Rhetorical Techniques for Negotiating Ideologies
An Analysis of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s
“A Time to Break Silence”

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Introduction

In his anti-Vietnam speech “A Time to Break Silence,” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., effectively used a number of rhetorical strategies to balance two different and often contradictory ideologies: militant Black Power and Dr. King’s own growing disillusionment with American society and government, and Dr. King’s continued commitment to Christian love and non-violence. It will first be necessary to have some discussion of the context in which the speech was delivered, in order to know something about Dr. King’s audience for this speech, and to understand the shifting social and political attitudes in America at the time. Many scholars have noted a change – in one form or another – in Dr. King’s speeches during the last year of his life, and it is generally agreed that “Break Silence” is one of the first times such a change was witnessed. Edward Appel characterizes this change in terms of genre shifting, from comedy to tragedy, and his article will be used to show how Dr. King introduced these new, tragic themes such as militarism, social decay, and moral disillusionment. Finally, I will describe Dr. King’s use of Aristotelian and Augustinian rhetorical techniques in order to show how he used the two to negotiate his growing conflict of ideology.

Context

“A Time to Break Silence” was delivered on April 4, 1967, at Riverside Church in New York City (King, 136). The occasion was a meeting of the anti-war organization Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam (CALCAV); Dr. King had been the organization’s co-chairman for a year prior to this address (Bowen and Spivey). CALCAV was a largely white, liberal Protestant audience, the same
audience that Dr. King had addressed in much of his civil rights discourse (such as “Letter from Birmingham Jail”). In his writings and speeches, Dr. King succeeded in translating the African-American appeal for racial and social justice into the “idiom” of white, liberal Protestantism, and by 1967, he had a “powerful political base in the white community” and the ears of many white listeners (Miller, 70). Riverside Church was a popular venue for well-known preachers, and “Break Silence” was highly publicized, with an audience that extended far beyond the three thousand people in attendance that night (69).

“Break Silence” came very late in Dr. King’s career; it was delivered exactly one year before his murder. Dr. King had been crusading for racial equality for almost twelve years, and although the civil rights movement had won many important legislative battles – the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and numerous Supreme Court decisions – racial equality was still not a reality in America. In the desegregated South and in urban centers across the country, African-Americans also faced social inequities like poverty, poor housing, and a lack of education. Dr. King and other main-line civil rights leaders called for cooperation, integration, and assimilation into the status quo, but by 1967, it was obvious that this strategy had failed to make any real progress outside of the courts and legislature.

Race riots in cities across America and the formation of sometimes militant Black Power groups such as the Black Panthers and the Black Guerilla Family reflected the disillusionment and anger that was growing among African-Americans; there was an emerging feeling that non-violence and assimilation were not the best –
or perhaps even viable – options. Dr. King himself even admitted to “becoming a more radical critic of the society,” and cited the war in Vietnam as being “but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit” (Halberstam, 47; King, 147). When Dr. King delivered “Break Silence,” the political and social atmosphere in America was tumultuous. Dr. King struggled with the prevailing change in values – within the African-American community and within himself – and, as several scholars have argued, the need to balance burgeoning anger and disillusionment with his continued devotion to Christianity and nonviolence caused a change in Dr. King’s language during the last year of his life.

**Tragic and Comic Genres and Conventions**

Edward Appel, in his article “Comedy and Context in Tragic Collision,” maintains that Dr. King’s rhetoric underwent a shift in genres, from mostly comic to mostly tragic; this new tragic genre introduced language and themes that reflected his growing internal conflict. Appel says that, in addition to a focus on issues like Vietnam and economic inequity, and an introduction of scathing language directed against America, Dr. King’s orations also contained new forms of drama with greatly heightened intensities (379). In his latter discourse, the quest for equality grew from a grassroots struggle against realistic, human opponents into a great revolution against a larger-than-life enemy – a revolution that at times seems to require a martyr for its cause.

Appel looks at generic changes from five categories: moral problem, problem maker, problem solver, action, and anticipated result. In each of these categories, he points out the differences in Dr. King’s early and later rhetoric, and shows how Dr.
King introduced tragic elements into his rhetoric to reflect changing ideologies. Tragic elements in these five areas are easily seen in “Break Silence.”

When Dr. King addresses the moral problem in his early, mostly comic discourse, the errors, injustices, and crimes of segregation are merely pointed out or identified. The cause of these injustices is the social atmosphere and environment; no one person or group of people is to blame, and instead, it is merely the “system” that is unjust (as in “The Power of Nonviolence”). The struggle against segregation is described in vague, general terms like light and darkness, good and evil. In Dr. King’s later tragic discourse, the errors and injustices of the moral problem are more obscene and numerous, and are named specifically. Guilt is clearly assigned to Americans and their leaders, and there are “hints of dire consequences” in the event of inaction (Appel, 380). In “Break Silence,” the atrocities in Vietnam are explicitly described, blame is assigned to Americans, and Dr. King even compares the American military to Nazis (King, 142).

In Dr. King’s comic discourse, the problem makers are “ordinary, if mistake-prone humans”; in his new tragic discourse, the problem makers become “agents of evil” and larger-than-life enemies (Appel, 380). In “Break Silence,” the problem maker is the American government, “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today,” and is imbued with imagery of a terrible, powerful foe, under whose oppressive and violent yoke hundreds of thousands tremble (King, 139).

In Dr. King’s early speeches, there are few “grandiose self-references,” and instead, the problem solver is a group or community working together (Appel, 380). As part of his shift into the tragic genre, Dr. King increasingly describes himself as
a “chief actor” in the struggle for equality, frequently makes references to his achievements, and even begins to suggest his possible martyrdom (as in “Drum Major Instinct”). In “Break Silence,” Dr. King begins by explaining why he is qualified to speak about Vietnam, and cites his involvement with the Southern Christian Leadership Council, his continuing commitment to Jesus, and his receipt of the Nobel Prize (King, 139).

In Dr. King’s early discourse, calls to action are “brief and implicit,” and instead there is an attitude of “restraint” (Appel, 381). Later on, he calls for free and deliberate action before it is too late. In “Break Silence,” Dr. King urges that, “We must move past indecision to action,” and warns of what will happen, “If we do not act” (151). In his calls for action, though, Appel contends that Dr. King always maintained a comic attitude toward opponents, advocating correction with Christian love and nonviolence (382). However, he did seem to respect his adversaries less, and even admonished or reproved them.

The anticipated result of the civil rights struggle in Dr. King’s comic discourse is acceptance and assimilation; Appel describes the attitude of these early addresses as “piece-of-the-pie” or “we’ll-settle-for-what’s-there” (382). In his tragic discourse, though, Dr. King often demands nothing less than total equality, as in “Break Silence” when he calls for a “genuine revolution of values” (150).

In the last year of his life, dark and tragic themes, language, and ideas permeated Dr. King’s rhetoric. These changes were a reflection of the turbulent social, economic, and political climate in America, and of Dr. King’s own growing disillusionment with the American government and people. But as Appel points out,
one aspect of his rhetoric did not change: his attitude of Christian love toward opponents and his continued affirmation of nonviolence. These high moral commitments meant that Dr. King could never advocate the use of any means necessary, like Stokely Carmichael, George Jackson, or Malcolm X, or even speak of things like anger, retribution, or Black Nationalism. He could only speak of nonviolence, love, brotherhood, and equality. But his shift to a tragic style permitted the introduction of language that expressed Dr. King’s anger and paved the way for harsh criticism of America’s social system, government, and people. Dr. King was forced to balance this anger and criticism with his commitment to Christianity and nonviolence, and he did so using the rhetorical techniques of Aristotle and St. Augustine.

**Aristotelian & Augustinian/Christian Rhetoric**

In “Break Silence,” Dr. King leans heavily on Aristotle’s conception of judicial rhetoric, both in terms of content and structure. Aristotle describes judicial rhetoric as being an accusation or defense; it deals with past events, with wrongdoers and those wronged, and its end is the just and unjust.

In “Break Silence” we see all of these topics at work. Early in the speech, Dr. King takes up the cause of the Vietnamese people, becoming a sort of defense lawyer giving an opening statement; the defendant is Vietnam, the accused is the United States. In his introduction to this section, he says that he speaks only for the Vietnamese people, because, he says, there will be no solution to the problem in Vietnam unless an effort is made to know her people and to “hear their broken cries” (140). To do this, Dr. King launches into a brief history of the three decades of
conflict that have plagued Vietnam. In this history, a strategy emerges that continues throughout this section: becoming a voice for the “voiceless” Vietnamese and using this voice to attack America. It is a simultaneous defense and accusation, and he addresses both the wrongdoers and the wronged – the Vietnamese people and Vietnam herself.

These past events although not illegal, are morally wrong, and violate what Aristotle would call “common” law (84). On page 142, Dr. King moves his discussion to present crimes against Vietnamese, saying that soldiers are murdering, raping, poisoning, corrupting, and destroying. This section contains one emotional appeal after another, another common rhetorical tactic. By describing these current atrocities, Dr. King shows that America is violating its own laws, “specific” law according to Aristotle, and says that “we refuse to put into action our many words” (142). By now, Dr. King has accused the US of violating common and specific law. Aristotle’s judicial rhetoric has allowed him to introduce inflammatory and accusatory rhetoric against America, but to be a fully judicial discourse, it must be determined whether the actions and events in question are just or unjust.

What Aristotle would call “common” law, Dr. King would call “God’s law.” To determine whether something is just or unjust, Dr. King only had one source: Christianity. Such was the case for much of his audience as well. It was obvious to Dr. King, and everyone else seated in Riverside Church, that America’s actions in Vietnam were unjust. Dr. King used judicial rhetoric in his accusation and prosecution of America. But how to suggest a suitable course of action? In the law courts, punishment is administered to the guilty, but Dr. King’s Christian faith and
commitment to nonviolence forced him out of a strictly judicial realm. The issue in “Break Silence” is not one of legality, but instead one of Christian ethics and morality, a higher law. Instead of punishment, there must be constructive, nonviolent action to correct the problem.

After his five step plan for ending the Vietnam conflict, Dr. King begins his calls for action. In speaking out against the war and urging other to do the same, Dr. King is practicing the things he preaches. Augustine tells us that “the life of the speaker has greater force to make him persuasive than the grandeur of his eloquence,” a precept that stems from the teachings of Christ (376). Dr. King embraced this philosophy, turning his words into actions. Says Augustine, “far more would...do good...by practising what they preached.” Augustine maintains that truly effective preachers must understand the scripture and concepts that they preach (363). Dr. King seems to understand the Christian ideas and actions he is advocating and proposing. Augustine also says that those people who lead truly righteous lives, who practice what they preach, “may without presumption express himself” in whatever style necessary, “because his life is beyond reproach” (376). Dr. King is free to attack America, free to use a subdued or grand form of eloquence, and free to urge others to Christian love and nonviolence, because of his words, actions, and status with the audience.

Each time he criticizes the US, Dr. King includes himself among the guilty. He never says “America did such and such,” but rather “We did this,” or “We are responsible.” Rather than passing the buck or placing blame solely on a large, faceless group, Dr. King accepts responsibility for the actions of his country. It is
as though he is admitting his sins and asking for forgiveness, while also asking his audience not to forget that he, and more importantly they, are Americans and are just as guilty as the soldiers in Vietnam and the politicians in Washington. Because all are complicit in their silence, it is the responsibility of all to take action.

Dr. King also engages in other common techniques of preaching. He makes frequent appeals on behalf of the poor, both American and Vietnamese. He also engages in voice merging by naming or quoting many notable figures and fusing their words, ideas, and message with his. This was a common technique in the folk religion of African-American slaves and freedmen throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Miller, 131). Throughout the speech, Dr. King mentions or quotes from Langston Hughes, Jesus, the Vietnamese people, John F. Kennedy, St. John, Arnold Toynbee, Omar Khayyam, and James Russell Lowell. Aside from the literary references (Lowell and Khayyam), conjuring these other personas and voices and wedding them to Dr. King’s own argument gives more credence to the speech.

Conclusion

“A Time to Break Silence” marked a dramatic shift in Dr. King’s language and rhetoric. As Appel demonstrated, this shift was a shift in genres; Dr. King introduced many new tragic themes – an immense struggle against evil enemies, calls for revolution, the need for a martyr – and used much stronger and specific language when describing injustices and assigning blame. These new tragic elements arose out of a response to the tumultuous political and social climate in America, like the growing Black Power movement, and from Dr. King’s own disillusionment with America and its people.
Dr. King’s commitment to Christianity and nonviolence, though, meant that these new ideas and language weren’t always in keeping with his established ideals. In his addresses, he had to somehow negotiate between anger and disillusionment on the one hand, and love and nonviolence on the other. In “Break Silence,” he delivers accusations against America using Aristotle’s formula for judicial rhetoric: he assigns blame and describes crimes, both past and present. But when it comes to determining justice and punishment, Dr. King must turn to Christianity, and to the rhetorical advice of St. Augustine. He balances his scathing attacks against America with calls for constructive, nonviolent action; appeals to help the poor; and an emphasis on Christian morality and ethics. He was able to attack America because his attacks were heartfelt and in the interest of the country and world, and he went beyond mere criticism by suggesting constructive, nonviolent solutions to problems like Vietnam. His rhetorical mix was truly effective because it informed, persuaded, and moved people to action.
Works Cited


