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Writing as Inquiry I 014

Rhetorical Analysis

March 15, 2020

A relatively clean sweep: Rhetorical strategies in Douglass’s “Learning to read”

“Those who will not reason, are bigots, those who cannot, are fools, and those who dare not, are slaves.”(Byron) Slavery in American history is a notorious “crime”(Douglass 96). Many slaves suffered injustice and were deprived of human rights. One such black man, author Frederick Douglas, wrote “The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,” published in 1845 by the Anti-Slavery Society, and in an excerpt of it called “Learning to read”, he argued that masters inflicted violent punishments and brought adverse spiritual effects on slaves, but slaves should have equal rights and freedom. He successfully “exposed the material degradation of slavery and the psychological effects” to the public by writing his narrative. (Douglass 97)Also, he managed to explain why slavery was evil, how evil it was, and in what aspects it did harm and brought injustice to slaves. Douglass aims to convince the white American audiences, who supported slavery, the wisdom of slaves, and the evils of slavery. Douglass built his persuasive arguments by citing sources and by giving an example, employed emotional appeals by selecting word choices, and established his credibility with personal stories.

Douglass began with the transformation of his mistress in “Learning to read” to tell how slavery corrupted its participants. To demonstrate this, Douglass used facts with logos. Douglass used four points to prove his mistress was a warm and tender-hearted woman when he first lived with her. The first fact is, “when I first went to live with her, to treat me as she supposed one human being ought to treat another.” The rest facts are, “She had bread for the hungry, clothes for the naked, and comfort for every mourner that came within her reach” (Douglass 97). Through these facts, the image of the mistress is vivid. She is believed as a kind and tender-hearted woman. However, she became ruthless to Douglass later. The facts with logos include stopping teaching Douglass, being anxious, and forbidding Douglass to read. Douglass used logos with logical reasoning to explain the transformation. The mistress was influenced by her husband and began to be mean to Douglass. By employing the fact, Douglass lent credibility to his point that the way his mistress treated him reflected the brutality of slavery. (Douglass 97) Slavery plays a vital role in changing white people’s concept of black people and humanity. Moreover, the sentence “the lamb-like disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness” used simile to emphasize the contrast. (Douglass 97) Thus, the sharping difference between the mistress’s previous manner and later rude behavior fully shows slavery seriously corrupted its participants. Also, Douglass cited many sources from the Colombian Orator Collection of political essays and dialogues about denouncing slavery to strengthen his credibility. By using the above rhetorical appeals with his own experience, logical reasons, and citations, audiences are convinced that slavery was evil.

Also, to show Douglass’s wisdom in learning read and write and to add credibility to the fact that he wrote the narrative, Douglass described his own experiences of learning and enhanced his persuasion by all rhetorical appeals, which are ethos, pathos, and logos. At first, to improve his credibility, Douglass used ethos of his own experience. After the mistress stopped to teach Douglass, he still succeeded in learning to read by making friends with white boys. Douglass also exchanged learning to read with bread. When he began to learn to write, he practiced writing in the spaces left in his Master Thomas’s copybook and imitated Thomas’s handwriting. Douglass described the details of how he did these things. He told the audience his own experience so vividly that he improved his credibility. To further persuade the audience, he used pathos appeal, which expressed his intense emotions. He wrote, “I am strongly tempted to give the names of two or three of those little boys, as a testimonial of the gratitude and affection I bear them” (Douglass 98). The author’s strong and sincere feelings to show his experience and to prove the truth were revealed. Finally, Douglass used logos with facts. He wrote the little white boys lived on Philpot Street where was near Durgin and Bailey’s ship-yard. This fact supported Douglass’s experience that he did work out ways to study from white boys. In the detail of learning to write, Douglass used the fact of ship carpenter’ marks, such as “L” sharp of timber stands for the larboard side. (Douglass 101) Moreover, he mentioned the fact that he copied Webster’s Spelling Book to learn to write. Apart from logos with facts, Douglass used logos with logical reasons. “With their kindly aid, obtained at different times and in different places, I finally succeeded in learning to read,” “Thus, after a long, tedious effort for years, I finally succeeded in learning how to write” (Douglass 101; 102). Because of the reasons listed above, although it was hard for a slave to learn to write, Douglass finally succeeded. The strategies strongly support Douglass’s persuasion and demonstrate his wisdom, courage, and persistence in learning to read and write. The audience is convinced that slaves are as wise as them, and Douglass, as a slave, was also able to write a high-level narrative by himself.

In addition, his introduction is full of emotionally-charged words and phrases that create a sympathetic image; Douglass noted that he “to his mistress’s satisfaction” and “that very document which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish.”(Douglass 97; 99) The image he evoked of the vulnerabilities of being stupid, as well as the high emotions a slave felt at the time when effectively introduce the argument and its seriousness. His purpose was to cause the readers to feel sympathy for him and aroused the outrage. Adding to this idea are words and phrases such as “even more violent,” “rush at me with a face made all up of fury,” and “snatch from me a newspaper.” (Douglass 97) All of these words evoke negative emotions about slavery, which makes the readers sympathize with slaves who felt the loss of human rights and education. In like manner, his language did not directly express much hatred towards his mistress and the white, but he mostly used a plain tone, preventing the white audience from feeling offended. Also, another feeling Douglass reinforced with his word choice was the concept of “invasion”: “who had stolen us from our homes” and “in a strange land reduced us to slavery.” (Douglass 99) These words help establish a sense of unfairness when slaves do errands, and they are an appeal to pathos or the readers’ feelings of sorrow and fury with injustice.

 Before Independence, slaves had a limited chance to speak for themselves and judge slavery. In conclusion, Douglass’s article is full of ethos with his own experience, pathos with his strong feeling and logos with real facts and logical reason to describe how he learned to read and write, which convinced the audience that slaves were as wise as white people, a slave like him was also likely to write a high-level article, and they could achieve their dream with wisdom. However, they were uncultured because of the evil slavery, which deprived the blacks the right to be educated. The article also successfully persuaded the audience that slavery was immoral and blew the white who had a prejudice against blacks. Douglass’s article is excellent and achieves its purpose of persuasion.

Works Cited

Frederick Douglass. “Learning to read.” “the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,” the Anti-Slavery Society, 1845, pp. 96-102.