Rhetorical Analysis Of Memphis: A Tale Of Two Cities

In “Memphis: A Tale of Two Cities”, Troy L. Wiggins thinks back to a time when he was with his grandmother passing the then abandoned Sears Crosstown Tower. 10 years later he was passing by the new crosstown Concourse that would bring new life to Central Memphis “because the old ones are less meaningful in the face of developments like this one” (Wiggins 50). Wiggins brings attention to how there are many big advances being made across town while leaving behind the biggest race and the low-class people of Memphis. He tries to get the Memphis community to realize how wrong this and to try to cause this to change by is by establishing his credibility, using juxtaposition, a chain of rhetorical questions, logos, and his use of adverse diction.

We are quick to not question Wiggin’s intentions because of the story he provides us. We see that this is something that happened in his life because of his personal story with his great-grandmother. We see his grandmother as one of those people who he mentions as helping Memphis become a better place, but still being forgotten about in the face of all the developments being made. His grandmother “had given most of her life to affluent White Memphians” and “had lived through so much pain in the hands of men, white folks, and crushing poverty” (Wiggins 50). This gives Wiggins the reader’s trust because it’s easy to tell that he speaks from experience and not just because he feels like it. He actually wants a change to happen because he doesn’t want the things that happened to his grandmother to continue to happen in the more modern-day world.

There are a lot of contradicting ideas present in the article. Wiggins uses this juxtaposition to show how divided Memphis really is. He shows us how while Crosstown’s expected opening was underway, people three miles down the road were demanding to remove hateful things from the parks. In one part of town the was excitement and not much down the road there were people trying to protect themselves and their families by protesting the removal of the “hateful edifices” (Wiggins 51). One part of town celebrated with joy while the other was just trying to stand up for what is right. Wiggins meets a lady that has a big resemblance to his great-grandmother. While talking to her he finds out that there isn’t “a full-service grocery store within three miles of her house” (Wiggins 51). This makes you start thinking a lot about how there is a divide because you can be in a certain part of town and have a surplus of stores to choose from, but in other parts of Memphis, you might have none nearby or have one that doesn’t have a wide variety things to choose from.

The article includes a chain of rhetorical questions in order to intensify the juxtaposition that Wiggins includes throughout the text. Wiggins asks his audience why he should be excited about the concourse when there are “thousands of unemployed and underemployed Memphians in a two-mile radius of its doors” (Wiggins 51). Having a building that big open makes you think that people around there would have jobs, but they seem to always forget about the low-class people who live nearby. He also asks why he should be excited when “white supremacy, the system that makes Memphis great (for white residents) is still deeply ingrained in every facet of our city’s operation” (Wiggins 51). Wiggins is trying to tell his audience that as long as white supremacy is overruling, the low-class citizens of Memphis will continue to be forgotten about. There is a second chain of rhetorical questions that arise when

Wiggins speaks to the lady that looks like his grandmother. She is not impressed by the developments around her. She asks things like “Where were the nearby jobs? The adequately funded schools?” (Wiggins 51) People aren’t happy about these developments. They prefer to get things that will improve their quality of life. The series of rhetorical questions make it seem like a cry for help because they show us the desperation that these people are feeling. Wiggins doesn’t want everything in Memphis crafted as only being accessible by wealthy white people. Having it this way has created, and will continue to create, a big divide in the city as long as it happens. He wants developers to keep in mind those who helped put a foundation on the city in order to make the change that’s occurring in Memphis more accessible to the people.

There aren’t many places in the article where there is an appeal to logos, but the one instance that it is used is enough to express the urgency of the situation. Wiggins tells us that a neighborhood in South Memphis has “lead soil contamination readings higher than 1,700 parts per million” (Wiggins 51) when the national average for soil contamination is 400 parts per million. This makes us realize that the people who live in that part of South Memphis have been livening in a place where the soil contamination is four times higher than the national average. These high levels seem like a big danger for the people who are living there; however, people prefer to ignore it because it’s not in a place that piques the interest of a rich person in Memphis. If this would’ve happened in another neighborhood it would probably be gone now, but the people who live there have the disadvantage of being a poor minority while living in Memphis.

There are many negative word choices used in the article that have a big impact on how we perceive the message. Wiggins uses many negative terms in order to demonstrate how these people live in unfavorable circumstances due to them being neglected and forgotten about when some new development is made by white developers. Wiggins uses phrases like “hurt and disgusted” (51) and “blighted and infested” (51) when he is explaining to us the conditions that some of these people go through in their daily lives. He uses phrases like “cry out for justice” (Wiggins 51) and “escape the chains of poverty” (Wiggins 51) to try and bring attention to these issues in order to change the current situations. These phrases also cause us to feel bad about these people. When we see something like “escape the chains of poverty” (Wiggins 51) we are inclined to think about the chains of slavery, which some of these families probably dealt with in the past. We know that slavery was a hard thing, so we don’t want people to be held down now because they are poor.

Through the story that Wiggins tells, his audience is convinced that a change needs to occur so that everyone in Memphis is included in the changes that happen throughout the city. Currently, Memphis is a “literal tale of two cities” (Wiggins 51), but Wiggins demonstrates his desire for there to only be one unified city. Wiggins convinces his audience of his want by demonstrating his credibility, using plenty of juxtaposition, rhetorical questions, appeal to logos, and by implementing an adverse diction throughout his article.

Works Cited

1. Wiggins, Troy L. 'Memphis: A Tale of Two Cities.' Writing Memphis, edited by Katherine Fredlund, Hayden McNeil, 2018, pp. 49-52