**A Summary and Analysis of Martin Luther King’s ‘I Have a Dream’ Speech**

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‘I Have a Dream’ is one of the greatest speeches in American history. Delivered by Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-68) in Washington D.C. in 1963, the speech is a powerful rallying cry for racial equality and for a fairer and equal world in which African Americans will be as free as white Americans.

He reportedly stayed up until 4am the night before he was due to give his ‘I Have a Dream’, writing it out in longhand.

**‘I Have a Dream’: background**

The occasion for King’s speech was the [march on Washington](https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/march-on-washington), which saw some 210,000 African American men, women, and children gather at the Washington Monument in August 1963, before marching to the Lincoln Memorial.

They were marching for several reasons, including jobs (many of them were out of work), but the main reason was freedom: King and many other Civil Rights leaders sought to remove segregation of black and white Americans and to ensure black Americans were treated the same as white Americans.

1963 was the centenary of the [Emancipation Proclamation](https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured-documents/emancipation-proclamation), in which then US President Abraham Lincoln (1809-65) had freed the African slaves in the United States in 1863. But a century on from the abolition of slavery, King points out, black Americans still are not free in many respects.

**‘I Have a Dream’: summary**

King begins his speech by reminding his audience that it’s a century, or ‘five score years’, since that ‘great American’ Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This ensured the freedom of the African slaves, but Black Americans are still not free, King points out, because of [racial segregation](https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/segregation-united-states) and discrimination.

America is a wealthy country, and yet many Black Americans live in poverty. It is as if the Black American is an exile in his own land. King likens the gathering in Washington to cashing a cheque: in other words, claiming money that is due to be paid.

Next, King praises the ‘magnificent words’ of the [US Constitution](https://www.senate.gov/civics/constitution_item/constitution.htm) and the [Declaration of Independence](https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript). King compares these documents to a promissory note, because they contain the promise that all men, including Black men, will be guaranteed what the Declaration of Independence calls ‘inalienable rights’: namely, ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’.

King asserts that America in the 1960s has ‘defaulted’ on this promissory note: in other words, it has refused to pay up. King calls it a ‘sacred obligation’, but America as a nation is like someone who has written someone else a cheque that has bounced and the money owed remains to be paid. But it is not because the money isn’t there: America, being a land of opportunity, has enough ‘funds’ to ensure everyone is prosperous enough.

King urges America to rise out of the ‘valley’ of segregation to the ‘sunlit path of racial justice’. He uses the word ‘brotherhood’ to refer to all Americans, since all men and women are God’s children. He also repeatedly emphasizes the urgency of the moment. This is not some brief moment of anger but a necessary new start for America. However, King cautions his audience not to give way to bitterness and hatred, but to fight for justice in the right manner, with dignity and discipline.

Physical violence and militancy are to be avoided. King recognizes that many white Americans who are also poor and marginalized feel a kinship with the Civil Rights movement, so all Americans should join together in the cause. Police brutality against Black Americans must be eradicated, as must racial discrimination in hotels and restaurants. States which forbid Black Americans from voting must change their laws.

Martin Luther King then comes to the most famous part of his speech, in which he uses the phrase ‘I have a dream’ to begin successive sentences (a rhetorical device known as [anaphora](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anaphora)). King outlines the form that his dream, or ambition or wish for a better America, takes.

His dream, he tells his audience, is ‘deeply rooted’ in the American Dream: that notion that anybody, regardless of their background, can become prosperous and successful in the United States. King once again reminds his listeners of the opening words of the Declaration of Independence: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’

In his dream of a better future, King sees the descendants of former Black slaves and the descendants of former slave owners united, sitting and eating together. He has a dream that one day his children will live in a country where they are judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

Even in Mississippi and Alabama, states which are riven by racial injustice and hatred, people of all races will live together in harmony. King then broadens *his*dream out into ‘our hope’: a collective aspiration and endeavor. King then quotes the patriotic American song ‘[My Country, ’Tis of Thee](https://hymnary.org/text/my_country_tis_of_thee_sweet_land)’, which describes America as a ‘sweet land of liberty’.

King uses anaphora again, repeating the phrase ‘let freedom ring’ several times in succession to suggest how jubilant America will be on the day that such freedoms are ensured. And when this happens, Americans will be able to join together and be closer to the day when they can sing a [traditional African-American hymn](https://hymnary.org/text/way_down_yonder_in_the_graveyard_walk): ‘Free at last. Free at last. Thank God almighty, we are free at last.’

**‘I Have a Dream’: analysis**

Although Martin Luther King’s speech has become known by the repeated four-word phrase ‘I Have a Dream’, which emphasizes the personal nature of his vision, his speech is actually about a collective dream for a better and more equal America which is not only shared by many Black Americans but by anyone who identifies with their fight against racial injustice, segregation, and discrimination.

Nevertheless, in working from ‘I have a dream’ to a different four-word phrase, ‘this is our hope’. The shift is natural and yet it is a rhetorical masterstroke, since the vision of a better nation which King has set out as a very personal, sincere dream is thus telescoped into a universal and collective struggle for freedom.

What’s more, in moving from ‘dream’ to a different noun, ‘hope’, King suggests that what might be dismissed as an idealistic ambition is actually something that is both possible and achievable. No sooner has the dream gathered momentum than it becomes a more concrete ‘hope’.

In his ‘I Have a Dream’ speech, King was doing more than alluding to Abraham Lincoln’s signing of the Emancipation Proclamation one hundred years earlier. The opening words to his speech, ‘Five score years ago’, allude to a specific speech Lincoln himself had made a century before: the [Gettysburg Address](https://interestingliterature.com/2022/10/abraham-lincoln-gettysburg-address-summary-analysis/).

In that speech, delivered at the Soldiers’ National Cemetery (now known as Gettysburg National Cemetery) in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania in November 1863, Lincoln had urged his listeners to continue in the fight for freedom, envisioning the day when all Americans – including Black slaves – would be free. His speech famously begins with the words: ‘Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.’

‘Four score and seven years’ is eighty-seven years, which takes us back from 1863 to 1776, the year of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. So, Martin Luther King’s allusion to the words of Lincoln’s historic speech do two things: they call back to Lincoln’s speech but also, by extension, to the founding of the United States almost two centuries before. Although Lincoln and the American Civil War represented progress in the cause to make all Americans free regardless of their ethnicity, King makes it clear in ‘I Have a Dream’ that there is still some way to go.

In the last analysis, King’s speech is a rhetorically clever and emotionally powerful call to use non-violent protest to oppose racial injustice, segregation, and discrimination, but also to ensure that all Americans are lifted out of poverty and degradation.

But most of all, King emphasizes the *collective*endeavor that is necessary to bring about the world he wants his children to live in: the togetherness, the linking of hands, which is essential to make the dream a reality.

Structure and Form

*‘I have a dream’*by Martin Luther King Jr. is an incredibly important text to study for those interested in understanding the Civil Rights movement and this specific pivotal moment. It was delivered in around seventeen minutes, using numerous [rhetorical devices](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/rhetorical-devices/) that are noted below. King uses [repetition](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/repetition/), seen through instances of [anaphora](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/anaphora/) and [epistrophe](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/epistrophe/)[[1]](#endnote-1), to drive home his poems. In this analysis, the speech has been separated into six sections. These are not sections created or noted by King. Instead, they’re used in this analysis to make the poem easier to analyze and understand. 

Themes

Throughout this piece, King engages with themes of freedom, justice, and the future. He acknowledges the past and present as a way of alluding to the promise of the future. His determination that no one rest until all people are truly equal comes through in his calls for justice and freedom.

Literary and Rhetorical Devices

Throughout the speech, King uses numerous literary and rhetorical devices in order to deliver the most effective speech possible. For example:

* [**Ethos**](https://poemanalysis.com/definition/ethos/): used in an argument by appealing to the [audience](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/audience/) through the [speaker](https://poemanalysis.com/diction/speaker-in-poetry/)’s credibility. King, as a Black man living in the United States, and working within the Civil Rights Movement, is in an ideal position in order to speak about what the contemporary American experience is like. King also uses the other modes of [persuasion](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/persuasion/), [logos](https://poemanalysis.com/definition/logos/), and [pathos](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/pathos/).
* [**Anaphora**](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/anaphora/)**[[2]](#endnote-2)**: the use of the same word or words at the beginning of multiple lines, in succession. Throughout the speech, King [repeats](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/repetition/) “I have a dream” eight times, successively, at the beginning of lines. “One hundred years later” is another example, appearing at the beginning of numerous phrases early on in the speech. “Now is the time,” “Go back to,” “With this faith,” and “We can never (or cannot) be satisfied” are all other phrases that begin multiple lines.
* [**Allusion**](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/allusion/): throughout this piece, King alludes to prior American history, important political moments, and contemporary events. The latter includes protests that he was famously a part of. He uses phrases like “Five score years ago” as a reference to the Gettysburg Address and “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness” is an [allusion](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/allusion/) to the Lincoln Memorial. There are also biblical [allusions](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/allusion/) scattered throughout the speech. Such as “It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity” which comes from Psalms 30:5
* [**Repetition**](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/repetition/): in addition to examples of anaphora, there are other kinds of repetition in King’s *‘I have a dream’*speech. For example, [repeated](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/repetition/) phrases, references, and calls to action. He also repeats common themes. These include: freedom, justice, and the power of dreams.
* [**Imagery**](https://poemanalysis.com/figurative-language/imagery/): another powerful rhetorical and literary device. It occurs when the speaker uses phrases that appeal to and trigger the listener’s senses. For example, “slums and ghettos of our northern cities,” a phrase that also alludes to the contemporary moment King is living through.
* [**Metaphor**](https://poemanalysis.com/figurative-language/metaphor/): [comparison](https://poemanalysis.com/figurative-language/simile/) between two seemingly dissimilar things that do not use “like” or “as.” For example, in the second paragraph of the speech, King uses the phrase “joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.” Here, he’s connecting Black American’s social and political restrictions and the racisms that still plagues the country to a “long night of captivity.” When freedom is truly given to all people it will be a “joyous daybreak” and end to that night.  
  Another example can be found in paragraph 19, in which he uses the phrase “sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.” Here, oppression is compared to “heat” and freedom and justice to “an oasis.” He’s using [imagery](https://poemanalysis.com/figurative-language/imagery/) in this [metaphor](https://poemanalysis.com/figurative-language/metaphor/) to evoke the beauty of one state of being and the pain or another.
* [**Alliteration**](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/alliteration/): the use of the same consonant sounds at the beginning of words. For example, King uses “trials and tribulations,” “dark and desolate,” “sweltering summer,” and “marvelous new militancy.”

1. Epistrophe, or epiphora, is the repetition of the same word, or a phrase, at the end of multiple clauses or sentences. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Anaphora is the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of multiple lines, usually in succession. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)