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Preaching to the Clergy

Martin Luther King, Jr. holds a legacy which will endure for all time. Through non-violence, love, and goodwill, King touched the hearts and minds of his contemporaries, both white and black. The prose he leaves behind will continue to move generations. The appeal of King's words, dreams, letters are, and by right always will be, timeless. It is remarkable, then, that the literary quality which sets King apart in "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" is that his argument is contextual, time and audience specific. King's work is time and place sensitive, fully aware of the when and where in which his argument will be viewed. Certainly, King exemplifies all categories of good writing, but the contextual nature of his argument is the heart of the letter's brilliance.

King's argument works so well first because it is carefully and delicately placed in its true temporal setting. Written in 1963, at the height of racial tensions, the letter neither ignites nor ignores those tensions; rather it addresses those tensions directly with hopes of alleviating them. King is especially sensitive to the time component of the letter because the Alabama clergymen criticized King's demonstration in Birmingham as untimely. To this criticism, King writes that the timing of the demonstration at the transition of the mayoralty from "Bull" Connor to Albert Boutwell was in fact timely. "The new administration must be prodded about as much as the outgoing one," King writes, showing that the demonstration was not untimely, but rather very much timely (10). By contending that the demonstration was at a good time, King also under the surface contends that the argument he is making is fit for its time setting. Change is desperately needed, reasons King, and what better time to bring about that change than now.

The contextual nature of King's "Letter" comes out not only in its time setting, but even more strongly it is revealed in how King knows his audience. King's primary audience is a group of "dear fellow clergymen," and King pulls them in specifically by appealing to concepts and stories which this audience is likely to value. King throughout the letter is keenly aware that his audience contains seven Christian clergymen and one Jewish clergyman. Establishing solidarity with the particular audience, King emphasizes that he too has credentials as a clergyman, citing his presidency of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (2). More importantly, though King shows he is aware of his audience by drawing analogies to religious figures such as the prophets and Paul. All eight clergymen are likely to hold the prophets in high regard, and the seven Christian clergymen will likely do the same with the references to Paul.

King shows he knows his audience further by playing to their intellects as prominent Christian thinkers. King alternately quotes St. Thomas Aquinas and Martin Buber, scholars who represent Christian and Jewish thought respectively (14). The purpose of quoting these men is twofold: first it shows how educated King truly is, second it shows how King has similar taste in reading as his audience, further advancing the concept of solidarity.

Contextual nature of arguments often involve the use of god and devil terms; King is such a powerful writer that he is able to turn the devil term of his counterparts almost into a god term by pointing to what the clergymen value. In "Letter" King uses the clergymen's word "extreme," a definite devil term for his audience. In the traditionalist and relaxed nature of the White South, the status quo was much preferred to anything radical or "extreme." What is striking, though, is how King redeems that devil term into a god term by setting the term not in the context of the American South but in the context of Judeo-Christian heritage. When King explains how Jesus was an extremist for righteousness, he turns what had been a contextual attack from the clergymen against him into a contextual positive for his own argument. Amos, Martin Luther, Paul, John Bunyan, Abraham Lincoln, and Thomas Jefferson, all people who King's audience is likely to admire, are also all used by King to redeem the devil term "extremist" (29).

What is special about King's prose is how well the argumentation works with regards to context. Simply because King knows his audience, he is able to write directly to them and maximize his potential influence. King uses the right approach at the right time in the right place to effect substantial change in the world around him. His brilliance allowed him to communicate with fellow clergymen powerfully. The result was a beautiful work of literary art. King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" is a timeless masterpiece largely because it is written for just the right audience at just the right time.