhetorical appeals. As you read this selection from Frederick Douglass, written in 1842 and published in his abolitionist newspaper The North Star, focus on the following:

1. His credibility and how he presents himself as a speaker (ethos)
2. His appeal to the emotions of his reader (pathos)
3. His use of logic and reasoning to make his point (logos)

Frederick Douglass’ “The Destiny of Colored Americans”

“It is impossible to settle, by the light of the present, and by the experience of the past, any thing, definitely and absolutely, as to the future condition of the colored people of this country; but, so far as present indications determine, it is clear that this land must continue to be the home of the colored man so long as it remains the abode of civilization and religion. For more than two hundred years we have been identified with its soil, its products, and its institutions; under the sternest and bitterest circumstances of slavery and oppression—under the lash of Slavery at the South—under the sting of prejudice and malice at the North—and under hardships the most unfavorable to existence and population, we have lived, and continue to live and increase. The persecuted red man of the forest, the original owner of the soil, has, step by step, retreated from the Atlantic lakes and rivers; escaping, as it were, before the footsteps of the white man, and gradually disappearing from the face of the country. He looks upon the steamboats, the railroads, and canals, cutting and crossing his former hunting grounds; and upon the ploughshare, throwing up the bones of his venerable ancestors, and beholds his glory departing—and his heart sickens at the desolation. He spurns the civilization—he hates the race which has despoiled him, and unable to measure arms with his superior foe, he dies.

Not so with the black man. More unlike the European in form, feature and color—called to endure greater hardships, injuries and insults than those to which the Indians have been subjected, he yet lives and prospers under every disadvantage. Long have his enemies sought to expatriate him, and to teach his children that this is not their home, but in spite of all their cunning schemes, and subtle contrivances, his footprints yet mark the soil of his birth, and he gives every indication that America will, forever, remain the home of his posterity. We deem it a settled point that the destiny of the colored man is bound up with that of the white people of his country; be the destiny of the latter what it may.

It is idle—worse than idle, ever to think of our expatriation, or removal. The history of the colonization society must extinguish all such speculations. We are rapidly filling up the number of four millions; and all the gold of California combined, would be insufficient to defray the expenses attending our colonization. We are, as laborers, too essential to the interests of our white fellow-countrymen, to make a very grand effort to drive us from this country among probable events. While labor is needed, the labor cannot fail to
be valued; and although passion and prejudice may sometimes vociferate against us, and demand our expulsion, such efforts will only be spasmodic, and can never prevail against the sober second thought of self-interest. We are here, and here we are likely to be. To imagine that we shall ever be eradicated is absurd and ridiculous. We can be remodified, changed, and assimilated, but never extinguished. We repeat, therefore, that we are here; and that this is our country; and the question for the philosophers and statesmen of the land ought to be, What principles should dictate the policy of the action towards us? We shall neither die out, nor be driven out; but shall go on with this people, either as a testimony against them, or as an evidence in their favor throughout their generations. We are clearly on their hands, and must remain there forever. All this we say for the benefit of those who hate the Negro more than they love their country. In an article, under the caption of “Government and its Subjects,” (published in our last week’s paper,) we called attention to the unwise, as well as the unjust policy usually adopted, by our Government, towards its colored citizens. We would continue to direct our attention to that policy, and in our humble way, we would remonstrate against it, as fraught with evil to the white man, as well as to his victim.

The white man’s happiness cannot be purchased by the black man’s misery. Virtue cannot prevail among the white people, by its destruction among the black people, who form a part of the whole community. It is evident that the white and black “must fall or flourish together.” In the light of this great truth, laws ought to be enacted, and institutions established—all distinctions, founded on complexion, ought to be repealed, repudiated, and forever abolished—and every right, privilege, and immunity, now enjoyed by the white man, ought to be as freely granted to the man of color.

Where “knowledge is power,” that nation is the most powerful which has the largest population of intelligent men; for a nation to cramp, and circumscribe the mental faculties of a class of its inhabitants, is as unwise as it is cruel, since it, in the same proportion, sacrifices its power and happiness. The American people, in the light of this moment, are at this moment, in obedience to their pride and folly, (we say nothing of the wickedness of the act,) wasting one sixth part of the energies of the entire nation by transforming three millions of its men into beasts of burden.—What a loss to industry, skill, invention, (to say nothing of its foul and corrupting influence,) is Slavery! How it ties the hand, cramps the mind, darkens the understanding, and paralyses the whole man! Nothing is more evident to a man who reasons at all, than that America is acting an irrational part in continuing the slave system at the South, and in oppressing its free colored citizens at the North. Regarding the nation as an individual, the act of enslaving and oppressing thus, is as wild and senseless as it would be for Nicholas to order the amputation of the right arm of every Russian soldier before engaging in war with France. We again repeat that Slavery is the peculiar weakness of America, as well as its peculiar crime; and the day may yet come with this visionary and oft repeated declaration will be found to contain a great truth.”

Reflect Poll: The Power of Language

Do you find the language in “The Destiny of Colored Americans” to be persuasive?

- Yes
- No

Expand: Examining the Rhetorical Situation

The author makes clear use of the different elements in this rhetorical situation: (1) his identity as a writer, (2) the subject or issue being discussed, (3) his purpose, (4) the beliefs and emotions of the audience, (5) the form of his writing, and (6) the context in which he writes.
Let’s take a closer look at how he approaches the particular rhetorical situation of his essay.

- **The writer, his credibility, and how he presents himself to the reader:** As an escaped slave who worked diligently to end slavery and make a life for himself in the North, Douglass writes from a place of pre-existing credibility. He does not need to spend much time arguing for his own expertise. One of the first observations we can make about Frederick Douglass' ethos is that he presents himself as a well-educated and thoughtful speaker. While his writing reads as intelligent, the words and phrasing are fairly accessible to most literate audiences. His word choice is often harsh: “the lash of Slavery” and “the sting of prejudice and malice” are phrases that have negative connotations and imply that Douglass’ tone is — at the very least — frustrated with the state of the black man’s position in America.

- **The beliefs and emotions of his audience:** The harsh language mentioned above does additional work to appeal to the emotions of the audience; *The North Star* was a publication produced by and for abolitionists. His audience would have shared his frustration and would not have required much convincing to join him in his righteous anger. Additionally, Douglass’ use of the pronoun “we” creates a community with his readers: “For more than two hundred years we have been identified with its soil, its products, and its institutions; under the sternest and bitterest circumstances of slavery and oppression.” He reminds his readers of their common experience and the oppression under which they have suffered. This kind of camaraderie would help to galvanize his readers to action.

- **His use of logic and reasoning to make his point:** Douglass concentrates the majority of his logos in the final paragraph. His ultimate argument can be summed up in the first sentence: “If knowledge is power, then a nation ought to want everyone within its borders to be intelligent.” By keeping the black man from knowledge, Douglass argues, America is keeping itself from power. He uses this commonly agreed upon saying, “knowledge is power,” and extends it to include the black man. By using a point that is usually considered inarguable, Douglass makes his own argument inarguable as well.

- **His purpose:** Douglass states his purpose fairly outright when he issues the following call to action: “In the light of this great truth, laws ought to be enacted, and institutions established — all distinctions, founded on complexion, ought to be repealed, repudiated, and forever abolished — and every right, privilege, and immunity, now enjoyed by the white man, ought to be as freely granted to the man of color.” He states this call with such clarity that the reader has no question what Douglass thinks should happen. All good essays should have a purpose statement this clear. Douglass’ respectable and credible ethos adds to this purpose. He is a man who has taken great risks to secure his own freedom. His appeals to pathos invite his readers to join him in this cause, and the logic of his argument is unquestionable. It is the combination of these elements that make this text a rhetorical success.

**Lesson Toolbox**

**Additional Resources and Readings**

A mini biography of the life of Frederick Douglass
- Link to resource: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Su-4JBElhXY

Another famous piece from Frederick Douglass
- Link to resource:
Lesson Glossary

None

Check Your Knowledge

1. Frederick Douglass taught himself how to read.
   a. True
   b. False
2. Frederick Douglass used harsh word choice when discussing slavery.
   a. True
   b. False
3. The North Star was written for abolitionists.
   a. True
   b. False

Answer Key:

Citations

Lesson Content:

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