

Rhetorical Analysis of Malcolm X's *Message to the Grassroots* (1963)

Introduction

For this essay I will be conducting a rhetorical analysis of Malcolm X's speech, *Message to the Grassroots* (1963). First I will be analyzing this piece's methods of persuasion through the lens of Aristotle's ethos, pathos, and logos. I will then highlight how *Message to the Grassroots* fulfills the four pillars of rhetoric as laid out in Campbell's theory of rhetoric. Finally, I will address how Malcolm X's speech is an example of an effective use of Blitzer's "rhetorical situation" theory.

Logos, Ethos and Pathos

For this section, I want to examine how Malcolm X uses Logos, Ethos, and Pathos to make the arguments that **1.** Black Americans must organize on the basis of race alone and **2.** that revolution (or the threat of it at least) is not only justified, but also necessary for Black Americans to secure true freedom.

What you and I need to do is learn to forget our differences [...] You don't catch hell 'cause you're a Baptist, and you don't catch hell 'cause you're a Methodist. [...] You don't catch hell because you're a Democrat or a Republican. [...] And you sure don't catch hell 'cause you're an American; 'cause if you was an American, you wouldn't catch no hell. You catch hell 'cause you're a black man. You catch hell, all of us catch hell, for the same reason. (Malcolm X)

Malcolm X's intention in this use of rhetoric is to create a sense of unity which can translate into an organized movement that will make concrete social and political gains. In the quote above we see Logos (persuasive appeal through logic) in his case as to why there should be unity on the basis of race, rather than on political or religious grounds, if gains are to be made. The logic is as follows: if the reason for unity is to fight against common oppression, then the rallying point and essence of that unity should be rooted within that which causes the oppression. He strengthens his argument with the same logic present in the famous quote "a house divided cannot stand." Malcolm compares the struggle of Black Americans to that of a family, saying:

“when you have a family squabble, you don’t get out on the sidewalk. If you do, everybody calls you uncouth, unrefined, uncivilized, savage. [...] when you come out on the street, you pose a common front, a united front.” The logos of his rhetoric is strengthened by this metaphor in that he is now giving a rationale for *why* it is important to organize based on common oppression, rather than on other basis. When Malcolm says to forget differences because “you don’t catch hell” for being a methodist, baptist, Democrat, or Republican, he is making the point that the fight against racial oppression can be undermined incredibly easily by smaller fights between methodists and baptists, or democrats and republicans, or any other narrower unit of identity aside from race.

In the speech “A Creative Protest” given in 1960, Martin Luther King Jr. says that he is “convinced more white people must join the movement against segregation” and that racial tensions are not between “black and white people” but instead are between “justice and injustice.” This quote is emblematic of a different approach to fighting oppression which Malcolm X is setting himself against through his argument that unity should be established based on race.

Malcolm X further strengthens the logic of his rhetoric by including a counter-argument to MLK within his own argument. He says, in reference to MLK, that this tactic is “just like when you’ve got some coffee that’s too black, [...] too strong. What you do? You integrate it with cream; you make it weak.” He backs his metaphor up with a real world jab, arguing that the “white element” which “put Kennedy in power” also “became the march” on Washington, and further, that the “white power structure” made the “Big Six” as the faces of the civil rights movement in order to exert more control over the process. Malcolm uses logic here to argue that once you begin to include members into your movement with priorities that are divorced from your own, you leave yourself open to dilution of goals and a manipulation of motives. Most importantly, you leave yourself open to the danger that your movement will be coopted into the same white power structure which you had previously been attempting to stang against.

Once the logos of his argument is established, that Black Americans are fundamentally oppressed in the same way by America and should therefore overcome differences in order to act as a family, his appeal to Ethos and Pathos follows.

One example lies in his invocation of the concept of the “Field” and the “House” negro of the past. He says:

You’ve got field Negroes in America today. I’m a field Negro. The masses are the field Negroes. When they see this man’s house on fire, you don’t hear these little Negroes talking about “our government is in trouble.” They say, “The government is in trouble.” Imagine a Negro: “Our government”!

By asserting that “you’ve got field Negroes in America today,” Malcolm X is connecting social ills of the present to the full history of oppression in American history. The use of Pathos here lies in the attempt to get people to see their current oppressions and social situation, potentially watered down by cultural norms, with an elevated emotional state fitting to the historical context. There is also a use of Pathos in the distinction between the use of “the” and “our” with “government” in an attempt to prompt a feeling of alienation of and hostility from the US government.

The Ethos in this part of the rhetoric lies in the use of a “field negro” identity which comprises “the masses,” and the use of “house Negro” and “Uncle Tom” identities. After Malcolm X establishes the American government as hostile and justifies the necessity of racial solidarity, he uses these concepts of identity to organize the actions of Black Americans morally within his rhetoric. He is equating those who say “our government” as duped and complicit in white supremacy, and as outside the struggle for freedom, the same way that the stereotype of the an “house Negro” or an “Uncle Tom” was in the era of slavery. Likewise, Malcolm X is equating those who recognize their oppression, who rally in a fight against it, and who realize that the government of America is mired in white supremacism, as the “field Negro.” Someone who is part of “the masses,” the implication being that they are someone who is part of the struggle in solidarity with the rest of their race.

2) The second argument that Malcolm X makes using Logos, Pathos, and Ethos is that Black Americans should feel that violent revolution is a legitimate and justified path to freedom. Further, that without at least the legitimate threat of revolution, the white power structure will not feel threatend enough to cede power.

Malcolm begins his argument for revolution by pointing to the origins of the country which oppresses Black Americans. He says: “Look at the American Revolution in 1776. That revolution was for what? For land. Why did they want land? Independence. How was it carried out? Bloodshed.” He also points to examples of revolution in Algeria, France, Russia, and other countries. The use of Logos here is relatively clear: Freedom is independence, independence requires land, and the only way to get land is through violence.

Malcolm strengthens his argument further by again including a counterargument to MLK’s rival tactic of revolution, that of non-violent civil disobedience. He says: “Whoever heard of a revolution where they lock arms [...] singing “We Shall Overcome”? Just tell me. You don’t do that in a revolution. [...] It’s based on land.” Admittedly, he ignores some historical examples, such as Gandhi. However, if you were to get into the weeds, you could argue that it is easier to gain freedom by making a distant colonial power leave, than it would be to gain freedom if you were a minority population within a territory owned by a colonial power. In the end, by providing numerous examples of successful violent revolutions, and by pointing out the historical rarity of a non-violent revolution, the argument is logically strengthened, especially by preemptively including a counter argument.

Malcolm X also strengthens his argument by pointing out how hypocritical it would be to disagree with him, especially for someone who identifies as “American.” First, there is his invocation of the justification of the American revolution previously quoted. The logic is obvious. Is a country founded by freedom fighters in any position to judge as immoral those who fight for their freedom? Malcolm further points out the cutting hypocrisy of Americans being against justified violence when he says:

“If violence is wrong in America, violence is wrong abroad. If it’s wrong to be violent defending black women and black children and black babies and black men, then it’s wrong for America to draft us and make us violent abroad in defense of her. And if it is right for America to draft us, and teach us how to be violent in defense of her, then it is right for you and me to do whatever is necessary to defend our own people right here in this country”

The Logos here is clear and strong: if America can draft Black Americans to commit violence with freedom as justification, then surely violence for freedom *can* be justified. If Black

Americans can't fight for their own freedom, then surely they should not be drafted to fight for America's notions of freedom. He points out the logically nonsensical position that Black Americans have been put into, whereby they can be forced to sacrifice for America's freedom, but America will not sacrifice for theirs.

Malcolm X uses Pathos and Ethos to advance his argument when he says: "the same old slavemaster today has Negroes who are nothing but modern Uncle Toms, 20th century Uncle Toms, to keep you and me in check, keep us under control, keep us passive and peaceful and nonviolent." The Ethical appeal to persuasion is the same as the previous use of the identities of "field Negro" and "Uncle Tom," attempting to draw a moral line whereby meek nonviolence is traitorous to the race. Pathos is used here to encourage shame and introspection into those who might be tempted to engage in non-violence.

Finally, Malcolm uses Islam to appeal to Ethos, Logos, and Pathos. For example, he says:

There's nothing in our book, the Quran — you call it "Ko-ran" — that teaches us to suffer peacefully. Our religion teaches us to be intelligent. Be peaceful, be courteous, obey the law, respect everyone; but if someone puts his hand on you, send him to the cemetery. That's a good religion.

His use of Ethos lies in the fact that he is falling back on the moral authority of an ancient religion in order to justify his rhetoric. Further, he makes clear that he is encouraging violence as a last resort, used only in self-defence and justified only by those who seek to be peaceful and good. He provides ethical nuance that makes it harder to say his argument is calling for violence recklessly.

His use of pathos lies in the fact that he is appealing to a sense of human dignity. He is making violent revolution seem like something that those who are good and mistreated have a right to pursue. Even if one does not wish to engage in violence, feeling that one has a right to defend oneself can give a sense of pride, righteousness, and desire to create change.

His use of Logos when it comes to Islam is made clearer when he says: "And doesn't nobody resent that kind of religion being taught but a wolf, who intends to make you his meal." The use of Logos here is clear. If someone wants to deny that you have the right to defend

yourself, what do you imagine they plan to do to you? And doesn't that say enough about what is necessary?

George Campbell's *Philosophy of Rhetoric*

For this section, I wish to highlight George Campbell's four pillars of rhetoric from *Philosophy of Rhetoric* to make the case that Malcolm X engages in all of these to create an effective piece of rhetoric in *Message to the Grassroots*. These four pillars are: 1. To enlighten the understanding, 2. To please the imagination, 3. To move the passions, and 4. To influence the will.

Malcolm X fulfills the first pillar of rhetoric by attempting to enlighten the understanding of Black Americans (and potentially white Americans, although this is not his direct audience). The fundamental truth that Malcolm is attempting to convey is encapsulated when he says: "America's problem is us. We're her problem." He claims to make this point so that his audience can plot an "intelligent" course of action. In an attempt to further this point, he makes his argument, previously quoted in this essay, that the nonviolent movement had been "diluted" by "the same white elements" which "elected Kennedy."

Malcolm argues that the fight against oppression must be on the basis of the oppression itself, race. However, aside from Logos, he gives historical context to justify this argument to his audience. Malcolm says:

Once you study what happened at the Bandung conference, and the results of the Bandung conference, it actually serves as a model for the same procedure you and I can use to get our problems solved. [...] The number-one thing that was not allowed to attend the Bandung conference was the white man. [...] Once they kept him out, everybody else fell right in and fell in line. This is the thing that you and I have to understand. And these people who came together didn't have nuclear weapons; they didn't have jet planes; they didn't have all of the heavy armaments that the white man has. But they had unity.

Although the validity of his interpretations on historical events would require a different type of analysis, Malcolm X objectively provides his audience with an account of how the March on Washington was diluted, a history of slavery and Black oppression unfiltered by America's education system, quotes from Islamic scripture (as previously quoted), examples of successful

revolution and trans-racial unity such as the Bandung conference, and more. Overall, Malcolm X enlightens the understanding of the audience by giving a unique perspective on racial relations, and by providing historical context to America, race relations, revolution, and oppression.

Examining the second pillar, Malcolm X pleases the imagination. He does this often through the use of imagery and metaphors, for example: “It’s just like when you’ve got some coffee that’s too black, which means it’s too strong. What you do? You integrate it with cream; you make it weak.” The use of a diluted coffee losing its kick helps the audience visualize the dilution of a movement and its effectiveness.

He also pleases the imagination by making freedom seem possible by naming and glorifying historical revolutions to emulate. Further, Malcolm says that “the black revolution is world-wide in scope and in nature. The black revolution is sweeping Asia, sweeping Africa, is rearing its head in Latin America.” Statements like these may be objectively true, but more importantly, create a narrative which people can see themselves becoming a part of.

Examining the third pillar, Malcolm X seeks to move the passions. He attempts to make his audience uncomfortable at times, saying things to provoke feelings of outrage, alienation, or hostility towards the American government with statements such as: “You don’t like to be told that. But what else are you? You are ex-slaves. You didn’t come here on the “Mayflower.” Malcolm also invokes the right of self-defence, and points out the hypocrisy of being denied the right to justified violence by a country who often justifies violence. He invokes the concepts of “field Negro” and “house Negro” to push Black Americans towards racial solidarity, implying that being complicit with the white supremacist power structure is shameful.

Examining the fourth pillar, Malcolm X lays out a clear course of action. Namely, solidarity in race, and revolution. Through the use of logos, pathos, and ethos, he clearly makes a case for the strategic necessity of revolution and racial solidarity. He makes an ethical and emotional appeal to the justness of this cause and a case for its efficacy. He further makes these appeals to the inefficacy of competing movements of his time, and attempts to convince his audience of the necessity of his causes. What this all succeeds in doing is moving a person's will towards action in the real world. His rhetoric is not merely informing or provoking emotion, it is attempting to steer people towards specific modes of action.

Lloyd F. Blitzer's *Rhetorical Situation* Theory

In this final section I wish to show how Malcolm X's speech utilizes the concept of *The Rhetorical Situation* effectively, and more specifically, the concepts of *Exigence*, *Constraints*, and *Audience*.

1. Exigence

Malcolm X properly identifies an Exigence in that he provides a problem to be addressed when he says: "America has a very serious problem. Not only does America have a very serious problem, but our people have a very serious problem. America's problem is us." By this he obviously means that America and Black Americans have a problem in race relations.

Malcolm succeeds in historically locating this problem within the context of slavery, as previously mentioned, but also in the context of colonial oppression by Europeans globally, when he says:

[The Bandung conference] realized all over the world where the dark man was being oppressed, he was being oppressed by the white man; where the dark man was being exploited, he was being exploited by the white man.

Beyond locating the current moment, he locates a path forward, as he sees it, which is rooted in history when he says:

History is best qualified to reward our research. And when you see that you've got problems, all you have to do is examine the historic method used all over the world by others who have problems similar to yours. And once you see how they got theirs straight, then you know how you can get yours straight.

When Malcolm says "How they go theirs straight," he is referring to revolution. In this quote, and in others proving the viability of revolution previously mentioned, he shows that not only is he giving an account to his audience of the current situation, but he has also located their situation in a global and historical context. The exigence in this piece of rhetoric is thus very

clearly defined, and located in a way in which the audience has a high degree of confidence in its validity due to Malcolm's use of historical examples.

2. Constraints

Malcolm X successfully utilizes the constraints of his times rhetorically. That is, he successfully navigates the popular notions of his time that run counter to his arguments. For example, he justifies self-defence for Black Americans in spite of the value being unpopular by saying: "if it is right for America to draft us, and teach us how to be violent in defense of her, then it is right for you and me to do whatever is necessary to defend our own people right here in this country."

He justifies the right to organize based on race by saying, despite this being called "racist" in his time by some, by saying: "We have a common enemy. We have this in common: We have a common oppressor, a common exploiter, and a common discriminator. But once we all realize that we have this common enemy, then we unite on the basis of what we have in common."

Overall, he effectively and preemptively includes counterarguments into everyone of his arguments. He is aware of the differing streams of thought within his time and takes care to point out hypocrisy in those who are critiquing him, and also to poke holes which strengthen his own points.

3. Audience

Malcolm X addresses his audience in a rhetorically effective way here as well. He taps into historical wrongs in order to draw emotion. He knows his audience well (Black Americans) and speaks specifically to them, not mincing words for a broader appeal, but instead utilizing a narrow focus and thus gaining more trust and authority within that community. For example, Malcolm says that "in America we all have a common enemy, whether he's in Georgia or Michigan, whether he's in California or New York. He's the same man: blue eyes and blond hair and pale skin — same man." Surely he does not intend to address white America, and in talking like this, makes it clear that he is speaking with racial solidarity as his primary consideration.

He also recognizes that his broader audience (White America) may feel threatened by his words and their gaining support, and perhaps be likely to make increasing concessions if they feel revolution could become likely.

Conclusion

In the end, although an early speech of Malcolm X's and perhaps not a definitive account of his philosophy (especially considering his early death), this speech is extremely rhetorically effective. It appeals to the logical, emotional, and ethical considerations of rhetoric. It fulfills all four ends of rhetoric, promoting understanding, exciting the imagination, inciting the passions, and presenting a course of action. It also addresses a comprehensive vision of the present moment, its historical ties, its different current, and presents its audience with a tailored vision of a future course of action.

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