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

The speech “I Have a Dream” by Martin Luther King, is a compelling one, designed to foster faith among a people, who are victims of gross prejudice. How may the rhetorical devices used by King have aided him in achieving his goals?

In his speech, “I Have a Dream”, Martin Luther King successfully uses an array of rhetorical devices in order to implant faith into the minds and hearts of the audience. Despite the many challenges that the majority of his audience faced during such a time of segregation and prejudice, King encourages them to have faith in the future and what he dreams will become a country free of prejudice and racism.

One device that King uses to foster faith within the audience is structure. Through structure, King is able to provide context to three different types of audiences. The structure of the speech is presented in a chronological manner—firstly addressing the past, followed by the present and lastly the future. In the first portion of the speech, King addresses the hardships faced by blacks in the past—appealing directly to those who were experiencing the effects of racism first hand. By making specific historical references, King is able to cause the audience to yearn for and have faith in his vision for the future. One example of this is when King speaks of the emancipation proclamation and how “once hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination...” By using terms such as “manacles” and “chains,” which are clear references to the time of slavery, King enables the audience to evoke emotions of anger and pain that would hopefully lead to a change; resulting in a better tomorrow. Another example of this is when King says that blacks are living “on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity.” This aids King in promoting hope as it encourages unity. It calls for the whites to think of the pain and troubles that blacks were and still are facing in America and how they were essentially the cause of that sufferings.

In the second section of the speech, King discusses the present and the civil rights movement. It is in this section that he addresses the second type of audience; the whites with a racist mentality. King makes a variety of biblical references that allows the audience to understand the essence and necessity of the civil rights movement. One thing that King makes clear in his speech is that his vision of equality should not be obtained through violence. This concept appeals to ethos as it allows the audience to understand and respect what kind of person King is. This context shows that King is a man of peace and that he isn't willing to overlook what he

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believes to be ethically right in order to get what he wants. Not only is this concept of not reacting (and almost taking on the role of martyrs) a reference to religion, but so is the way in which it is said. King speaks very prophetically throughout the entire speech but the way he delivers this concept sounds as if it was quoted directly from the bible itself. An example of this is: “Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred.” King’s use of biblical allusions is effective as it reminds the audience that everything that he mentions is in agreement with the bible and that they should support his vision. By making both historical and biblical references throughout the speech, King enables the audience to trust him and what he is saying. This trust that King builds with the audience allows him to become one step further in fostering faith in the audience.

Another rhetoric technique that King uses is metaphor. One of the most memorable metaphors that King uses is the check analogy. King compares the injustice that blacks receive in America to a “bad check...which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds’.” This metaphor is able to unite the audience due to its relatable nature. King used this and other metaphors in order to evoke strong emotions, such as anger and determination that would inspire the audience to make a change. King also uses metaphor when he says that with faith, “the jangling discords” of America can be transformed “into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.” Through this metaphor, King tells the audience that life is more difficult when we are disjointed; when everyone is equal and unified, everything is simpler and everyone is happy.

Along with metaphor, King also uses repetitive devices such as anaphora, epistrophe and isocolon in order to foster faith in the audience. An example of anaphora can be seen when King spoke of the present. He reminds the audience that “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 injustice...” The word ‘now’ was repeated quite a few times in this section of the speech. King uses this technique in order to emphasize to the audience that there is no time to waste, that persistence and action is the key to change. King’s use of epistrophe is even more effective than anaphora. An example of this technique is when King says that “with this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to stand up for freedom together...” The repetition of the word ‘together’ unifies the audience as it shows that they are not alone, that no one will be left behind. This technique is effective because the repetition occurs at the end of the line and is the last thing that will be remembered. This will also motivate them to continue on in the fight for racial equality.

An additional repetitive technique that King uses to inspire the audience is isocolon. An example of this device is when King tells the audience to “Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to South Carolina, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana.” Along with making the speech more memorable and connecting several ideas, the use of isocolon is used by King as a means of boosting the audiences’ spirits. He encourages them to go back to the

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states that are most effected by racism and make a change. He urges them to be hopeful as well, as he tells them to go back “knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed.”

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