

"I Have a Dream"

by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Aug. 28, 1963

I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation.

Conventions of Literature:

1. How does a speech differ from other forms of literature? How could speakers emphasize their main idea?

Research:

2. Using the "Read the Web" feature found under "Read" in the main menu, find out why the people have come together. Record the reason in your **Work Log**.

3. Where is this speech taking place? Why is the place important?

Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon of hope to millions of Negro slaves, who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.

Conventions of Literature:

4. What famous literary work does the highlighted phrase allude to? What other allusions is Dr. King making in this paragraph?

Reading Comprehension Question:

5. Who is the great American that Dr. King is referring to?

But one hundred years later, the Negro is still not free; one hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacle of segregation and the chains of discrimination; one hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity; one hundred years later, the Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds

himself an exile in his own land.

Reading Comprehension Question:

6. What is the main idea that Dr. King is trying to make in this speech?

So we've come here today to dramatize a shameful condition. In a sense we have come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our great republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a **promissory note** to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed to the inalienable rights of life liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Reading Comprehension Questions:

7. What is a promissory note?

8. What is Dr. King saying African-Americans have been promised?

9. What important documents does he say made the promise?

It is obvious today that America has **defaulted** on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check that has come back marked "insufficient funds." But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we have come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and security of justice.

Words to Know:

10. Look up the word **default** in the dictionary. Type the definition and then use the word correctly in an original sentence.

Conventions of Literature:

11. Define a metaphor. Explain in detail Dr. King's metaphor about the promissory note, which was given to the African-American people.

We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of Now. This is not time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy; now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation

to the sunlit path of racial justice; now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood; now is the time to make justice a reality to all of God's children. It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment and to underestimate the determination of its colored citizens. This sweltering summer of the Negro's **legitimate** discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality.

Conventions of Literature:

12. What phrase is repeated in this paragraph? What is Dr. King's purpose for using repetition in his speech? Watch for other examples of repetition in King's speech.

Words to Know:

13. Look up the word **legitimate** in the dictionary. Type the definition and then use the word correctly in an original sentence.

Nineteen sixty-three is not an end but a beginning. And those who hope that the Negro needed to blow off steam and will now be content will have a rude awakening if the nation returns to business as usual. There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges.

But there is something that I must say to my people, who stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice. In the process of gaining our rightful place we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must ever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force. The marvelous new militancy, which has engulfed the Negro community, must not lead us to a distrust of all white people. For many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny. They have come to realize that their freedom is **inextricably** bound to our freedom. We cannot walk alone. And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back.

Reading Comprehension Question:

14. Dr. King presents two warnings—one to the nation and one to his people. What does he warn each of these groups against?

Words to Know:

15. Look up the work **inextricably** in the dictionary. Type the definition and then use the word correctly in an original sentence.

There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, "When will you be satisfied?" We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality; we can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities; we cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro's basic **mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one; we can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating For Whites Only; we cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote.**

No! No we are not satisfied and we will not be satisfied until "justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream."

Reading Comprehension Question:

16. What does King predict will happen if justice is not granted to African-American?

Conventions of Literature:

17. Define a simile. What simile is being used in this paragraph to describe justice?

Words to Know:

18. Look up the work **mobility** in the dictionary. Type the definition and then use the word correctly in an original sentence.

I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of your trials and tribulations. Some of you have come fresh from narrow jail cells. Some of you have come from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by storms of persecutions and staggered by the winds of police brutality. You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive. Go back to Mississippi. Go back to Alabama. Go back to South Carolina. Go back to Georgia. Go back to Louisiana. Go back to the slums and ghettos of our Northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed.

Let us not wallow in the valley of despair.

I say to you today, my friends, that even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed, “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal.” I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today!

I have a dream that one day down in Alabama—with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification—that one day right down in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream today!

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and every mountain shall be made low. The rough places will be made plains and the crooked places will be made straight, “and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.”

This is our hope. This is the faith that I will go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling **discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to climb up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day. And this will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning "My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my father's died, land of the Pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring." And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true.**

Words to Know:

19. Look up the work **discord** in the dictionary. Type the definition and then use the word correctly in an original sentence.

Reading Comprehension Question:

20. What is King's dream? Give an example used by King to explain his dream.

Literary Analysis:

21. Why do you think King quotes from the Declaration of Independence and the patriotic song "My Country 'Tis of Thee" in his speech?

So let freedom ring from the hilltops of New Hampshire; let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York; let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania; let freedom ring from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado; let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California. But not only that. Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia; let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee; let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi. "From every mountainside, let freedom ring."

Literary Analysis:

22. Re-read the last paragraph looking closely at the geography. Using the "Read the Web" feature found under "Read" in the main menu, find a map of the United States which shows the locations named by King. What direction is King moving as he lists the different locations? What would be the significance of listing the locations in that order?

And when this happens, when we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children—black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics—will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old spiritual, "Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty, we are free at last."

Literary Analysis:

23. What words or phrases from King's speech stand out in your mind? Why are they memorable?

24. Do you think that King's dream at the end of the speech offers a solution for the problems outlined at the beginning of his speech? Explain why or why not.