

Rhetoric in martin luther king jr.s i have a dream speech critical thinking

[Politics](#), [Civil Rights](#)



There are few Americans today who are not familiar with Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous speech, "I Have a Dream." At the time King gave the speech, America was in the middle of a civil rights movement that would end segregation and other injustices (King). However, it is not just the timeliness of King's speech that makes it so effective; King's rhetorical expertise persuasively uses comparison and contrast, metaphor, poetic language, and emotional appeal to all people regardless of race rally the nation to his forceful but peaceful cause with words that will be remembered for generations.

The use of comparison and contrast is the way King introduces his subject concerning the state of civil rights in the United States. As he speaks the words, "Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation," he aligns himself with the cause of popular president Abraham Lincoln who gave the Gettysburg Address (King, Washington 16). The use of comparison and contrast as a rhetorical device provides a strong foundation on which King bases the rest of his speech.

King's speech is filled with metaphor, which provides the audience with vivid and emotionally forceful images to help them understand the severity and serious nature of the civil rights situation he describes. For example, when King speaks of "the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination," he is not speaking about literal manacles or actual chains. However, manacles and chains are instruments of imprisonment, and even if the audience does not already agree with King's cause, most can make the association that slavery was essentially a prison. An exceptionally powerful

metaphor that King uses is by likening the current situation of civil rights to one of economics, a much less contentious subject. King says, " We've come to our nation's capitol to cash a check," from which it is expected the currency of " unalienable Rights" of " Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" can be received. However, King states that America has declined to accept this check from people of color. It becomes something that every American can relate to, not just people who are oppressed or are of a particular race.

King's use of poetic language throughout the speech make his words more memorable so that the audience will have a better recollection of the phrases and ideas he wishes to convey. The poetic device King favors the most is repetition. Toward the beginning of the speech, King repeats the phrase " one hundred years" four times in order to emphasize to the audience that " the negro is still not free" and suffers in a " shameful condition." As he gives specific examples of injustice, he repeats the phrase " we can never be satisfied" to cement those images in the minds of his audience. Finally, as he begins to conclude his speech, he repeats the phrase, " I have a dream" seven times, while he vividly describes his ideal vision of what a better America, free of racial prejudice and problems, he believes that he and his fellow citizens can create.

Additionally, King's speech and its emotional appeals are designed to encourage both black and white Americans to rally to the support of the civil rights movement. He does not want to foster an " us against them" mentality, but instead wants to develop a sense of unity and brotherhood in his audience. According to scholar Keith D. Miller, King utilizes proverbs in his

speech “ to wrap himself in Christianity, Shakespeare, . . . American ‘ folk wisdom,’ and everyday ‘ common sense’ . . . to seem much more palatable (especially to whites) than he would otherwise have appeared” (168). King’s recognition that all people are valuable to the fight for civil rights and his use of inclusive language and ideas allows his audience to feel that they are important and not alienated from his cause.

The comparison and contrast, metaphor, poetic language, and emotional appeal to all people regardless of race are four elements that together make King’s “ I Have a Dream” speech one of the most memorable speeches of the 20th century. These rhetorical tools, along with his powerful message, make the peaceful civil rights message of Martin Luther King Jr. one that is familiar to almost every American since 1963 when he first spoke those words. King’s rhetoric is highly successful, a terrific example for any aspiring public speaker, and will not soon if ever be forgotten.

Works Cited

King Jr., Martin Luther. “ Full Text of Martin Luther King Jr.’s ‘ I Have a Dream’ Speech.” Miami Herald, 24 Aug. 2013. Web. .

Miller, Keith D. “ On Martin Luther King Jr. and the Landscape of Civil Rights Rhetoric.” Rhetoric & Public Affairs 18. 1, Spring 2013. 167-183. Print.

Washington, Durthy A. “‘I Have a Dream’: A Rhetorical Analysis.” The Black Scholar 23. 2, Winter/Spring 1993. 16-19. Print.