

A Rhetorical Analysis of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" Speech

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The classical definition of the term "rhetoric" is "the art of persuasion" (*Rhetorical Analysis*, n.d.). Rhetorical devices are frequently used to make written texts and speeches more persuasive. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech is one of the most compelling and persuasive speeches of all time. The speech holds several rhetorical devices. In his "I Have a Dream" speech, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. employs the rhetorical devices of allusion, anaphora, and pathos.

In Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, the rhetorical device of allusion can be found in abundance. An allusion is a rhetorical device that involves making references to places, events, or a person (*53 Rhetorical Devices With Definition and Useful Examples*, 2021). In the second paragraph of his speech, Dr. King begins with the phrase "five score years ago" (*Martin Luther King I Have a Dream Speech - American Rhetoric*, n.d.). This is an allusion to the Gettysburg Address, which begins with the phrase "four score and seven years ago". By using this allusion, Dr. King relates the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s to the Abolitionist Movement, highlighting the critical essence of both movements. Furthermore, in the fourth paragraph, an allusion to the Constitution is made: "When the architects of our Republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution [...]" (*Martin Luther King I Have a Dream Speech - American Rhetoric*, n.d.). Also, there is an allusion to the Emancipation Proclamation in the second paragraph: "[...] a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation" (*Martin Luther King I Have a Dream Speech - American Rhetoric*, n.d.). This allusion, which refers to the end of slavery, brings the past hardships of

African Americans into the minds of the audience. Dr. King also makes an allusion to the Declaration of Independence, quoting one of its most well-known lines: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal” (*Martin Luther King I Have a Dream Speech - American Rhetoric*, n.d.). Additional allusions to the Declaration of Independence include the phrases “unalienable rights” and “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (*Martin Luther King I Have a Dream Speech - American Rhetoric*, n.d.). By making an allusion to the Declaration of Independence, Dr. King reminds the audience of the vision the Founding Fathers had of equality. He also makes an allusion to the patriotic song “My Country ‘Tis of Thee” by including its lyrics: “My country ‘tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrims pride, From every mountainside, let freedom ring” (*Martin Luther King I Have a Dream Speech - American Rhetoric*, n.d.). He makes an allusion to the song’s lyrics to reinforce the idea that to be patriotic, one must accept freedom and liberty for all. And so, in that way, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. 's speech utilizes allusion.

In his “I Have a Dream” speech, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. also applies the rhetorical device of anaphora. Anaphora involves the repetition of a word or words at the start of phrases, clauses, or sentences (Kelly, 2022). Anaphora is used in abundance throughout the speech. For example, in the third paragraph of the speech, we see the phrase “one hundred years later” repeated over and over again: “One hundred years later, the life of the negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of an ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and

finds himself an exile in his own land” (*Martin Luther King I Have a Dream Speech - American Rhetoric*, n.d.). Another example of anaphora is found in the sixth paragraph of the speech with the repetition of the phrase “now is the time”: “Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God’s children” (*Martin Luther King I Have a Dream Speech - American Rhetoric*, n.d.). The most famous example of anaphora in this speech involves the repetition of the phrase “I have a dream”: “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’ I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character” (*Martin Luther King I Have a Dream Speech - American Rhetoric*, n.d.). An additional instance of anaphora in the speech involves the repetition of the phrase “with this faith”: “With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together,

knowing that we will be free one day” (*Martin Luther King I Have a Dream Speech - American Rhetoric*, n.d.). The final instance of anaphora in the speech involves the repetition of the phrase “let freedom ring”: Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania. Let freedom ring from the snow-capped rockies of Colorado. Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of Colorado [...] Let freedom ring from the Stone Mountain of Georgia. Let freedom ring from the Lookout mountain of Tennessee. Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring” (*Martin Luther King I Have a Dream Speech - American Rhetoric*, n.d.). Anaphora is used frequently throughout the speech to add emphasis, make it more rhythmic, and to make the speech more memorable. And so, in that way, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech uses anaphora.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. also makes generous use of the rhetorical device pathos in his “I Have a Dream” speech. Pathos, also known as an emotional appeal, appeals to an audience’s needs, values, and emotional sensibilities (*Rhetorical Strategies*, n.d.). Dr. King makes a reference to police brutality in the eleventh paragraph: “We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is is the victim of unspeakable forces of police brutality” (*Martin Luther King I Have a Dream Speech - American Rhetoric*, n.d.). Later in the speech, he makes another reference to police brutality: “[...] quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality” (*Martin Luther King I Have a Dream Speech - American Rhetoric*, n.d.). During these references, he revealed the harsh reality of police brutality against African Americans to invoke sympathy from the audience. Dr. King also used an

emotional appeal when he said, “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character” (*Martin Luther King I Have a Dream Speech - American Rhetoric*, n.d.). During this appeal, he allowed the audience to sympathize with him as a parent and identify with his high hopes for his offspring. Also, Dr. King created an emotional appeal with the phrase “[...] and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together” (*Martin Luther King I Have a Dream Speech - American Rhetoric*, n.d.). In this emotional appeal, he was striving to build a connection between blacks and whites via their mutual belief in God. He was attempting to compel the audience to see both races as God’s children. Hence, in such a manner, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech employs pathos.

Thus, in his “I Have a Dream” speech, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. employs allusion, anaphora, and pathos. Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech was the impetus for the Civil Rights Movement and were it not for that speech, African Americans may not have been given the civil rights they deserve. It is crucial to study this speech to continue making speeches that will change the world for the better. Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech is studied worldwide and will likely continue to be for centuries to come.

References

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