

# 'I Have a Dream' – Looking at Language

Below are several extracts from the speech 'I Have a Dream' by Martin Luther King Jr. Look at the imagery being used by Martin Luther King Jr. What is he saying in each case about the civil rights movement and the place of black people in the society of 1960s America?

"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 light and hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as the joyous daybreak to end the long night of captivity.

But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacle of segregation and the chain 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 corner of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. So we have come here today to dramatize a shameful condition."

1. What uses of imagery do you see in the quotation above? How are they used for effect?
2. This quotation comes from the beginning of the speech given by Martin Luther King Jr. Who is the 'great American' he is referring to? What did this man do? (Hint: King's speech took place beneath a monument to the man he described in his speech).
3. What conditions does King say black people were living under in the 1960s? What words from the world of slavery are used here?

"We cannot walk alone, and as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back. 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 so long as the Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and the Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, no, we are not satisfied and will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream."

4. Why does King say people are still not satisfied? List some of the grievances he has about American society in the 1960s.
5. What rhetorical and oral technique is being used here to make his speech more effective? How does it work to have a greater impact on the person listening to the speech?
6. When King states they 'will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream', what language technique is he using? Why is this effective at this point in his speech?

"I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great 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 the storms of persecution 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."

7. What are the 'trials and tribulations' King mentions here?
8. Why does King describe the jail cells as 'narrow'? What are the alternative understandings of that word and what then is the implied meaning?
9. Persecution and police brutality are described as being other things. What are these? How effective is this use of metaphor?
10. What do you think he means by 'unearned suffering is redemptive'?

"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 fathers 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. So let freedom ring. From the prodigious 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 crevass 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 in Mississippi. From every mountainside.

11. What song is King quoting from here? Why do you think he includes this in his speech?
12. What technique does King use again here? How effective is it?
13. Why does Martin Luther King Jr. separate the section about Georgia and Tennessee and Mississippi from the rest of the text about freedom? What is he implying here?

### Further Work:

Now watch the full speech by Martin Luther King Jr. Try to imagine that he needed another section to be added to the speech. What else might he have written about? What language techniques might have been used? Try to write your own short addition to Martin Luther King Jr.'s epic speech – it should be 2-3 short paragraphs in length.

