

Rhetorical Analysis of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream"

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Composition 0990

April 21, 2011

Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of the “I Have a Dream” speech by Martin Luther King. The author covers King’s use of support, ornamentation/embellishment, and other rhetorical techniques. Further, the author is quick to contextualize the nature of King’s speech.

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The "I Have a Dream" speech has a very simple context. The author of the "I Have A Dream" speech is Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. King is known for his work in Civil Rights during the 1960s. The purpose of this speech is to inspire change in both white and black citizens of the United States during the Civil Rights era. Moreover, the premise of the speech is that both sides of the discussion must accept change in a non-violent yet effective way. Finally, the audience of the speech is very general; however, one should note that since the speech is given in Washington, it is possible that the speech attempts to engage law makers and policy makers who work and live within the nation's capital.

The genre of this work is somewhat narrative and argumentative. The speech conveys many personal thoughts and experiences of the author; however, there is a strong position taken against the crimes of "white" citizens and the nation as a whole. While there is no explicit claim present, there are the foundation points which make the argumentative position of the author very clear and visible. The style of the speech is very formal with some hints of informality. The diction or word choice is comparable to other political speeches such as John F. Kennedy's "Inaugural Address." Yet, throughout the "I Have a Dream" speech, one may find a bit of black gospel within it. The images and the ornaments are heavily religious, reminiscent of a Sunday church sermon. The tone is both informative and argumentative. Moreover, it is descriptive. The imagery is very dark, and the ideas are very sincere.

The claim, as I mentioned, is not very explicit. However, the points of support are clear: 1) American has defaulted on its promises. 2) The black people of the U.S. are still not free. 3) Now is the time to make changes. 4) As, King suggests, "Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred" (p.343). 5) People should move forward to spread the message that freedom is a part of every U.S. citizen's life, even blacks.

In terms of natural support, throughout the speech, King uses biblical codes. In addition, King is very overt in using his own testimony of what is happening in the United States. In terms of artificial support, King uses many different kinds of pathos. Beginning with a long allegory about Negro freedom and banking, King uses the imagery of being behind a great leader, Abraham Lincoln. One could make a case that such imagery is also linked to ethos, since Lincoln was the father of the Emancipation Proclamation.

Towards the end of the speech, there is a surge of pathos, as King discusses the brutality that the negro has experience and the basic mobility of the negro who is unable to find jobs, stay in hotels, etc. Towards the absolute close of the speech, King launches into a long discussion of a possible and decent future, using images of children playing together. In these passages, King uses biblical images: "That one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low... the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together" (p.344).

While the introduction of the speech evokes Lincoln, the conclusion uses lyrics from the song "America" (p.344). Additionally, he gives a sort of "shout out" to the people of the United States, saying: "Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York... Pennsylvania... Colorado... California" (p.345). In the end, King closes with words from an old Negro spiritual: "Freed at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last" (p.345).

King's style is unique but very easy to discuss. King's use of ornamentation/embellishment is made possible through heavy uses of the anaphora (a scheme which allows for repetition in the beginning of successive lines). An example of this includes his long series of "I have a dream..." statements, where he states: "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed... I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judge by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" (p.344). Further, King makes heavy use of listing. In one passage, he states: "Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go

back to South Carolina...” (p.343), which he mixes with a sort of anaphora. Of note, King use a large allegory in the beginning of the speech, again comparing banking to the rights of black U.S. citizens.

Overall, the speech is very much loaded with rhetorical techniques. King as an accomplished civil rights leader is a very accomplished writer. His words are very hopeful and deliberate. He is very conscious of his audience, and he is very commanding of his wording to avoid hurting his credibility with this audience. However, King takes the right kinds of chances rhetorically. I believe that this speech is one of the better written works that I have had the chance to read.

References

King, M.L. (2010). I have a dream. In J. Aaron (Ed.), *40 model essays: a portable anthology* (pp.341-347).

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