

Example of a Rhetorical Analysis Essay

“I Have a Dream”

On the steps of Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. declaimed his views about human equality for African Americans at one of the largest civil rights demonstrations in history. Over 250,000 people stood before King in Washington, D.C. at this rally. This great civil rights leader played a pivotal role in ending the segregation for African Americans and helping inspire the Civil Rights Act of 1964. His rhetorical language left an impact on America. **Through his use of appeals, tropes, schemes, and propaganda techniques, he influenced Americans to believe in the notion that all men are created equal.**

Martin Luther King Jr. relies heavily on **pathos** and **ethos** to convey his message of equality. In his speech, he **alludes** to the **Emancipation Proclamation** in order to gain **credibility** to his speech: “Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today signed the Emancipation Proclamation.” By using the **authority** of Lincoln in his speech, he established trust and common ground with the audience. Additionally, he uses the Declaration of Independence to appeal to his audience by reinforcing “unalienable rights” of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” to demonstrate that the government has not fulfilled on its promise. These examples add to his **credibility or ethos** as a speaker to convey his message. More strikingly, he uses **pathos** to evoke an emotional response from the audience by appealing to their emotions, fears, and desires. By repeating the phrase, “I Have a Dream,” he stresses the sense of hope and sympathy for negroes during that time period. He states, that the “Negro...finds himself in exile in his own land.” This phrase yields compassion as it shows that he empathizes with the unfair treatment and alienation of African Americans. He also uses **highly connotative words** to evoke an emotional response in the audience such as, “chains of discrimination” and “oppression” to reinforce the need for change. He also uplifts his audience through positive diction using words such as “freedom,” “majestic,” and “brotherhood” to motivate and inspire his audience. He also appeals **to logos** through his use of **analogies**: “America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds.’” This analogy uses **logic** as a form of reasoning because he appeals to the basic concept of money and the frustration of receiving a “bad check.” Besides connecting to the audience through appeals, Martin Luther King Jr. also uses rich metaphors to convey his message.

Martin Luther King Jr. creates imagery through **tropes** to persuade the reader to think beyond the literal. For example, his use of **metaphors** provide rich comparisons: when referring to the **Emancipation Proclamation**, he says, “a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.” By referring to the time of day, he evokes the sense of relief that the daybreak provides after a long night or period of slavery. While he understates the time period of the long night of slavery, his stress on the daybreak shows the audience a relief or break from the harsh night. He continues his theme of nature in **his metaphor** that he will be

able to “hew out the mountain of despair a stone of hope.” By stressing the idea of a mountain, he creates imagery that the task at hand is huge as a mountain, but that in any big dilemma, there is a “stone” of hope to carry them on in their mission for equality.

His **schemes** in his diction also provide emphasis to his message of equality. He provides contrasts through the **scheme, antithesis**, when he stresses the importance of a child’s character: “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” This **contrast** emphasizes the reality of the situation: people are judged by their skin and not their character, which only reinforces the need for change against the discrimination of the time period. His **parallel structure** creates a rhythm to his writing that emphasizes his ideas. He states, “We will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together...” His **climactic structure** emphasizes the need to in the end to stand together to protect the rights of African Americans. By far, his greatest and most impactful scheme is the repetition through anaphora. He builds **a crescendo effect** in his repetition of certain lines such as, “one hundred years later,” and “we never can be satisfied.” However, it is not until the end, that the audience sees the force and intensity behind his message, when he repeats, “I have a dream.” The use of **anaphora** adds rhythm and intensity to his vision of equality.

Martin Luther King Jr. relied on **propaganda techniques** to persuade his audience. For example, he uses **group dynamics** to inspire the audience to believe they are a part of his effort: “In a sense **we’ve** come to our nation's capital to cash a check.” By stressing “we” throughout his speech, he asks the reader to be part of a collective voice. His **loaded words** or highly connotative words also add to his intensity: “I have a dream today . . . I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain made low.” His loaded language provides an intense imagery to his writing. He exaggerates with his use of a valley being exalted and that all mountains will be made low. He does this to emphasize that the rights of African Americans need to be respected.

Appeals, tropes, schemes, and propaganda techniques all contribute to the effectiveness of Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech. Martin Luther King Jr. aimed for justice. And, while he didn’t fully see the day of equal rights, he created a legacy in time through his language. A sniper took his life in 1968, but his cause for equality transcends time --that no matter what race you are, all people are equal.

Work Cited

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