

Malcolm X's "The Ballot or The Bullet": Rhetorical Analysis

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Malcolm X was a leader in the civil rights movement. His efforts were seen as violent in comparison to the efforts of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. because he urged fellow African Americans to stand up to white aggression and the government. Malcolm X criticized Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech by saying "Who ever heard of angry revolutionists all harmonizing..." When Malcolm X was a child, he and his family moved from Nebraska to Michigan after receiving threats from the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). While in Michigan, his father was murdered by a white supremacist group known as The Black Legionaries. These experiences made Malcolm X the man and leader he became in the civil rights movement. Malcolm X's speeches were intended to appeal to an audience of fellow African Americans as well as white legislators. In one of his most famous speeches, "The Ballot or the Bullet," Malcolm X effectively appeals to his audience's emotion of anger, and he uses humor and imagery to appeal to his audience's experiences with white aggression to promote them to get involved in politics.

Malcolm X uses humor throughout his speech to appeal to the audience's emotion. He starts his speech by addressing everyone in the room, knowing that some of them don't like him: "I just can't believe everyone in here is a friend, and I don't want to leave anybody out." He is making sure that everyone knows that he knows there is more than one listener in the audience. By doing this he is already stating that there will be people who do not like what he has to say. He also uses humor when he calls out Uncle Sam as a "number-one hypocrite." He uses this as an example because Uncle Sam is seen as an American figure that wants you to support America. Meanwhile, America will not support those who are not white. Uncle Sam stands for

freedom, but 22 million African Americans do not have the same freedom as a white citizen in the United States. Malcolm X uses this to enrage his audience, both African Americans and the white people in the crowd. He wants African Americans to see how freedom in the United States has been a lie and that they need to stand up and take it for themselves. He is also mocking and making fun of the white patriotic people in the crowd by making fun of and calling out a symbol of American freedom. Malcolm not only uses humor to appeal to his audience, but he also appeals to his audience's anger.

Malcolm X uses emotion to appeal to the anger the audience feels. He points out how people who get to America from Europe become American: "Everything that came out of Europe... is already an American. And as long as you and I have been over here, we aren't Americans yet." He uses this to anger the audience of African Americans because they were slaves in this country, they shed their blood sweat and tears, they were born in this country, they were the backbone of America for so long, and still, they don't have the same treatment as those who just arrive in America. He says "I'm not going to sit at your table and watch you eat, with nothing on my plate, and call myself a diner. Sitting at the table doesn't make you a diner, unless you eat some of what's on that plate." He uses this analogy to persuade his audience to think about how white people in power want them to see their status. He is trying to say that the white people in power are telling African Americans that they already have a seat at the freedom table, but in reality, they have no freedom on their plate. By telling his audience this, he is provoking them to take a stand and take what they deserve. He effectively states, "No, I'm not an American. I'm one of the 22 million black people who are the victims of Americanism... nothing but disguised hypocrisy." This quote tells his audience that he too is a victim of the false freedom they have been promised. He is also hoping to show people that the government does not care

about them. He criticizes the government here and in a future part of the speech where he says "... you put the Democrats first and the Democrats put you last." Malcolm says this to show and enrage people that the time of waiting is over. He wants African Americans to realize that they do not deserve to be put on the bottom of a priority list. Malcolm X says "We're all in the same boat and we all are going to catch the same hell from the same man. He just happens to be a white man." He used this to show that, yes, some people may argue that they are in the same boat but that is not entirely true. Everyone may be struggling, but African Americans are struggling more because of the white men in power. The white men in power have pushed them to the bottom of priority lists, given them false freedom, and have continuously oppressed African Americans. Malcolm X believes that to get freedom they must use their voice in politics.

Thus, Malcolm X tries to inspire fellow African Americans to use their vote to put people who have the same views in office. Malcolm X states, "Your vote, your dumb vote, your ignorant vote, your wasted vote put in an administration in Washington, D.C. ... And your and my leaders have the audacity to run around clapping their hands and talk about how much progress we're making." Malcolm is telling his audience this to make them think about why they are there today. Malcolm wants fellow African Americans to see that the person they voted in has no care about the freedom African Americans deserve or else there would not be a civil rights movement. He is encouraging African Americans to use their vote wisely and to support candidates that will support them in their struggle for freedom.

Malcolm X effectively uses his anger and humor to appeal to the audience's emotions, to persuade them to vote and put an end to white aggression. The audience can take away the feeling of anger towards those in power and hope for a better tomorrow. Political representation, the idea of freedom, and ways to gain freedom are key points Malcolm X highlights in his

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speech. His speech is meant to make his audience question the government and tell themselves

“Things won’t change unless I make them.”

Work Cited

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