

Name of Student

Instructor's Name

Course Code

Date

### Evaluating persuasive techniques in Martin Luther King Jr.'s I Have a Dream

Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech *I Have a Dream*, delivered on August 28, 1963, at the Lincoln Memorial, remains one of the most powerful and enduring speeches in American history. Speaking to over 250,000 people during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, King called for racial equality and an end to discrimination. His speech masterfully employs rhetorical strategies, particularly ethos, pathos, and logos, to persuade his audience of the urgent need for civil rights. Through his credibility as a leader, emotional appeals, and logical arguments grounded in American ideals, King effectively conveys his vision of a racially just society.

Ethos, or the establishment of credibility, is a fundamental rhetorical strategy in King's speech. As a Baptist minister and leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, King had already gained national recognition as a civil rights activist. He further strengthens his credibility by referencing foundational American documents, such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, to argue that the nation has defaulted on its promise of equality. He states, "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'" (King). By invoking these authoritative texts, King establishes himself not only as a leader of the movement but also as a defender of the fundamental principles upon which the United States was founded. Moreover, King's credibility is reinforced by his consistent commitment to nonviolent resistance. As Djameleddine notes, "King's leadership in the civil rights movement was defined

by his unwavering adherence to nonviolence, inspired by Gandhi's principles" (Djameleddine 45). This commitment strengthens his moral authority and makes his appeal more persuasive to both the African American community and white allies.

King's use of pathos is one of the most striking elements of *I Have a Dream*. He evokes deep emotions through vivid imagery, repetition, and personal anecdotes, making his message resonate with a broad audience. One of the most memorable examples of pathos is his use of the phrase "I have a dream," which he repeats multiple times to emphasize his vision of racial harmony. He declares, "I have a dream that one day little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers" (King). This imagery powerfully conveys the hope for a future free from racial division. King employs metaphors to make his arguments more impactful. He compares the African American struggle to "a bad check" that the United States has failed to honor, stating, "Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds'" (King). This financial metaphor makes the injustice more tangible, particularly for those familiar with economic hardships. King also uses space and place to enhance his emotional appeal. According to Adams, "King's choice of the Lincoln Memorial as the site for his speech underscores the historical weight of his words, linking his message to Lincoln's legacy of emancipation" (Adams 12). The symbolic location reinforces the moral urgency of his speech, reminding the audience of the unfinished work of racial justice.

While King's speech is deeply emotional, it is also grounded in logical reasoning. He effectively uses logos to argue that racial justice aligns with American values and should be pursued to fulfill the nation's founding promises. He appeals to the shared ideals of freedom and democracy, asserting that "America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens

of color are concerned” (King). By framing racial equality as an issue of fulfilling America’s promise, King presents a logical case for why change is necessary. Furthermore, King anticipates and refutes potential counterarguments. He acknowledges the frustration and impatience of the African American community but urges them to pursue justice through peaceful means: “We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence” (King). This statement demonstrates his awareness of alternative perspectives and strengthens his argument by positioning nonviolent resistance as the most rational and effective path forward. King also uses cause-and-effect reasoning to illustrate the consequences of continued racial injustice. He warns, “The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges” (King). This statement suggests that ignoring the demands for civil rights will only lead to further unrest, reinforcing the logical necessity of addressing systemic inequality.

In addition to ethos, pathos, and logos, King employs various rhetorical devices to enhance the speech’s persuasiveness. One of the most notable is anaphora, the repetition of key phrases for emphasis. The phrase “Let freedom ring” is repeated in the concluding section, reinforcing the message of unity and justice. This repetition creates a rhythmic and poetic quality that makes the speech more memorable. King also uses allusions to connect his message to historical and religious texts. He references the Bible when he states, “We will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream” (King). By incorporating scriptural language, he appeals to the moral and religious convictions of his audience, further strengthening his argument.

Martin Luther King Jr.’s *I Have a Dream* speech remains a masterclass in rhetorical persuasion, effectively combining ethos, pathos, and logos to advocate for racial equality. His

credibility as a leader, emotional connection with his audience, and logical argumentation create a compelling case for justice. Additionally, his use of figurative language and rhetorical devices enhances the speech's impact, making it one of the most powerful speeches in history. As Adams observes, "King's ability to transform space, time, and memory through his rhetoric ensures that his dream remains alive in the American consciousness" (Adams 18). Even decades later, his words continue to inspire movements for social justice, demonstrating the enduring power of rhetoric in shaping history.

### Works Cited

Adams, Pamela. *The Use of Space and Place in the Civil Rights Discourse of Dr. Martin Luther*

*King, Jr.* 2024. Google Scholar, [https://scholarworks.uttyler.edu/comm\\_grad/6/](https://scholarworks.uttyler.edu/comm_grad/6/).

Djameleddine, Barr. *Civil Rights Movement under the Leadership of Malcolm X and Martin*

*Luther King, Jr.* 2021. Google Scholar, [http://archives.univ-](http://archives.univ-biskra.dz/bitstream/123456789/18487/1/BARR_DJAMELEDDINE.pdf)

[biskra.dz/bitstream/123456789/18487/1/BARR\\_DJAMELEDDINE.pdf](http://archives.univ-biskra.dz/bitstream/123456789/18487/1/BARR_DJAMELEDDINE.pdf).

King, Martin Luther Jr. *I Have a Dream*. 28 Aug. 1963, Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C.