

Religious Rhetoric in “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop”

By Jana Elenany

The purpose of Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” is to give hope to his audience. It is important to pay attention to the style, imagery, and structure that he uses throughout the speech, especially at the end when he leaves the audience with a hopeful message to think about. There are two long and complex sentences in the first paragraph of this passage. These two sentences are both very biblical. "...view of the whole human history up to now, and the Almighty said to me" (1). This line is notable because it uses the word "Almighty," rather than the word "God."

Several of his remarks as a world-renowned spokesperson promoting nonviolent protest centered on peaceful means to address blacks' unequal treatment and segregation. His objective was to adopt peaceful protest techniques to ensure that one day all of God's children, whites, and blacks alike, would live and treat each other as equals. The religious audience perceives this point differently because of this. To them, Almighty implies that God is in an even higher position, which adds to its significance. God speaks directly to Martin Luther King, asking him, "Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?" (1). The piece is dramatized in a godly sense, in a way something that is bigger than us because the spectator imagines God speaking to Martin Luther King. Because the audience is religious, the use of religious terminology is essential. The listener gets another picture of God in the second paragraph of this chapter, where God is as a person working.

After considering how the author has presented his biblical language, it is now necessary to analyze how he has adopted tone, and how some words are sung more than once. For instance, when he emphasizes "dark dungeons" (1), he is using alliteration, but the intonation also conveys the illusion of singing. The repetition used, such "...favorite, favorite formula..." (1), is crucial since it adds enthusiasm to the sentence and allows the listener to have better comprehension. However, in the third paragraph, a more casual linguistic style is adopted. Succeeding that the imagery in this section is very present. Throughout the whole speech, King makes these connections that are, therefore, portrayed to the people.

The manner Martin Luther King portrays God to the audience is what makes this section of the book particularly enjoyable to examine. This is clearly shown, when he says, "And I see God working in this period of the twentieth century in a way that men, in some strange way, are responding" (2). In this scene, Jesus also demonstrates that God does not employ his enormous abilities, but rather works like any other human. The picture of the "promised land" is very meaningful to the audience since everyone has a different idea of what the promised country looks like. The majority of the audience envisions a paradise-like setting. There would be no conflict, no hatred in general, and it would be a calm environment. In some ways, Martin Luther King resembles Moses, and his purpose is to lead the audience to the promised land.

Furthermore, he employs phrases that were popular during Moses' time, such as "the promised land." He also claims to have been to the summit, to have "looked over," and to have "seen the promised land." However, Moses died the day after this occurred, therefore in a manner, these foreshadow, Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, because he was slain the day after this speech. King mentions his approaching death but utilizes prophetic language to inspire

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the people to join him in crossing the Promised Land and living up to the principles of the United States. This speech's structure is made up of the background, the present, and the coda, at which point the speech comes to an end. "Something is happening in our world. The masses of people are rising. And whenever they are assembled today, the cry is always the same. 'We want to be free'" (2). By addressing the worldwide differences that beset the people, King suggests that unity and oneness may combat the injustice that was taking place. King claims that he was delighted to be in Memphis so that he could encourage people to fight for their beliefs and rights against the wrongdoings of the city of Memphis, which is a type of pathos that refers to the people's feelings.

Martin Luther King begins the first two paragraphs by going back in time, to a time when God would question him, "Which age would you like to live in?" Then Martin Luther King walks past numerous well-known historical sites, continually repeating the words, "I wouldn't stop there..." (1). The audience can understand where he is attempting to go and what he is doing to prevent getting to the moment in history where he wants to live because of this repetition. He chose to live in the twentieth century since it is particularly significant. It is significant because, after saying, "Now that is a strange statement to make because the world is all messed up ... The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land; confusion all around" (2). In a way, he is also attempting to argue that he chose to live in this era in order to restore the nation's optimism and teach people how to deal with the world again.

He is speaking with greater hope in the middle, in a lighter but stronger voice. The wording also gets more uplifting in order to restore people's optimism. The conclusion of the speech is significant since he leaves the audience at the pinnacle of his discourse. He concludes

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by declaring, "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the Lord" (9), and then he steps down from the pulpit. The crowd then applauds, and everyone is convinced by his message. In essence, the text is exceptionally well structured, with the composition, style, and imagery all working together to create an atmosphere where it appeared that everything had an undesirable effect at the start of the speech, yet nevertheless it turned out to be bright again at the end. Martin Luther King Jr., in my perspective, restored the audience's hope in the quest to achieve nonviolent action and retain cohesion and solidarity.