
The Use of Rhetorical Devices in I Have a Dream Speech by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

On August 28, 1963 Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. gave the monumental I Have a Dream speech. One hundred years earlier, the Emancipation Proclamation had been issued in 1863 freeing all the slaves. Two years later the Civil War ended in 1865; unfortunately, the racism that started the war and caused such anger towards the Emancipation Proclamation did not end. The early 1960s was a very difficult time full of hatred, racism, and confusion. All sorts of discriminatory laws restricted where African Americans could sit, eat, drink, and even go to the restroom. On that momentous day in August, hundreds of African Americans had gathered for a march on Washington DC. Marches on Washington are fairly common now, but in 1963 they were almost unheard of. In front of the Lincoln Memorial, for one of the first times in history, speeches were given, prayers were said, and songs were sung to rally the marchers together in the cause of freedom and harmony for blacks, and to draw attention to the issues at hand and demand a solution.

Dr. King was a Baptist minister from Alabama who had made many speeches as part of the civil rights movement, both in his church and other venues. On August 28, 1963 he was 16th on the program, the seventh out of the nine speakers to speak that day. The listeners were tired and sweltering in the humid heat of the late summer in Washington. Some of Dr. King's earlier speeches had contained the "I have a dream" statement, but none of them had been very impactful. Advisors had warned him not to use that phrase again. King wrote his speech without using the phrase at all, but as he neared the end of the speech, he set his written text aside and began to tell people about his dream. His speech went down in history as one of the greatest speeches of all time. Through his rhetoric, including allusion, analogy, and repetition, Dr. King presented his beliefs that all men are created equal and are inherently endowed with certain unalienable rights, and shared his dream of a society where people of all races could live together in harmony, making a powerful argument for the rights of African Americans.

One of the very first rhetorical devices King uses is allusion. He begins his second sentence with "Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today...." By using this statement, Dr. King alludes to Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg address, thus arousing a sense of patriotism in his listeners. The use of that opening line also establishes a standard of expectation for the rest of his speech. By using the same style of opening as did the Gettysburg address he sets a comparison between that historic speech and his own, immediately setting the expectation for his audience that King's speech will be as powerful as Lincoln's. The allusion to that speech also stirs the memory of the line in the Gettysburg Address "a

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government of the people, by the people, and for the people,” which concept he expounds on in the content of his speech. One last impact that opening two-word phrase “five score” had was the same as the impact Lincoln’s use of the phrase had in 1863. It alluded to the grandiose language of the Bible, and thus utilized some of the Bible’s ethos to add power their speeches. Both Lincoln’s and King’s audiences had a majority of Christians. By alluding to the Bible, King used the same tactic as Lincoln to open his listeners’ ears and hearts, thus allowing his words to penetrate their innermost emotions, adding an unmatched force to his words that would give his audience the enthusiasm and the drive for continuing the civil rights movement and enduring the resulting hardships ahead.

Dr. King again employs allusion later in his speech. He says, “Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred.” In this sentence, he alludes to the atonement when Christ drank from the bitter cup. However, Dr. King here reverses the order of the words and says “cup of bitterness”. This achieves two goals. First, it compares the civil rights movement to the atonement. As he expounds in the same paragraph, he wanted the African Americans to withstand all the trials and afflictions thrown at them with soul force instead of physical force and essentially turn the other cheek. That was exactly what Christ did when he was crucified—he drank the bitter cup and withstood his hardships without reacting violently. The second accomplishment of that allusion was to show the gravity of the situation if the African Americans retaliated and became hateful. Christ drank from the bitter cup. If the blacks drank from the cup of bitterness, they would be partaking of the same metaphorical poison drunk by Judas and the others who killed Christ. In that one phrase, Dr. King warned his audience of the possible consequences of letting animosity into their hearts, all through the power of allusion. This played a great role in making the civil rights movement what it was—civil. The blacks that were part of that movement did not retaliate or react violently. They civilly did what was right, despite persecution, just as Christ did.

The rhetorical device of analogy is used next. Dr. King compares the march on Washington to cashing a check for the inalienable rights promised to all men in the Constitution and Declaration of Independence. He says that America has defaulted on that check, and thus, that the “bank of justice” is bankrupt. In the 1960s, everyone wrote checks. Everyone dealt with bankers and understood the concept of cashing in a check. By using this analogy, King did two things. First, he created a simple comparison that everyone could understand, so that the idea of the march would be not just an abstract concept, but instead, an action with a purpose. He gave their march a sense of solidarity and tangible meaning. Second, through this simple comparison, he used the analogy to put the situation in terms so uncomplicated as to make the actions of the United States government sound absolutely ridiculous. The American government would default on a check, and declare bankruptcy? The United States was formed on the idea of balance between liberty and justice! No one can declare bankruptcy on something innate to them, inherently in their nature.

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At the very end of his speech, Reverend King again utilizes analogies. He proclaims, “With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope...we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood...” The first analogy used here compares despair to a mountain, and hope to a stone that is cut away from that mountain. It is in that first analogy that King fully connects with his audience. In that analogy, he recognizes the situation for what it is. He sees what the African Americans are going through and what they are feeling—a mountain of despair. In that analogy he shows them that he knows and is very familiar with the crushing, agonizing, overwhelming pain of anguish and hopelessness. But then he shows the audience that there is hope and that it can be gained through the trials they are facing. He says that hope is a stone that can be cut out of the mountain of despair—misery and hopelessness, through Christ, can lead to hopefulness and eventually, happiness.

The second analogy mentioned says that, “we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.” Here Dr. King recognizes that the country is not at its best. The jangling discords represent the conflict between the blacks and whites—they clash constantly and the contention results in a nationwide dilemma where both races hate each other. An orchestra needs all of the instrumentalists to play in harmony—if they all try to outplay each other by seeing who can play his instrument the loudest, the orchestra does not sound good at all. Dr. King resolves the metaphor by saying that it will be possible to take that inharmonic jangling and transform it into a beautiful symphony. If all of the instrumentalists play in harmony and balance, the orchestra will sound beautiful; if everyone in the United States treats each other with kindness and respect, the people of the nation will come to have a feeling of brotherhood and the country will function properly. As shown, not only does the analogy make the main concept easier to understand, it connects imagery with the concept. That makes the concept much more tangible and meaningful to the people fighting for it. Dr. King successfully utilized analogies to help every member of his audience see what they were striving for, and thus press forward with much more unanimity and gusto.

One of the most important rhetorical devices Dr. King used was repetition. Although it is used in several places, it is most commonly remembered at the very end of the speech when Dr. King tells his audience about his dream. He shouts, “I have a dream” then expounds on what that dream is—whether it be for the nation to rise up to its creed that “all men are created equal”, or that “little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.” In between each of those statements Dr. King declares “I have a dream today.” That repetition drives home Dr. King’s argument like nothing else could. In saying he has a dream, he sheds light on the fact that all the African Americans have ever been able to do in America is dream of a better life. However, when King says, “I have a dream today,” what he really is saying is that he has a dream today that will be a reality tomorrow. It will not be a dream forever. By repeating that phrase, “I have a dream today,” he shows that

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there is hope for the future, and that hope is the same hope held by every other African American and warrior in the civil rights movement, and that that hope has the potential to not just be a hope forever—if the people work hard, that hope can become actual circumstances.

Through his rhetoric, Dr. King created an outstanding speech and argument. Through allusion, analogy, and repetition, among other rhetorical devices, he successfully proved to his audience and to African Americans throughout the United States that hope exists. That hope gave them courage, and that courage made it possible for them to win the civil rights movement, gaining rights to education, suffrage, and overall equal treatment. His speech had an even broader effect than that though.

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