
A Rhetorical Analysis of the Speech I Have a Dream by Martin Luther King Jr.

“I Have A Dream” Rhetorical Analysis

One of the most well known pieces of oratory of all time is Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech. This speech was written with the intention of persuade all Americans that all people are created equal under God and the law. The use of allusion and exposition aid in the overall effectiveness of his piece.

King’s use of allusion to the Bible, a patriotic song, and the Declaration of Independence are used to appeal to each person’s sense of moral obligation to uphold equality. By using biblical references like “and the crooked place will be made straight” he appeals to a Christian audience. No Christian wants to be seen as a sinner so by telling them that it is God’s will for people to live with equality he adds validity to his point. In the same manner, King uses a patriotic song “My Country Tis’ of Thee”. He urges one to listen to the sense of nationalism felt by the majority of Americans. By referencing the commonly accepted patriotic song he makes an undeniable case for acceptance of integration policy and universal equality. He also appeals to members of Congress and Americans who are tied to their roots by quoting the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration of Independence was the beginning of the American Revolution, which is a heroic moment in American history. By comparing that event to that which was being experienced when he made the speech, King made his audience have a tangible understanding. By using sources that are commonly accepted by the majority of the population, King made each person feel a moral obligation to his cause through Christianity and nationalism.

The other technique that Martin Luther King Jr. uses to enhance the effectiveness of the oratory is exposition. He uses examples from his own life and the lives of others to make his piece more accessible to the average person. King uses his own children as an example of racial injustice. He says that his children should be judged upon their moral character and not upon their skin color. This statement is powerful to anyone who is a parent. For King to talk about his own children adds an element of emotion and makes his writing all the more effective in its purpose of persuasion. He also lists different mountains from which freedom should ring. This is in reference to his quote from “My Country Tis of Thee”. He lists the names of these mountains so that a listener might feel a personal connection as well. Examples heighten the personal response and cause people to act on their emotions.

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King uses persuasive techniques like exemplifying and allusion to appeal to the broad audience that is the American public. He also uses techniques like repetition, specifically of the words “I Have a Dream” to emphasize the importance of his work and make sure that everyone understands that the outcome of this situation affects them no matter their race.

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