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A Rhetorical Analysis of the Speech '*I've Been to the Mountaintop*'

Delivered on 3rd April 1968 at the Mason Temple, Memphis, Tennessee, '*I've Been to the Mountaintop*', refers to a popular and the last speech by the most famous American civil rights activists named Martin Luther King Jr. Martin's speeches were directed towards ending racial segregation and achieving social justice among all the citizens of the United States irrespective of their racial or religious backgrounds. This speech is the last that Luther delivered to the Memphis fraternity before he was cruelly assassinated the following day. Arguably, the speech is more of a recap that gives directions to the citizens on the way to follow to acquire the long-sought freedom for the 'Black' generations in U.S. basing on the artistic use of words, phrases, and various textual structures and linguistic devices, this Luther's speech becomes persuasive to the audience (both listeners and readers) as it satisfactorily appeals the ethos, logos, and pathos.

Being a renowned spokesperson and an advocate of peace, Martin starts his speech with a tender, appreciative, and a rather courteous opening remarks that suddenly brings together the minds and spirits of the audience. He says, "*Thank you very kindly, my friends. As I listened to Ralph Abernathy and his eloquent and generous introduction and then thought about myself, I wondered who he was talking about. It's always good to have your closest friend and associate to say something good about you.*" (King 1) Such an introduction appeals to the ethos of the audience as it portrays the speaker as a nonviolent person whose aim is to draw a valid attention

to the need of people to unite and peacefully articulate their grievances to the various arms of the Government or the general society. Additionally, he appeals to the ethos of the audience by giving credibility to the essence of his speech. As observed, he clearly pinpoints the significance of his speech, in which he seeks to unite the people of Memphis. To begin with, he creates awareness to the audience that something sinister is happening around Memphis, and generally around the world. "Something is happening in Memphis; something is happening in our world." (King 2). Such diction, the orator captures the attention of the audience as they become more interested to know what is really happening.

The speech appeals to the pathos through use of various linguistic features employed by the speaker. Martin uses a variety of stylistic devices that evoke the emotions of the listeners, thereby persuading them to take an action to achieve what he talks about. For example, he uses an analogy to convey the similarities between the mistreatment in Egypt and the one present in the United States. In his speech, he asserts, "*You know, whenever Pharaoh wanted to prolong the period of slavery in Egypt, he had a favorite, favorite formula for doing it. What was that? He kept the slaves fighting among themselves.*" (King 5). Through the analogy, he directly implies that the same slavery the pharaoh subjected Israelites into is similar to the one the U.S. government is using to enslave the people of black decency. The comparison enables the audience to see the sense of unity and overcome the oppressive government in the same way as the Egyptian slaves would do and win over the pharaoh. In other words, Martin uses analogy in the speech to persuade and convince the civil rights communities on the significance of staying united to achieve their goals. It is also a challenge that evokes the need for harmony among the civil rights society in the United States.

Through constant use of flashback as a linguistic technique, Luther reminds the audience about his previous successes in fights against racial segregation in Alabama and Birmingham. By referring to his past achievements, King restores the faith of the audience and instills confidence in their capability to stage and subsequently win a peaceful protest as he did before. Moreover, the speech is characterized by use of repetition as a rhetoric device that enables Martin to emphasize on the critical aspects of his content. For instance the phrase “somewhere it is written” recurs at least three times in the speech. The phrase is meant to remind people about their fundamental rights. Juxtaposition is yet another rhetoric device used in the speech to persuade the civil rights communities and the general audience on the importance of peaceful demonstrations for the fundamental freedoms of all American people. In his speech, Martin compares United States and other countries such as China and Russia. He puts it clearly that the two nations are different from U.S in the sense that their government is characterized by totalitarianism. He urges the authority to abide by their obligation by putting across the following statement: *“Be true to what you said on paper.” If I lived in China or even Russia, or any totalitarian country, maybe I could understand some of these illegal injunctions”* (King 3). The statement is meant to remind the authority, through side-by-side comparison about its constitutional mandate to recognize and safeguard the rights of the people because U.S is a democratic country, unlike Russian and Chinese regimes which were dictatorial.

Lastly, the speech uses allusion, a linguistic style that enables Martin to make indirect references to the constitution of the United States. Such Constitutional allusion does not only appeal to ethos, but also to pathos of the audience as it gives relevant statistics and evidence for the need of the American society to enjoy equal freedom. At the near end of the speech, Martin says, *“Somewhere I read that the greatness of America is the right to protest for the right”* (King

6). The allusion further adds the antanaclasis that embellishes the rhythmic style of the speech. The multiple implicit references the speech makes to the constitution of the U.S serve as an effective rhetoric device that appeals to logos by persistently reminding the audience about the Bill of Rights, subsequently sensitizing them on the need to protest for emancipation from racial discrimination. By brilliantly alluding to most crucial document in the country's history, Martin Luther provides factual justification about the nonviolence protests he is about to stage, and successfully persuades other civil rights activists to join him.

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Works Cited

Martin, Luther, King, Jr. *I've Been to the Mountaintop*. 1968. 1-7

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