

Speech Analysis Directions

Good speakers, like good writers, use many techniques to persuade their audiences. Historical references, literary elements, and even musical passages are among the techniques they employ. Patrick Henry's famous "give me liberty or give me death" speech to the Virginia House of Burgesses is a great example of persuasive speaking. His speech convinced the very reluctant Virginians to join the war effort, despite seemingly insurmountable odds of victory. Below are some examples of the techniques he used.

Historical References

--Henry told his audience to "suffer not yourselves to be betrayed with a kiss," a reference to the Biblical betrayal of Jesus by Judas (84). He knew his audience would be familiar with this reference.

--Henry also reminded the Virginians the colonists had been "spurned with contempt at the foot of the throne" when they presented the Olive Branch Petition, another betrayal by the king (84).

--Henry alluded to the amassing of the British navy and army, saying they were "sent over to bind and rivet upon us those chains which the British ministry have been so long forging (84).

Literary Elements

Metaphor Henry compares British rule to slavery, and extends the metaphor throughout the speech.

Near the end of the speech he says the colonists' "chains are forged! Their clanging may be heard on the plains of Boston" (84).

Repetition Henry repeats key phrases, to make them memorable to his audience.

Henry insists "we must fight! I repeat it, sir, we must fight!" (84).

Henry says the war is inevitable, telling his audience "let it come, I repeat it, sir, let it come!" (84).

As he finishes his speech he insists that the colonists "cry, 'peace, peace' –but there is no peace" (84).

Literary Allusion Henry urges the colonists not to "listen to the song of that siren till she transforms [them] into beasts," referring to the Odyssey (83).

Rhetorical question Henry asks his audience questions whose answers are obvious, strengthening his argument. After reviewing the steps the colonists took to try to avoid war, he asks "What terms...have not been already exhausted? (84).

Musical Passages Many African Americans, like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, drew on the musicality of jazz music to appeal to their audience. Although Henry isn't known as a musician, many passages from the speech have a musical quality.

Call and response Henry's rhetorical questions might have actually been intended to elicit verbal responses. When he asks them if they should "resort to entreaty and humble supplication?" he may have been hoping for a resounding no from the audience (84).

Refrain "We must fight!" "Let it come!" and "'peace, peace' but there is no peace" are all phrases that the colonists might have repeated as they engaged in discussions about the war (84).

Rhythm Henry says the "battle...is to the vigilant, the active the brave," which has a pleasing rhythmic sound (84).

Henry's famous line "give me liberty or give me death" has a very strong rhythmic quality (84).

Henry, Patrick. "Speech in the Virginia Convention." In Donald T. Hollenbeck and Julie West Johnson

eds., *Literature*. Evanston, IL: McDougal, 1984.

Directions: As you read the assigned speech:

Underline historical references

Circle literary elements

Bracket musical passages

Be prepared to discuss what you have marked, and how each contributes to the effectiveness of the speech.