

Comparison and Contrast Outline: Martin Luther King and Malcolm X

THESIS: In their effort to improve the lives of African Americans, MLK and Malcolm X employ the rhetoric of innate human rights and shame in their texts, while putting forth competing visions of the American Narrative.

CRITIAL TOPIC SENTENCE 1: Within the letter and the speech, both leaders appeal to their audience's sense of justice by discussing innate rights.

MLK SUB TOPIC SENTENCE : By employing his discussion of just and unjust laws, MLK attempts to convince readers of the rationality of the movement.

MALCOLM X SUB TOPIC SENTENCE: Though his terminology is different, Malcolm X's analysis of the difference between civil rights and human rights mirrors MLK's discussion of just and unjust laws.

CRITIAL TOPIC SENTENCE 2: While MLK's letter addresses white moderates and Malcolm X's speech addresses members of the African American community, they each seek to improve the lives of African Americans by engendering shame in their audience.

MLK SUB TOPIC SENTENCE: Dr. King makes his audience feel shame about not living up to both their religious and moral obligations to the movement.

MALCOLM X SUB TOPIC SENTENCE: By critiquing their political engagement and their unwillingness to protect themselves mentally and psychologically, Malcolm X, like Martin Luther King, shames his audience in order to encourage them to improve their lives.

CRITIAL TOPIC SENTENCE 3: In an effort to inspire their audiences to stand up for the rights of African Americans, MLK treats the idea of the American Dream positively while Malcolm X is critical of it.

MLK SUB TOPIC SENTENCE: In "The Letter from Birmingham Jail," MLK attempts to engender American patriotism to remind his audience of the principle of equality.

MALCOLM X SUB TOPIC SENTENCE: Noting the frequency of violations of basic American Principles, Malcolm X treats the American Dream as a myth.

Green=Evidence

Yellow=Analysis of Evidence

While MLK's letter addresses white moderates and Malcolm X's speech addresses members of the African American community, they each seek to improve the lives of African Americans by engendering shame in their audience. Dr. King makes his audience feel shame about not living up to both their religious and moral obligations to the movement. By invoking the biblical doctrines of Christianity and Judaism, the rhetoric of the letter makes the audience feel as though they are failing to live according to their faith. He begins to do this in the second paragraph of the letter. There, Dr. King connects himself with Christianity by revealing that he is the president of the SCLC and affiliated with the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Such connections are important because they remind his reader that he shares their faith. He compares his plight to the Apostle Paul, noting "Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid" (King 1). He also makes an analogy of his plight to that of Jesus. When addressing accusations that he is an extremist, he asks "Was not Jesus an extremist in love?" (King 4). With these two analogies, Dr. King aligns the Civil Rights Movement with the persecution of Jesus and the goals of St. Paul. For a religious audience, such an alignment would cause them to question any reservations that they have about the movement. Therefore, it is implicit that people who disagree with Dr. King's goals and methods are not living according to their faith.

Comment [LS1]: Critical Topic Sentence

Comment [LS2]: MLK Sub Topic Sentence

MLK's references to religious philosophers and his articulation of his disappointment in the religious community are used to engender shame. Dr. King references St. Thomas Aquinas and Martin Burber strategically. Because these philosophers might not be as familiar to the everyday Christian or Jew, Dr. King uses them to demonstrate his knowledge of complex religious doctrines, thus placing himself in a superior position. These references further emphasize the illegitimacy of asking people who seek basic civil rights to wait. If educated philosophers share his argument that injustice of any kind is a moral failing, then his audience might question their view of the Civil Rights Movement and feel ashamed of their failure to support the movement. Perhaps the most significant rhetorical device that is intended to cause shame is his expression of

Comment [LS3]: Sentence that reminds the reader that this paragraph continues to discuss shame and MLK

“disappointment” in the white middle class community. He devotes the last two pages of the letter to explaining his disappointment. To be able to express disappointment suggests that he and his beliefs are morally superior. Therefore, his expression of disappointment is a form of chastisement that emphasizes that any position against his position is not in keeping with religious doctrine and should cause shame.

Dr. King uses secular rhetorical tools that make his audience feel shame as well. For example, he counters claims that he is breaking laws by reminding his audience that Hitler’s behavior was legal, though immoral. The comparison to Hitler is effective because just twenty years after the end of WWII, Americans see Hitler as the ultimate example of evil. Therefore, the audience would be horrified to be in any way to compared to him. The Hitler comparison makes the audience feel shame that they are more interested in what is legal than in what is morally right. Finally, the rhetoric engenders shame in the inability to live up to the standards of our nation. Dr. King references America’s founding fathers. He explains that “We [African Americans] will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands” (5). This is significant because it reminds the audience that a desire to disenfranchise African Americans and the call for African Americans to accept gradual enfranchisement is contrary to the principles upon which this nation was founded, as well as contrary to the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Comment [LS4]: Sentence that reminds the reader that this paragraph continues to discuss shame and MLK

By critiquing their political engagement and their unwillingness to protect themselves mentally and psychologically, Malcolm X, like Martin Luther King, shames his audience in order to encourage them to improve their lives. Early in his speech, Malcolm X makes his African American audience feel ashamed about their blind complicity in their own mistreatment by America’s political system. He asserts that “the Democrats have got the government sewed up, and you’re [African Americans] the one who sewed it up form them. And what have they given you for it? Four years in office, and just now getting around to some civil-rights legislation” (X 27). Here, he is attempting to make these lower class voters feel foolish about their support for democratic politicians like John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. Malcolm X’s implication is that the democrats garnered African American votes through manipulation and ignored the needs and desires of that group once elected. He wants African Americans to feel ashamed of being used as pawns. He further criticizes

Comment [LS5]: Malcolm X Sub Topic Sentence
Topic Sentence

the Johnson administration. He argues that Johnson is in “cahoots” with “his buddy” Richard Russell, a staunch adversary to civil rights legislation (X 27). He also argues that they are running a “con game” and “playing with” African American voters (X 27). The words “cahoots” and “con game” are both words associated with criminality (Malcolm X 27). Therefore, he posits these politicians as criminals, and he casts his audience as foolish people who inadvertently aid criminals. Moreover, the notion that the African American electorate is being played also indicates a lack of sophistication and gullibility in that group. These are both qualities for which, he implies, they should be ashamed.

Furthermore, Minister Malcolm derides mainstream civil rights activists, making them feel ashamed about what he sees as their misguided efforts to seek civil rights through the political system. He calls African Americans who have been involved in the mainstream Civil Rights Movement “handkerchief-heads” (X 31). This term is significant because it was a derogatory term used to describe African Americans who were submissive to white authority and willing to accept an inferior position. He intends this insult to make civil rights leaders, some of whom were present when he gave this speech, as well as the everyday people who look up to them feel that the current civil rights agenda is not progressive enough. He compares these groups to weak people who accept inferior circumstances; he wants them to feel ashamed of their weakness. Malcolm X also declares that “we don’t intend to let them [mainstream civil rights leaders] pussyfoot and dillydally and compromise any longer” (31). Essentially, he accuses the leaders of delaying or impeding progress. Like the power that Martin Luther King asserts when he shames white moderates and church leaders, Malcolm X’s insistence that he is more aggressive and therefore stronger not only shows his superiority but underscores what he sees as the shamefulness of their gradualist stance. He continues his use of rhetorical questions by asking “How can you thank a man for giving you what’s already yours? How then can you thank him for giving you only part of what’s already yours. You haven’t even made progress, if what’s being given to you, you should have already” (X 31). By restating the predicament of the civil rights struggle in its simplest form, he makes the civil rights platform seem shamefully ridiculous and illogical.

Comment [LS6]: Sentence that reminds the reader that this paragraph continues to discuss Malcolm X and shame.

Minister X shames people who are afraid to address the physical and psychological threats caused by racism. He explains “The ballot or the bullet. If you’re afraid to use an expression like that, you should get out of the country, you should get back in the cotton patch, you should get back in the alley” (X 28). He makes the audience feel ashamed of their unwillingness to sacrifice everything to the fight against racial oppression if necessary. He aligns such unwillingness with the cotton patch, which is meant to invoke images of slavery, as one of the south’s primary crops was at one time cotton and grueling agricultural industries such as sharecropping and farm laboring that were prominent in the first half of the twentieth century. Therefore, to go back to the cotton patch would be regressive. Malcolm X continues to use shame as a rhetorical device again when he notes “ If you [African Americans] don’t take this kind of stand, your little children will grow up and look at you and think ‘shame’” (34). Parents want to be role models for their children. He is insisting that failure to stand against oppression will diminish the younger generation’s respect for the older one. This makes his audience feel ashamed of inaction and fearful that inaction will alienate them from their children. Like, MLK’s assertion that all moral and patriotic citizens should be ashamed of ignoring civic and religious doctrines, Malcolm X asserts that African Americans who fail to stand up for their inalienable rights should be ashamed of themselves as parents and intelligent people. Thus, both leaders employ shame as a powerful rhetorical device.

Comment [SL7]: Sentence that reminds the reader that this paragraph continues to discuss Malcolm X and shame.

Comment [SL8]: Concluding Sentence