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Third-place Winner

Short Essay Category

2018 Emerging Writers Contest

Martin Luther King Jr. Rhetorical Analysis

Martin Luther King Jr. was born into segregation. As a result, he immediately saw the injustices committed by those who had social power in the world around him. Due to his numerous years of schooling in order to earn his doctorate in systematic theology, he became a scholar of the Bible and its implications. After being a reverend for a few years he decided that based on his biblical beliefs, something should be done about the lack of community within the races. This desire was fueled by the injustices he saw in his own life and the lives of those around him. It was during the time of the Civil Rights movement that much of the nation was torn due to racial tensions; Martin Luther King Jr.'s desire was not to see the dissension of the races but rather their reconciliation. For these reasons, MLK decided to write and deliver his "I have a Dream" speech on August 28, 1963. Martin Luther King Jr. utilizes a variety of rhetorical devices in order to further his argument on the need for racial reconciliation.

Imagery is "visually descriptive or figurative language" which seems to be the most evident rhetorical device in MLK's speech. For example, King boldly states, "*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.*" Though this piece of

MLK's speech seems to be insignificant, it contains much more imagery than seen at first glance. The imagery of "*the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood*" paints a beautiful picture of unification. The fact that MLK chose to identify these people as "*former slaves*" and "*former slave owners*" rather than black men and white men signifies that he was not just referring to the people by their race, but by how these people were being treated. King uses the phrase "*to sit down together at the table of brotherhood*" to show how he anticipates that this maltreatment may change in the future. The idea of both races coming together, to sit down and dine with one another is a recognition of the brotherhood that MLK hopes they would have as a unified body.

In the following sentence, MLK talks about the maltreatment of the colored people as he refers to the state of Mississippi as one that is sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression. The word choice here was used to bring about memories of what it was like to be in the sweltering heat, drawing from people's experiences. These words connect with "*sons of former slaves*" in more ways than one, such as: what it may have felt like, what the heat did to their bodies, and how the heat affected their mind. King uses the connection between the sweltering heat on a hot summer day when the body is burnt out and the mind is drained in a way that makes it seem like the heat is unjust and oppressive. As MLK goes on, he talks about the possibility of injustice and oppression being "*transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.*" The thought of this transformation must have been such a relief for these people. Instead of walking through life and society saying, "You cannot drink from this fountain. You cannot eat here. You cannot work here because of your color," the freedom and justice they dreamt of would say, "You are welcome here, and you are welcome to drink from either fountain. You are welcome to dine with us regardless of your color. You are welcome to apply for a job here." By

the use of MLK's rich imagery, it is evident that these are prime ideas for the unification and racial reconciliation King was hoping for.

Throughout Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech, his tone of voice noticeably fluctuates as he expresses his thoughts, feelings, hopes, and dreams. When he talks about the hope he desires for the future, he uses compelling language overflowing with confidence. For example, King boldly states, "*knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed. Let us not wallow in the valley of despair,*" which means to lie in a low region of hopelessness. This piece of MLK's speech is essential to the goal of reconciliation within the races because a society that is hopeless is not motivated for things to be different. As a pastor, MLK was a leader in guidance, wisdom, hope, and sound teaching which is why he deemed this part of his "I Have a Dream" speech to be important enough to share with a diverse audience of 250,000 men, women, and children of all colors. The goal of sharing this with others was not only to pour his heart out but to change the perspective of the nation as a whole, especially those that had not experienced discrimination. Without this conspicuous hope, there is no reconciliation.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech is powerfully organized in the way that it is inclusive of all people; King repeatedly uses the pronouns 'We' and 'Our' in order to do just that. His intentions when choosing these words were to bring as many people together as possible in hopes of unifying whites and blacks as a whole instead of segregating them by color; MLK is able to connect on a personal level with those of color because of the persecution he has experienced. When he mentions that he is mindful of the fact that some of the audience have come "*out of great trials and tribulations,*" I can only imagine that he is talking about: being locked up jail, experiencing police brutality, or other creative sufferings. However, as he continues his speech, MLK is able to relate to all Americans when he quotes a line from the

Declaration of Independence, “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.” In quoting the Declaration of Independence (which all Americans hold fast), he is using a legal document to argue his desire for racial reconciliation.

King’s repetition draws focus to different points by his usage of “I have a dream.” This phrase was used a total of eight times and each time it brings attention to a different aspect of MLK’s argument. The first time King uses “I have a dream,” he immediately follows it with a reference to the Declaration of Independence. By doing this, he draws focus in on the logic of his argument that is based on an American legal document. In the next “I have a dream,” he highlights the imagery of his argument by stating that the sons of slaves and slave owners would be able “*to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.*” This summarizes the uniting idea that MLK had in mind for racial reconciliation. The consecutive “I have a dream” that King uses furthers the imagery of his argument; when he contrasts the “*heat of oppression*” with “*an oasis of freedom and justice*” not only does it evoke strong images in the minds of those in the audience, but it also creates a sense of hope for the oppressed hearer. In the following “I have a dream,” MLK appeals to emotion in order to connect with all parents by including his “*four little children.*” He does this in such a way that even those that may not have children are still moved by his seriousness and desperation. The next time King repeats, “I have a dream,” he says that it is a dream of today, which presents the urgency of which he is speaking. Again, MLK uses “I have a dream” to bring about an emotional response when he speaks of little black boys and girls being able to join hands with little white boys and girls. MLK then repeats the exact quote, “I have a dream today” in order to reiterate the imperativeness of his “I Have a Dream” speech. In his final repetition of “I have a dream” he goes back to his Gospel roots by directing his speech to the Lord and the glory that He shall reveal. Ultimately, every single time he repeats “I have a

dream” it allows the audience to recognize what his dream is because they are drawn in by his passionate and reoccurring statement as he summarizes the factors of his argument for racial reconciliation.

Though King reiterates his dream of rapprochement between the races eight different times, there are other ways MLK makes a strong argument by using repetition. When MLK states, “*we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds*” and “*we must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence,*” the repetition of “*we must not*” is used in a manner that is logically inclusive to each and every individual in hopes to unify the nation as one. MLK used these words to command his audience that even though they were going to fight for their rights, they must not do so in a violent manner—this way, no one would be “*guilty of wrongful deeds.*” By King’s repetition of “*we must not,*” he is creating a standard in which they must live. He did this in a mindful, thought out, and well-organized way hoping to leave a lasting impression on the community as well as the rest of the world.

Unity comes from the feeling of a group of people coming together as one. The appeal towards emotion in MLK’s “I Have a Dream” speech is evident as he continues to paint a picture of this idea of all men being equal. He does this in more ways than one; King states that African Americans will, “*Never be satisfied, as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels*” and “*hotels.*” Again, MLK says that they will not be satisfied “*As long as the Negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating: ‘For Whites Only.’*” By saying these things, MLK was not only empathizing with those who can relate, but also triggering the feelings of the entire audience causing them to put themselves in the shoes of the oppressed. He also mentions how he hopes that one day his

children would not have to walk through life in fear of judgment due to the color of their skin, but by their character instead. This draws the audience in by the emotion he expressed simply because of the thought of anyone's children suffering in that way—knowing that the Bible says that each person was wonderfully and fearfully fashioned. Though I am not a mother, I was a child at one point and know for a fact that I would not want to suffer in this way, or in any way for that matter. With this said, I can only imagine the heartache that thought would bring to those that do have children.

Throughout Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech there are various rhetorical devices that were successfully used to portray King's thoughts, feelings, hopes, and dreams of racial reconciliation. He does this by unifying people as one regardless of skin color, experiences, upbringings, or desires. King also creates a logical, easy to follow argument while appealing to the emotions of the audience to invite each individual into his dream for reconciliation. Due to MLK's perseverance and determination, his "I Have a Dream" speech made this nation one step closer to achieving the dream of unification that King longed for. All of these factors, combined with the racial reconciliation of the Civil Rights movement, set the stage for Martin Luther King Jr.'s monologue to be the most influential speech ever.