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### Reviewing Rhetoric

Roman rhetorician Quintilian once stated, “Rhetoric is the art of speaking well” (Quintilian). The way in which an idea is presented can be skillfully done in order to persuade or argue. Professor and rhetorician Lloyd Bitzer, and Duke University Professor Joseph Harris both demonstrate ways in which people address information to an audience or reader. Bitzer proposes the idea of the “rhetoric situation”. He believes that in effective arguments is a response to a situation, also known as the rhetoric discourse. Bitzer feels rhetorical discourse is composed of three factors, exigence, audience, and constraints. Harris explains of a slightly different way to look at a work. He develops the idea that a reader needs to come to terms with the work in order to fully understand and review a piece. Harris unravels techniques of coming to terms with writing by understanding what the author’s purpose is, there methods, what the author forwards and counters, and which phrases or words are significant to the writing. Using the tools provided by Bitzer and Harris can be applied to various literary works. Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” may be analyzed using both Bitzer and Harris’s methods. By doing so, the audience or reader is able to comprehend King’s goals by writing this letter.

Bitzer’s philosophy of rhetoric is one in which a rhetorical discourse is presented as a response to a situation. The rhetor’s goal is to influence change in favor of an argument. The

three major factors of this that need to be understood begin with exigence. Exigency is the urgency to act on a situation. The prompt action required drives a rhetorician to express their argument to an audience. An audience is the second focal point that Bitzer evaluates. The speaker or writer should understand who their audience is. These are the people who are able to be persuaded. These are the people whom the rhetor is trying to convince in order to assist in the change. There are constraints however that affects the deliverance of a situation. These are the factors that have the capability of hindering the favorable results of the argument being made. Bitzer's rhetoric situation focuses on the idea of this conversation in which dialogue is expressed with an understanding of both sides.

Martin Luther King Jr's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" is his desire to improve civil rights conditions for African Americans. King follows the philosophy of Bitzer in that King is acting upon the exigency, he recognizes who the audience is, and he battles through the constraints that are harmful to his argument. During the mid-twentieth century, America was at a state in which civil rights of its citizens were being challenged. King notes that this issue cannot be delayed any longer when he states, "There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of despair" (King 346). Though at a struggle, or constraint, while in a Birmingham jail, King accepted this due to the urgency to fight for equality between all races in the United States. King is directing this letter to an audience of people whose hope for progress is almost lost, whose faith in nonviolent action is doubtful, yet also to an audience eager to hear words of support for equality. Throughout, King is convincing that in order for improvement for the African American community to occur, urgent nonviolent action must take place.

Joseph Harris's approach toward analyzing rhetorical literature is valuable as well. He believes that rather than summarizing a piece, it is better to "rewrite" it in a way that you come to terms with it. Generally, coming to terms is not a recitation, but rather one's understanding and addition to what the writer is trying to do. In order to do so, one should look for several strategies the writer uses to prove their point. It is important first to understand the author's project. Exploratory the purpose, aims, and goals of the author, helps to better understand the literary work. Finding key terms and quotes that appeal to oneself is ideal because it allows one to share what personally stood out to them as a reader. The author helps to demonstrate their points by forwarding and countering information from outside sources. Forwarding is used to express provocative or interesting information, prove a point, or create dialogue to benefit their argument. Countering differs in that it is used to respond to opposing views. This opens a new discussion of the opposing side, therefore creating an argument against the other side.

Using Harris to analyze a text can help to understand rhetoric, such as Martin Luther King Jr's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail". King's goal of this letter is to recognize the social tension against African Americans in the United States, as well as noting unjust actions and laws. King also aims to create a better society through peaceful, non-violent actions. He comments on the urgency of this situation, along with the want to gain support on resolving this issue. By forwarding, King parallels this situation to conflicts in history, such as World War II. King also forwards famous historical thinkers in order to support his thoughts. He also counters several times throughout the letter in order to challenge the opposing viewpoints on the matter. King argues against segregationists by the names of Mr. Boutwell and Mr. Conner who were running in an upcoming election during the time in which this letter was written. He believed electing

either of these candidates will not reform the South; rather it will take willpower by the people of the South to stand up for equality.

Reviewing a rhetorical work can be done in several ways. The methods of Lloyd Bitzer and Joseph Harris are ideal in order to understand why and how the author argues and persuades an issue. Both theories of analysis result in not only a better comprehension of the issue presented, but also who the author is as a writer, and what inspires them. Studying the rhetorical discourse, such as Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail", allows the reader or audience to become a part of the dialogue. As a reader, you are not just observing the discourse, yet actually dissecting it.

Works Cited

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