

Martin Luther King Speech Analysis

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## **Introduction**

Speech offers the basic component of addressing people in a public place. Through speech and public speaking, a speaker is able to put intended thoughts across a multitude or a group in order to influence action. Rhetoric theory in form of speech is dependent on the speaker's ability to collect the group into a single entity, study their communication needs and use these needs to develop a sustainable speech mechanism that will keep the group glued to the speaker. Therefore, communication skills are an important factor in rhetoric theory.

Development and conception of the basic components of rhetoric theory and criticism are a necessity, not only for presentation of speech but also for participating in the communication process to make it complete. One of the most celebrated public speakers is Martin Luther King. As a public speaker, Luther used his communication skills as part of rhetoric theory to articulate his ideas across the American people over issues of racial discrimination. The purpose of this paper is to give rhetorical criticisms into Martin Luther King's speech "I have a dream" and analyze its persuasive speech components.

## **Description of the Artifact and Research Question**

On 28<sup>th</sup> August 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. stunned the American nation with a speech that has stayed in American lips for over 40 years. Luther stood up in the capital Washington DC on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and gave his electrifying speech "I have a dream" with the intention of uniting the white and black races in America. With this same speech, Luther sought to unify the black race towards a common goal of accepting themselves regardless of the discrimination they faced from their white counterparts. Luther had worked towards developing a society that was free of any racial discrimination. He was an advocate of standing up for his fellow Negro men in instances where they faced acts of extreme racial discrimination

(Manheimer, 2011). The speech came at a time when the black race was associated with slavery and the African-American people were still considered property of the American people. Luther had taken active contribution towards ending racial discrimination. He was one of the players involved in establishing structures towards ending racial discrimination.

Luther had a soaring rhetoric demand for racial justice and development of an integrated society. These pillars were the mantra for the black community and they are as important to them as the US Declaration of Independence is to the American people. Luther's speech came at time when tension was high between the white and the black races, with all the negative societal actions branded to the black race due to the white superiority complex (Martin Luther King, 2014). The black community was crying out and seeking to have a leader who could stand up inform of the white-filled government and address issues facing the black community. They also wanted a person who could unite the people and break the chains that leaders from the white comity had cultivated among the American people. They all wished for a society that was common with people accepting each other and working together in building a great nation of the world. To rally the black community, Martin Luther King Jr. gave a powerful brave speech to the American people, both white and black, meant to motivate and encourage them to create a society that had equality in a time when America needed unity to grow.

From the beginning, Luther never enjoyed a good life as he was brought up in an environment full of discrimination because of his skin color. From his name, Luther was set for greatness. He was a civil rights activist and had a seismic impact on the issue or race relations in the United States, which began in the mid-1950s (Martin Luther King, 2014). He put a lot of effort that he drew from his background as a black person coming from a strictly religious family. Luther from his childhood had a successful ladder in terms of education, which showed

that he had the ability to lead. While in college, he was the students' body leader and this shaped his perception about leading a society that he wanted to change. Through his activism after school, he played an important role in bringing to an end the legal segregation of the African-American citizens in the south. The south was notorious for racial discrimination acts and its influence was fast spreading to other places in the country. He took active participation in the creation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as well as the reconstituting of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Frady, 2015). Martin Luther had gained a lot of national notoriety and was arrested on several counts.

All these incidents had a huge contribution towards Luther's "I have a dream" speech in 1963. Luther was already a well-established human rights activist and his actions had won him a Nobel Peace Prize. Luther had the ability to articulate his thoughts through speech in very captivating ways (Manheimer, 2011). Luther was an excellent craftsman in the manner that he wrote his thoughts and spoke out his ideas. His vocabulary added to the list of the many things that made King a perfect public speaker of such force. He was also young and energetic, drawing a lot of energy from his college life with other African-American students who had developed a spirit to fight racial discrimination in the south and other parts of America. Luther, through his eloquent speech and ability to communicate well gained fame and popularity in over 100 cities across America (Manheimer, 2011). He spoke out his thoughts with embodied energy and a passion towards liberating America from the chains of discrimination based on one's race. His major characteristic of fiery disposition, convicted cause and eloquent speech, Martin Luther King Jr. was the activist that the black community had been waiting for in order to make their issues known to the world.

### **Description of the Critical Method**

The artifact about Martin Luther King Jr. came to existence because of the problems he faced as a black student. The artifact of language also occurred because the African-American community was looking for a torchbearer who could give them new hope and an end to the inequality in the society (Frady, 2015). Therefore, his speech had a basis of mixed anger and determination. King was keen in observing trends in the American nation judging from previous acts against of the white community against the black community. Luther himself had witnessed several actions of inequality and had become a victim of discrimination in hotels, buses and shopping centers (Frady, 2015). In his language and speech, it was clear that he understood the tensions that his speech and actions could bring to the American nation and other supporters of inequality. He was advocating for something that was right and a thing that had been demanded by many. This gave him a force and a brave face to communicate to his audience using the best possible means in order for the audience and the targeted people in government and white community to hear the public outcry of the African-American community.

Luther had felt the sting of inequality and racial discrimination apart from being a witness of widespread struggles and demonstrations. However, he was wearing down with constant demonstrations and strikes and wanted a onetime thing that could revolutionize the public. He had stood up against American powerful people meaning that he had the experience to bring masses together and convince people about the fight for equality. However, Luther was slow to accommodate the white community into his revolutionary ideas. This had a huge influence on young African-Americans who were willing to fight against discrimination and wanted to incorporate their white student counterparts (Manheimer, 2011). Despite this, in his speech presentation, Luther had capitalized on the support he was getting from the few states that were

supporting his actions. His speech set in motion an entire American community into believing that everyone under the sun had equal rights and should enjoy similar rights. He used his eloquence and good communication skills to create a sense of logos, ethos and pathos in his address on “I have a dream.”

In the first few sentences of his speech, King develops a solid sequence of the logos paradigm. In creating this paradigm, King starts his speech with expressing happiness in a group context because he says that he is happy to be with the crowd (Spack, 2013). He also creates the logos pattern by taking his audience in the speech up to five years ago. This serves as the solid establishment as he shows respect to the Emancipation Proclamation. He connects the past five years and the current times with the audience by saying that “But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself in exile in his own land. So we have come here today to dramatize a shameful condition.” Through this statement, King manages to communicate to the audience that little has been achieved despite the declaration and his own efforts to create an equal nation without any discrimination.

In his first few statements, King is trying to bring the multitude closer by addressing ancient atrocities that the African-American race was facing. At this instance, King is trying to help the congregation come to a conclusion that more needs to be done if they are to earn liberation from inequality and discrimination. The existence of a peaceful and equal correlational living between the two conflicting communities was the main idea in the first three paragraphs of

his speech. The speech was well researched, which came as a result of his Bible studies. The Bible also contributed to his preparation alongside the Gettysburg Address as well as the speech given at the US Declaration of Peace. King understood that he first had to promote the good values of the society before pointing out on the flaws that the society had developed in return (Manheimer, 2011). He compares the America that they thought of and the America that exists. Through this comparison, King is able to create a parallel paradigm of unifying to contradicting aspects.

As King continues with his speech, he manages to bring out syllogism. In his statement “In a sense we've come to our nation's Capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir.” In this statement, King stresses on the importance of respecting and defending a constitution. At this point, Luther is giving out several options to the American people. According to the statement, the public had come to confirm on the status of the words spoken during the Declaration of Independence. At this point, the people could have chosen to disobey other clauses of the constitution especially those that pointed directly towards equality in America. King collects his audience and fits them into a round table where they can face each other and develop options on the way forward in beating the predicament ahead of them (Keenan, 2014). In the fourth paragraph of the speech, he was talking not as a person but as an African-American who had been fed up with poor governance in creating an equal nation with no discrimination.

The artistic proof of ethos forms a key aspect of King's speech because of his reputation of being bold, articulate, passionate and energetic when expressing ideas that pain him. The people in Lincoln Memorial expect him to be courageous and speak out issues affecting them

because he speaks for the wider African-American community at all measures (Martin Luther King, 2014). Understanding this responsibility, King lashed out his dream with great agitation. "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal."

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.

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.

I have a dream today." These statements cause uproar among the crowd and motivate the public to have a focus that one day the community will be one and there will be total freedom. He encourages the audience to stand up for a common cause.

### **Report of the Findings of Critical Analysis Interpretation of the Findings**

In the entire speech, King uses ethical appeals in trying to convince the audience in having a focus and hope that one time things will be well. All through his speech, he communicates as if he is talking directly to the perpetrators of racial discrimination. In some sentences within his speech, he communicates directly to the government, which has failed to implement the necessary laws for ending racial discrimination. He takes note of the people's

heritage and motivates them to take action and liberate themselves from the chains set up by ideologies that are more than a century old. The language is clear with a high sense of passion in enlightening the public. The speech is based on hope and it is clear that it is a continuous hope that is waiting to be revealed. The significance of the speech is felt through the way he presents himself, his ideas and involving the public in matters he feels are the most important in a society that is changing.

### **Evaluation of the Artifact**

In evaluating the artifact used in “I have a dream” speech, the ethos, logos and pathos artifacts are clear through the persuasive nature of his speech. He has proof that his dream can be achieved through the retrospective achievements he and his team are doing towards ending racial discrimination (Manheimer, 2011). The organization of his speech has a clear pattern of flow of ideas. At specific points, he emphasizes on certain aspect that he wants the public to stress on and hold on to as a form of guidance towards creating equality in America. The effect of King’s speech is robust with ideas that he has gathered from his youth stage since he joined college and the Bible that he had read for a long time as a church minister (Frady, 2015). The effect of his ideas is enormous to the public because his speech still stands to date as a reference point of an African-American man who stood up for his community regardless of the odds. In terms of memory, King had prepared his speech perfectly well, memorizing some of the clauses of the Declaration of Independence. This led to his ability in controlling the ideas he wanted to pass across to the audience.

### **Contribution of the Study to Rhetorical Theory**

Rhetorical theory deals with creating a convincing attitude to the intended audience. King's speech has a vocal range and different intonations, which implies that some areas were stressed and needed extra attention from the audience. This is a great contribution to rhetorical theory. King appears to have read and memorized his speech before but he only prepared by reading the Bible, The Gettysburg Address and the US Declaration of Independence. King had a desire to place the African-American community on a platform that can help them realize their place and position in the society. In contributing to rhetoric theory, King's speech is memorable to date; his words still have a huge influence towards uniting America, and making it shun racial discrimination to create a society that upholds equality. King's dream has been achieved and became evident when president Obama welcomed children of all walks to his home in the White House during Easter holiday.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, rhetorical criticism in speech as a part of an artifact works to convince and influence a group of people towards accepting a certain idea. Martin Luther King's speech "I have a dream" serves as perfect example in illustrating the rhetoric. King in his speech articulates ideas of liberating the African-American common person from inequality and racial discrimination. His speech comes from the different experiences he went through since he was a child, through his college life and his life as an activist. His speech is clear and organized, indicating the level of preparedness to speak to the public about his dream of having an America where all races were equal. The speech is still memorable to date because of the style and the delivery method of King's speech.

## References

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## Appendix

I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation.

Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of captivity.

But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself in exile in his own land. So we have come here today to dramatize an shameful condition.

In a sense we've come to our nation's Capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir.

This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check; a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds."

But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we have come to cash this

check- a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.

We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism.

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 justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.

It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment. This sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality. Nineteen sixty-three is not an end, but a beginning. Those who hope that the Negro needed to blow off steam and will now be content will have a rude awakening if the nation returns to business as usual. There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges.

But there is something that I must say to my people who stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice. In the process of gaining our rightful place we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.

The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to a distrust of all white people, for many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny. And they have come to

realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom. We cannot walk alone. And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall march ahead. We cannot turn back. There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, "When will you be satisfied?" We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality.

We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities.

We cannot 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."

We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote.

No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations. Some of you have come fresh from narrow jail cells. Some of you have come from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive.

Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to South Carolina, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed. Let us not wallow in the valley of despair.

I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal."

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.

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.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, that one day right down in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope. This is the faith that I will go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.

With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning, "My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the Pilgrims' pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring."

And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true. So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania.

Let freedom ring from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado. Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California. But not only that; let freedom ring from the Stone Mountain of Georgia. Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee.

Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring.

And when this happens, and when we allow freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0yP4aLyq1g>

