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680 Words

Dr. KP

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“I Have a Dream” Analysis

Martin Luther King, Jr. was an African American pastor at the height of the Civil Rights Era in the United States. He prioritized peaceful protest and preached nonviolence to those involved in the civil rights movement. He gave his most famous speech, titled “I Have a Dream,” on August 28, 1963 (Tikkanen). Through his use of allusions, repetition, and metaphors, Dr. King portrays the necessity of the Civil Rights movement.

The allusions Dr. King used in this speech provides meaning through contributing historical context. For example, he opens his famous speech with “[f]ive score years ago,” very similar to the beginning of the Emancipation Proclamation delivered by President Lincoln. This reference to the Emancipation Proclamation elevates this speech as one of great historical importance and relevance, just as the Emancipation Proclamation is. Through this allusion, Dr. King also provides historical context to his speech. He is insinuating that although slavery ended “Five score years ago,” the oppression of African Americans has persisted. Additionally, he exclaims that he hopes the United States will live up to the promise that “all men are created equal.” Through referencing the Declaration of Independence, Dr. King provides a connection between his dream and the American dream. Implying that African American oppression and discrimination houses a logical discrepancy that disobeys the very foundations of this

country. His use of historical allusions exerts a sense of importance onto this speech and illustrates the way in which the nation is not fulfilling the duties it set out for itself.

Repetition creates an elevated emotional appeal and leaves a lasting impression on the audience. Throughout the speech, “I have a dream” is repeated eight times. This repetition allows Dr. King to illustrate what a unified America would look like while maintaining the connection between both the different places of America as well the different time periods. The repetition also creates an emotional response in the audience. Every time Dr. King says “I have a dream,” the audience buys into him and his message even more. Furthermore, this rhetorical device makes the speech extremely memorable, making it leave an impression on every person who heard or read this speech.

Additionally, “[w]e can never” or “[w]e cannot be satisfied” is repeated five times in response to the question “[w]hen will you be satisfied?” This repetition also creates a memorable, lasting effect for the speech. It also allows Dr. King the opportunity to clearly paint the unacceptable discrimination African Americans are facing. Lastly, it politely implies how ridiculous the question “when will you be satisfied” is, as the treatment African Americans are receiving is outrageous. Dr. King is able to employ such emotion and meaning simply through repeating himself.

Metaphors allow for Dr. King to further explain his dream for the nation by comparing it to tangible objects. He compares the treatment of African Americans to “a bad check.” He claims that the United States “has defaulted on this promissory note.” The promissory note being the ideal stated in the Declaration of Independence, that all men are created equal. This comparison of the nation’s treatment of African Americans to

the nation malfunctioning financially depicts how the nation truly failed African Americans. Dr. King later compares the attempts for progress and equality to the “doors of opportunity” that lead “into the palace of justice.” Metaphors concerning buildings and doorways are commonly used to convey progress, but Dr. King sophisticates the metaphor by expressing that the opportunities of progress have been closed off to African Americans. He also elevates the comparison by equating justice and freedom to a “palace,” not just a house. A palace is the pinnacle of structures, just as justice is the pinnacle of this nation.

Through his sophisticated use of allusions, repetition, and metaphors, Dr. King invokes historical importance and high emotions that result in his speech being very memorable. These rhetorical devices are a large reason why this speech is so widely studied even after all these years.