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Martin Luther King Jr. Speech Rhetorical Analysis

In December of 1964, Martin Luther King Jr gave a speech at the City Temple in London, England, presenting the case for the urgent dismantling of segregation and discrimination. In the recording of this speech, we hear Dr. King, having just seen the United States of America through the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, speak of the challenges and victories in the journey to civil rights in the United States. Through variations in tone, immersive storytelling, collective language, and repetition, he leads his audience through the historical and modern causes and solutions to civil injustice. He successfully uses an amalgamation of rhetorical devices to impress upon his audience that while much has been achieved in civil rights, there is still a significant amount of work.

Martin Luther King Jr.’s familiar cadence and intonation are the foundation for connecting to his audience. Throughout his speech, he varies his vocal tone, volume, word emphasis, and speaking rhythm as a strategic tool to indicate feelings of optimism, injustice, and urgency. While discussing the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, he seamlessly transitions between a solemn description of Governor Wallace’s attempt to block integration and a bemused explanation of the bill’s filibuster in Congress. The tonal shift acts to engage the audience while framing the threat of the opposition as persistent but ineffective. Dr. King’s delivery accentuates his message and the urgency of his calls to action.

This delivery, combined with King’s use of repetition and collectivist language, strengthens the speech's persuasive power. In one example of repetition, he uses the phrase “a long, long way” in various contexts, effectively leading the audience through the progression of the movement through the past, present, and future. His repeated use of “we” and “our” cultivate a sense of community and shared responsibility. In one such instance, he states, “And so we must help time, and we must realize that the time is always ripe to do right.” Framing calls to action as a mutual effort encourages a feeling of shared responsibility between himself and the audience. Dr. King’s strategic use of language and intonation engages his audience and impresses upon them the importance of action.

This use of tone is an intentional and integral part of the structure of his argument, which leads the audience through each piece of evidence toward the conclusion that the struggle for civil rights is far from over. The beginning of his speech is focused on the foundation of civil rights up to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. He effectively blends historical knowledge with storytelling to provide context for the remainder of his speech. He follows a more traditional argument framework as he moves forward to evidence for calls to action. He supports each claim with context, acknowledges and refutes the opposition, and reasons why each item is important. By using this approach, Dr. King builds a comprehensive view of the contemporary struggle for civil rights and the steps necessary to overcome them.

The strategic use of tone and structure then provides a perfect atmosphere for the delivery of King’s uniquely immersive use of imagery. While phrases such as “a long and desolate corridor with no exit sign” and “plunged into the abyss of exploitation” paint a picture of bleak desperation, he is equally adept at conveying images of immense hope. When he describes the Supreme Court decision rejecting the Plessy doctrine as “a great beacon light of hope into millions of disinherited people all over our nation,” he makes the abstract concept of hope palpable. By using imagery through descriptive language, storytelling, and poetic phrasing, Dr. King evokes the audience's senses, creating a heightened empathetic connection and accountability.

Dr. King’s approach to tone and imagery in his argument lays the groundwork for his masterful use of rhetorical appeals – logos, pathos, ethos, and Kairos. In presenting evidence such as the number of voters registered or the income of Black Americans, he presents logical arguments that highlight the movement's achievements and the work that still needs to be done. In one example, he appeals to the emotions of his audience when advocating for the power of love over hate, saying, It would be nonsense to urge oppressed people to love their violent oppressors in an affectionate sense, and I have never advised that. When Jesus said “Love your enemies,” I’m happy he didn’t say “Like your enemies.” It’s pretty difficult to like some people. But love is greater than like. Love is understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill for all men.” Throughout the speech, he establishes his knowledge of historical and philosophical concepts, referencing Plato, Aristotle, and the Bible and applying these to the struggle for civil rights. Dr. King skillfully weaves these rhetorical elements to solidify the moral imperative of fighting for civil rights.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s masterful use of rhetorical devices ensures his audience deeply understands the progress made, the challenges still faced, and the path one must take to get there. He compels each listener that contributing to the struggle is not only a necessity for Black Americans but a moral responsibility crucial for the progression of all of humanity.