

A Relevant Ministry: Ideology In Martin Luther King's "I've Been To The
Mountaintop"

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"Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land! And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!!" (King, 1968)

Echoing first through Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee on the third of April, 1968, these profound words resound still as a cry for equality and mutual respect amongst all people. The day after speaking this seemingly prophetic exhortation, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated outside of his first floor hotel room, solidifying King as the epic hero portrayed in the speech. Today, we remember the words of Dr. King's last public address, "I've Been to the Mountain Top," as a call for social justice and as a reminder of the power of rhetoric.

Delivered at the Mason Temple (Church of God in Christ Headquarters) in Memphis, Tennessee to encourage support for a sanitation workers' strike, King's final speech is one of the most prominent orations of the twentieth century. In point of fact, according to a list compiled by one hundred and thirty seven rhetoric

scholars for, “American Rhetoric,” it is the fifteenth most significant American speech of the twentieth century. This significance is assessed in both the quality of language and ideology used by King, as well as the historical and cultural significance attributed to it. Dr. King’s ability to fuse eloquently powerful language to the ideas of social justice and equality made him one of the most famous orators in modern American history. It is this power as an orator, therefore, that establishes significance to any speech given by Dr. King. Therefore, as a student and scholar of rhetoric, one can better understand his influential power through detailed analysis of this work.

To one unacquainted with scholarly dealings in rhetoric, the significance of “I’ve Been to the Mountain Top” is equally relevant. The ideologies of justice, equality, and hope in the future remain chief among the ideals of the American paradigm. In his article, “Dr. King’s Legacy of Faith,” in the magazine, *Black Enterprise*, Earl Graves asserts that the most powerful significance left by this speech is an attitude of faith in these ideals (Graves 1). With his uniquely prophetic cadence, Dr. King expressed hope in the future—hope, “that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!” The encouragement King communicates in his speech seems to be coming to fruition in recent history. As Graves observes, the historic assent of President Barack Obama to the country’s highest executive office gives testament to Dr. King’s hope (Graves 1). Thus, as a means to better understand the events of our own time, it is crucial that one study the means by which our society has come to be as it is.

In view of said significance, detailed analysis of Dr. Martin Luther King's, "I've Been to the Mountain Top," must be conducted. Assessment and critique of the effect and subtleties of the artifact will be ascertained through an inquiry into historical context and through an explanation and application of the Ideological method of rhetorical criticism.

Background

To fully understand the artifact, one must first understand the context in which it was given, as well as the background of the rhetor to which it is attributed. "I've Been to the Mountain Top," was delivered on April 3, 1968 at the Mason Temple, in Memphis, Tennessee. Dr. King's immediate purpose for the discourse was to generate support for a strike of Memphis sanitation workers, which began several months earlier on February 11, 1968. The strike came in response to years of inequitable pay and treatment of employees of color, as well as an outrage over the city's slow and unhelpful response to the death of Echol Cole and Robert Walker—sanitation workers who were killed by a malfunctioning garbage truck (Honey 23-50). In addition, however, King raised the stakes of the immediate issue to include significance to the Civil and Workers' Rights movements at large. The audience consisted of about 2000 of supporters, most of whom were African American. Several days earlier, a protest march had been attempted unsuccessfully, as several protestors eventually broke out into violence.

This gathering had been made to rally and prepare for an upcoming peaceful march that was to begin a few days later.

This, though, was only a part of the whole—a microcosm for a larger movement for the civil rights of equality and justice for African Americans nationwide. Although ideas of dissatisfaction over racial segregation and institutionalized prejudice had been formulated and communicated earlier, Dr King's involvement in civil rights activism began when Rosa Parks, a member of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama—of which King served as Pastor—was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white man in a public bus. (Nicol, 16) A few days subsequent to the decision to instigate a boycott of the bus system, Dr. King was selected to be the spokesman for the movement. Using the speaking style he had developed from delivery sermons from the pulpit, King began delivering speeches advocating nonviolent resistance of the unjust segregation laws of the American South. After 382 days of boycott, the Supreme Court ruled the state and local segregation laws of Alabama unconstitutional.

Following the success of the Montgomery boycott, leaders of civil rights community decided to organize by forming the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and appointed Martin Luther King president of the organization. The organization of this community propelled both the movement and its leader into national prominence. A year later, Dr. King wrote his first book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, documenting the success of the boycott. While signing copies of his book in Harlem, New York, King was stabbed by a black woman and

nearly died. In, "I've Been to the Mountain Top," King makes reference to this near death incident to illustrate the hardship associated with the cause. Fortunately, King recovered from the incident and began a subsequent snowball of activist activity. Between 1960 and 1967 the SCLC coordinated a slue of protest, boycotts, and a demanding schedule of public addresses. From "sit-ins" on college campuses across the country, "freedom rides" to advocate equality in the transportation systems of the south, arrests in Birmingham, Alabama, and civil rights demonstrations from Chicago to Florida, the Civil Rights movement began to take hold of America.

By 1968—the year Dr. King delivered, "I've Been to the Mountain Top"—however, the country had been thrust into race riots due, in large part, to the more violent and militant sects of the Civil Rights movement. King, moreover, faced allegations of communist involvement as well as considerable political pressure for his views on the war in Vietnam. (Honey 23-50) When the time to deliver his speech to the crowd in Memphis, Tennessee arose, King needed to rally the movement back to a united cause advocating compassion and nonviolent resistance.

These actions, this movement, this speech was not, however, a mere result circumstance, but the product of Dr. King theological, philosophical, and political ideology. Learned both through experience and the classroom, these ideologies helped to shape the rhetoric of Dr. King. Though his family was fairly well off for a Southern black family, King experienced the effects of institutionalized racism at

an early age when he was told that he was no longer allowed to see his best boyhood friend, a white child, by the boy's father. Other similar experiences of humiliation and racial prejudice slowly shaped his view of reality. Although this led to his initial resentment toward white people, upon attending Morehouse College in 1944, his ideas radically changed. As he was exposed to the writings of Henry David Thoreau and instructed in courses on the philosophy of religion, he soon began to see civil disobedience as a way to overcome much of the evil he saw in the world.

After Graduating from Morehouse, King enrolled in Crozer Theological Seminary to pursue a degree in Christian Theology. While there, he was introduced to the works of the philosopher George Hegel and the theologian Walter Rauschenbusch. From Hegel he developed a view of political leaders as servants of the public will. It was from Rauschenbusch, however, that his most powerful inspiration came. Dr. King became passionate about the role of Christian compassion in the advocacy of social justice. He then discovered the works of the Mahatma Gandhi and nonviolent resistance in India. If God's call for compassion and social justice were the motivation for Dr. King's involvement in the civil rights movement, Gandhi's work in nonviolence was a perfect way for him to enact God's call.

Ideological Criticism

The critical perspectives of past analyses of the speech have been far from uniform. Much of the literature has emphasized King's use of narrative discourse. Keith Miller, for example, in his work, "Alabama as Egypt: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Religion of Slaves," suggests that the speech's power of influence is derived chiefly from King's construction of the Western Historical tradition and African American Christianity. Other scholars, such as Robert and Linda Harrison in their piece, "The call from the mountaintop: Call-response and the oratory of Martin Luther King," however, have found more significance in the use traditional African American delivery styles. Though these perspectives are indeed important in analyzing the power of the speech, it seems inquiry ought also be done into the forces behind the narrative and delivery—the ideological wind behind the sails of the styles used. Thus, critique and analysis will be done using the framework of ideological criticism.

As the context reveals, a wide array of events and ideas shaped and refined the development of the artifact at hand. Using the method of ideological criticism, a deeper understanding of the ideas being communicated and their significance to the Civil Rights movement at large will be possible. As its name implies, the paradigm seeks to understand and critique rhetoric by understanding how it has been influenced by the ideology it communicates and how its communication influences its ideology. Thus, to fully understand how and why ideological

criticism is to be used, one must have a clear definition of the two chief variables of the methodological equation—namely, rhetoric and ideology.

Definitions of rhetoric have been created and modified countless times by a wide array of scholars over the centuries. However, perhaps the most foundational definition of rhetoric can be attributed to Aristotle in his work which bears the topic's name. Aristotle pens that rhetoric is, “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion.” Thus, rhetoric can be understood as any artifact used in the purposes of persuasion. Modifying and specifying this understanding, rhetoric scholar Sonja Foss has identified three dimensions of Aristotle's original definition—that rhetoric is created by humans, uses symbols, and that communication is purpose (Foss 4-5). As such, Dr. King's “I've Been to the Mountain Top” is undeniably an artifact of rhetoric.

Equally foundational to the critique of rhetoric using ideological methodology is an understanding of the concept of an “ideology.” An ideology can be understood as the “system for the interpretation of fundamental, social, economic, political, or cultural interests,” (van Dijk 69) used by a people group. Scholars of communication put emphasis on the rhetorical construction of these patterns of beliefs. Because much, if not all, of human ideas are transferred via rhetoric of some kind, communication scholars assert that the way which ideologies are presented and communicated shapes what is believed about an ideology in question. Likewise, what is believed about an ideology shapes much of the presentation and communication of a rhetorical artifact. Hence, a circular pattern

emerges whereby artifacts of rhetoric shape and are shaped by ideology. The goal of ideological criticism, then, is to analyze how ideologies work by revealing the ways it is communicated in the rhetoric.

Ideological criticism, moreover, associates ideology with the distribution of power, or hegemony. Of this, Foss says the following: “Hegemony is the privileging of the ideology of one group over that of other groups. It is thus contributes a kind of social control, a means of symbolic coercion, or a form of domination of the more powerful groups over the ideologies of those with less power.” (Foss 215). Thus, ideologies of the same topic, by virtue of the law of non-contradiction, are mutually exclusive. One cannot at the same time, for example, advocate both democratic and totalitarian forms of government. The nature of the ideologies excludes all other possibilities. As one ideology becomes more powerful in a society, it naturally dominates ideologies with less power. Since its beginning development, other perspectives have allowed further expansion and development to be realized in ideological criticism.

As one examines the various perspectives and expansions on the study of the ideological criticism of rhetoric, a striking similarity emerges—a common methodology that all of the scholars writing on the subject hinge upon. This methodology is expressed in a two step system whereby a critic analyzes a rhetorical artifact. The first step is to identify the nature of the ideology in question. This involves an in depth examination of the artifact for evidence of ideological influence. The second step is to identify the strategies used in support

of the ideology. To expand, a critic must ask, “How does this piece of rhetoric communicate its ideology? How is the ideology working?” Critical analysis of “I’ve been to the Mountain Top” will be done using these two steps.

The Ideology of a “Relevant Ministry”

Upon analysis of Dr. King’s historical background and the artifact itself, a consistent and all encompassing ideology becomes very clear. Though fairly complex, Dr. King puts a fitting name to this ideology in his description of the minister’s role in fighting for the oppressed. He states in the last sentence of this section, “I’m always happy to see a relevant ministry.” Thus, the ideology of “relevant ministry” is pervasive throughout the artifact and, indeed, drives and gives meaning to the speech as a whole. Through study of the artifact within the context of King’s life, several concepts and outlets of expression are identified by the rhetor as parameters of this ideology.

At the heart of this ideology—at the core of its principles—lies the teaching of Christ to love one’s neighbor as one’s self. From this principle of faith, developed the practical system of ideology that gave birth to the Civil Rights movement and it is from this principle of faith that Dr. King spoke on the third of April, 1968. After delivering some powerful oratory regarding the tangible application of this ideology, the rhetor then shifts the focus on to its philosophical founding.

“...he [Jesus] talked about a certain man, who fell among thieves. You remember that a Levite and a priest passed by on the other side. They didn't stop to help him. And finally a man of another race came by. He got down from his beast, decided not to be compassionate by proxy. But he got down with him, administered first aid, and helped the man in need. Jesus ended up saying, this was the good man, this was the great man, because he had the capacity to project the "I" into the "thou," and to be concerned about his brother.”

By following this example, by projecting “the “I” into the “thou”” as Christ taught, King asserts, one can truly learn to love one’s neighbor as one’s self. Thus, this “relevant ministry” requires a radical commitment to taking the teachings of Christ seriously enough to translate them to real life practice. Again, in the words of Dr. King, “Let us develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness.”

Foundationally for Dr. King, the justification of treating others—regardless of race or creed—with dignity and respect also came from his spiritual background. Communicating a Biblical teaching, King argues that because all people bear the emotional, spiritual, and intellectual image of God, and are thus, “God’s children,” all people are deserving of respect and dignity. As Dr. King affirms, “We are saying -- We are saying that we are God's children. And that we are God's children, we don't have to live like we are forced to live.” So the rhetor’s ideology, then, hinges on the assertion that all people deserve to be treated fairly—indeed, as “ourselves”—because all people bear the image of God.

The next step, then, in Dr. King's ideology is to translate beliefs held on a philosophical and theological level to actions expressed on a personal and relational level. It is at this point that the ministry, mentioned above, becomes "relevant." King says on this point,

"It's all right to talk about "streets flowing with milk and honey," but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can't eat three square meals a day. It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preacher must talk about the new New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do."

With this exhortation, Dr. King brings to surface the notion that loving one's neighbor does not merely involve preaching and teaching, but also is expressed in acts of radical compassion and justice.

It ought also be noted that central to King's belief in following Christ's teaching of loving one's neighbor as one's self and fighting for the rights of the oppressed was his conviction that such action be taken without the use of violence. He reasoned that violence not only hinders the ability to love the perpetrators of injustice—who are also our "neighbor"— as ourselves, but diverts attention away from the issue at hand on to the violence itself. As King says, "Men, for years now, have been talking about war and peace. But now, no longer can they

just talk about it. It is no longer a choice between violence and nonviolence in this world; it's nonviolence or nonexistence. That is where we are today”

With these philosophical and theological principles as his foundation, Dr. King believed that the then current segregation of African Americans and the treatment of the workers of many industries were acts of injustice. Thus, he defined a relevant ministry as one that would champion the rights of these oppressed peoples.

Ideology in the Artifact

When one examines “I’ve been to the Mountain Top,” wide arrays of rhetorical devices and genres become evident. These devices not only communicate, but also shape and give meaning to King’s ideology of a “relevant ministry.” Though Dr. King makes use of a great number of figures and tropes in communicating his ideology, the chief structural devices and genres employed are found in epic discourse, exhortation from Biblical text, and personal anecdote.

Epic Discourse

One of the most prominent rhetorical genres Dr. King uses in communicating his ideology is epic discourse. Epic discourse is the use of hero’s journey type narrative in order to frame and communicate a current situation. As Keeley (2008) states, “Using narrative genres in discourse also creates a framework for the audience to understand the situation and the role of the speaker and of

audience members themselves and to bring the story toward resolution. The epic genre helps to contextualize a situation and to create expectations for what will happen in the future.” The epic constructs a set of adversity through which the hero must endure and over which the hero must triumph. In using such a narrative, the audience is called upon to support the cause of the hero, which—in the construction of the epic—is synonymous with the cause for good. Odysseus must brave the dangers of the Aegean and the tests of the gods, Beowulf must slay monsters of the ancient forest, and now Martin Luther King Jr. must stand in defiance of the tyranny of injustice. Thus, when using epic discourse, the rhetor describes the events of a current situation within or compared to a larger drama.

Dr. King first employs the form of epic by opening the speech with the portrayal of the Civil Rights movement within the unfolding of great moments of history. He begins highlighting this in the opening sentence of the second paragraph: “Something is happening in Memphis; something is happening in our world.” This use of parallel sentence structure connects the events of the sanitation workers’ strike in Memphis to a greater movement worldwide and places this worldwide movement among the defining moments of history.

The subsequent hypothetical, in which Dr. King stands with God before the history of mankind, solidifies the notion of the current events as a part of a larger epic. Dr. King begins, “if I were standing at the beginning of time, with the possibility of taking a kind of general and panoramic view of the whole of human history up to now, and the Almighty said to me, ‘Martin Luther King, which age

would you like to live in?” and then finishes, “Strangely enough, I would turn to the Almighty, and say, ‘If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the 20th century, I will be happy.’” He further emphasizes this with the extensive use of anaphora—repeating the phrase “I would” at each great moment of history—building momentum with each statement towards the allegory’s eventual climax at the present. King then solidifies this climax by transitioning with a repetition of the opening clause with which he connected the struggle in Memphis, “Something is happening in our world.”

Such use of epic language in the introduction contextualizes the events of the Memphis sanitation workers’ strike not only within the greater movement for civil rights, but also within the great defining moments of western history. In leading his audience through the mental flight of historical events, Dr. King brings to light each of these events’ momentous connotations. By privileging the events of his own time above these events, therefore, he casts the rhetorical situation as one of epic magnitude, drawing the audience’s attention and persuading them towards action in the face of such importance.

The next, and perhaps more structurally prevalent use of epic discourse comes with the allusion to the Biblical account of the Exodus, in which the Israelite people are freed from slavery in Egypt and led by Moses to the promised land of Canaan by the sovereign providence of God. The striking similarity between the plight and eventual victory of the Israelites and that of African Americans in the United States has long been drawn upon in African American

discourse (Keeley 288). According to E.S. Glaude, “The endless repetition of the story in black life established the narrative as paradigmatic in the developing black political culture” (45). Thus, the audience would have identified with the references and understood them to be representative of the current times.

The first reference to this account comes as the first great moment in history presented in the allegory discussed above, “I would watch God’s children in their magnificent trek from the dark dungeons of Egypt through, or rather across the Red Sea, through the wilderness on toward the promised land.” By placing this story as the first event discussed in the allegory, King highlights the story’s importance and sets up a powerful parallel between the struggle for civil rights and the great turning points of history.

The next reference comes at a transition point between describing the strike within the context of history and elaborating the need to continue with peaceful protest,

“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. But whenever the slaves get together, something happens in Pharaoh’s court, and he cannot hold the slaves in slavery. When the slaves get together, that’s the beginning of getting out of slavery. Now let us maintain unity.”

This reference leads the audience into several insights. The first is the implication that the audience in general and the sanitation workers on strike in particular, were still “enslaved” by the unjust treatment to which they were subjected. The second insight is that because of the similarity between the Israelites’ circumstances and that of the audience, the oppression before them could be overcome by following the Israelites example. In this way, King uses and extends the audience’s identification with the story to help them gain an understanding of and take action in their own historical context.

The final use of this allusion is found at the speeches climactic conclusion, in which King assures the audience of the inevitable success of their movement:

“Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!

In this powerful exhortation, King assures and motivates the audience by framing the movement within the epic narrative of the Israelites’ entrance to the promised land, placing the cause on the brink of triumph and himself as the Moses figure. In this reference, King alludes to Deuteronomy 34, in which God allows Moses to view the promised land from the top of Mount Nebo before his death. Though we cannot know if King had in mind his actual impending assassination or

if he spoke more abstractly of perseverance through whatever timeline necessary, the allusion clearly places King as the Moses archetype, looking out towards future victory. This was particularly important within the historical context, in which questions over King's leadership that had surfaced surrounding increased violence in other branches of the Civil Rights movement and his own controversial views of the war in Vietnam. The effect, then, of framing the cause within this epic drama, is to assure the audience of both the movement's direction and King's leadership. The reference, moreover, portrays to the audience that, just as the Israelites had been guided by divine providence, so too was the movement. This is clear in King's stated conviction, "I just want to do God's will," and his assurance of success seen from the "the mountaintop." Such a message moves the audience to confidence in the cause itself.

Exhortation from Biblical Text

As noted earlier, Dr. King's discussion of the parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the speech's most telling sections of King's ideology. Many scholars have noted the power of this section as allusion (Keeley 289-290) and narrative (Osborne 325)—which indeed it is. However, King's use of this parable goes beyond an allusion or narrative symbolic of the historical moment. Rather, King uses this story as an explicit justification for his exhortation to participate in the strike—to, "develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness." Case in point, after

explaining the perspective of the Good Samaritan as, “if I do not help this man, what will happen to him?” King exhorts:

“That’s the question before you tonight. Not, “If I stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to my job. Not, “If I stop to help the sanitation workers what will happen to all of the hours that I usually spend in my office every day and every week as a pastor?” The question is not, “If I stop to help this man in need, what will happen to me?” The question is, “If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?” That’s the question. Let us rise up tonight with a greater readiness. Let us stand with a greater determination. And let us move on in these powerful days, these days of challenge to make America what it ought to be.”

In this way, King uses the story not only as an allusion that represents the historical moment, but as an authoritative unit of reasoning. The story is given as support for his charge to continue to sustain the protest, in response to the hypothetical question, “why ought I participate in the sanitation workers strike?” King’s reasoning, then, is an appeal to an ethical authority—namely the teachings of Christ—to show that one ought to support the strike as an expression of the principles in the parable. Such usage suggests King’s position as a preacher exhorting from the pulpit in addition to his use allusion and narrative to construct present realities.

Personal Anecdote

Another device employed by King to communicate his ideology of a “relevant ministry” is the recounting of personal anecdote. During the course of the speech, there are two major stories used. The first of these is the relating of the protests in Montgomery Alabama:

“I remember in Birmingham, Alabama, when we were in that majestic struggle there, we would move out of the 16th Street Baptist Church day after day; by the hundreds we would move out. And Bull Connor would tell them to send the dogs forth, and they did come; but we just went before the dogs singing, "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around.”

As the story comes immediately following the admonition that, “when people get caught up with that which is right and they are willing to sacrifice for it, there is no stopping point short of victory,” the context makes clear that the purpose of the story is to encourage the audience to persevere. The story chronicles three phases of opposition that the protestors faced—first police dogs, then fire hoses, and finally jail.

With each obstacle, though, King illustrates the protest’s determination and continued perseverance, symbolized by the singing of a hymn. In response to the dogs, King says, “we just went before the dogs singing, ‘Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around.’” At the fire hoses he explains, “we'd go on before the water hoses and we would look at it, and we'd just go on singing ‘Over my head I see freedom

in the air.” And finally while in jail he states, “we would just go in the paddy wagon singing, ‘We Shall Overcome.’” Thus King not only describes the perseverance and eventual success of the campaign, but roots each victory in powerful symbolism. The use of hymn to depict perseverance invokes a sense of spiritual authority and strength beyond circumstance, calling upon a power for perseverance beyond what an individual alone has the ability conjure. Thusly, the anecdote creates confidence for the audience and a paradigm for campaign success that can be emulated. This example of personal victory, then, garners support for the tangible application of the ideology of a relevant ministry.

The second personal anecdote used presents itself at the end of speech, following the discussion of the Good Samaritan. In the anecdote, Dr. King explains how he was stabbed in 1958 while at a book signing in New York City and the medical emergency that followed—making clear that, “if I had merely sneezed, I would have died.” The power of the story is found in his recounting of a letter he received from a young “white girl” following his surgery. In the story, the Civil Rights movement is constructed as representing the values of both the white and black communities. The “white girl” and her expression, “I’m so happy that you didn’t sneeze,” is shown to symbolize the feelings of the white community, while King and his struggle is portrayed as symbolizing the black community. In this way, King is able to convey the importance of the cause for people of all communities.

Having established this importance, King then, with artful crescendo, uses the framework of the story to list the achievements of the Civil Rights movement to that time. Using anaphoric repetition of the phrase, “If I had sneezed, I wouldn’t have...” before each of the great victories of the movement, King shows the end to which he survived the ordeal:

“If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been around here in 1961, when we decided to take a ride for freedom and ended segregation in inter-state travel. If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been around here in 1962, when Negroes in Albany, Georgia, decided to straighten their backs up. And whenever men and women straighten their backs up, they are going somewhere, because a man can't ride your back unless it is bent. If I had sneezed -- If I had sneezed I wouldn't have been here in 1963, when the black people of Birmingham, Alabama, aroused the conscience of this nation, and brought into being the Civil Rights Bill. If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have had a chance later that year, in August, to try to tell America about a dream that I had had. If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been down in Selma, Alabama, to see the great Movement there. If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been in Memphis to see a community rally around those brothers and sisters who are suffering. I'm so happy that I didn't sneeze.”

The repetition here shown builds momentum with each added item, bringing the audience smoothly into the speech’s final allusion to the

mountaintop. In this way, King calls upon the larger movement's successful past to illustrate the significance of the specific manifestation of the ideology found in the sanitation worker's strike. Personal anecdote, therefore, serves as a powerful tool to give specificity and tangibility for the ideology present in the speech.

Conclusion

The ideology of a "relevant ministry" is pervasive in the entirety of "I've been to the Mountaintop." King clearly and eloquently articulates this ideology through the use of epic discourse, exhortation from biblical text, and personal allegory. Such communication of his ideology enabled him to address the challenges faced by the rhetorical situation—specifically, encouraging involvement in the Memphis sanitation worker's strike and answering doubts about his own leadership. In this way, the artifact is markedly shaped by the ideology that powers it.

More than this, though, the speech itself helped to shape the ideology. Though King was by no means the first to employ many of the rhetorical devices of the speech, his platform of influence and effectiveness as an orator has allowed him to influence greatly the way the ideology of civil rights is viewed. Perhaps one of the clearest recent examples of this speeches influence on the ideology it communicates surfaced in a speech given in 2007 by Barack Obama. In the speech, Obama continues the epic discourse used by King in reference to the Exodus story to frame our current generation as the "Joshua generation" that follow the

generation of Moses. The rhetorical presentation of the ideology in “I’ve been to the Mountaintop,” then, has had a profound impact on shaping this ideology.

“I’ve been to the Mountaintop” stands as seminal example of the power of rhetoric—not only because it was Dr. King’s last, but because of its artful and effect use of language to communicate the ideals of the Civil Rights movement. In studying this piece, one can see with singular clarity the power of influence in communication.

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