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## Objective:

- Students will be able to analyze a rhetorical work, and to understand its cultural influence and its historical significance.

### *Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929 – 1968)*

Martin Luther King, Jr. was a Baptist minister, social activist, and the leader of the American civil rights movement during the 1960s. He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 for his use of nonviolent protest to achieve civil rights. He was famous as a speaker, writer, social and religious leader. He was assassinated on April 4, 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee, but the cause to which he dedicated his life – the end of segregation and equal rights for African Americans – continues.



August 28, 1963 there was an enormous rally in Washington D.C. that gathered on the Mall. Over 250,000 people had come from every part of the country in support of civil rights. That afternoon, standing on the Lincoln Memorial, Martin Luther King, Jr. gave one of the most famous speeches of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The March on Washington, and especially King's "I Have a Dream" speech, put civil rights at the top of the national political agenda and helped to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964. His speech helped change American culture, and so remains one of the most **historically** and **culturally significant** speeches in American history. Let's discover what made it so powerful.

King began his speech with these words:

Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light 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 captivity.

“Five score years ago” is a **historical** reference. Abraham Lincoln began his famous “Gettysburg Address” with the words, “Fourscore and seven years ago.” King was standing in the Lincoln Memorial and referenced Lincoln’s most famous speech. Lincoln was the “great American” and also fought for equal rights. By referencing Lincoln’s words, King created a powerful connection between himself and one of America’s greatest leaders.

In the next paragraph King described the **culture** of contemporary African Americans.

But one hundred years later, we must face the tragic fact that the Negro is still not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles 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.

King claimed one hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation, which helped pave the way to free slaves in America, that “the Negro is still not free.” King correctly cited segregation and discrimination as causes. Segregation was the law in the Southern states. It was the forced separation of different races. During segregation, African Americans could not attend the same schools, eat in the same restaurants, use the same bathrooms, sleep in the same hotels, or drink from the same water fountains as Caucasian (white) Americans. Even public transportation was segregated. African Americans had to sit in the back of city buses while white people sat in the front. If there were not enough seats, black people had to give up their seats for white riders.

King emphasized that the movement for civil rights must remain nonviolent. As a Baptist minister, peace was very important to him, but so was social justice. He was determined to have both.

But there is something 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 forever 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.

### Interesting Fact:

The Emancipation Proclamation was issued by President Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863. Most assume it “freed” all slaves; however, the proclamation only applied to those states not belonging to the Confederacy, and only if there was a complete Union victory. The complete abolishment of slavery resulted from the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865.

These sections of his speech are very **historically significant**. Dr. King believed in non-violent protest. This is also known as “civil disobedience.” The word “civil” means “polite or peaceful.” Civil disobedience was the method Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi used in the 1940s to win Indian freedom from centuries of British rule. The American philosopher Henry David Thoreau used civil disobedience to protest the Mexican – American War. Therefore, Martin Luther King’s use of nonviolence was maintaining a **historical** tradition of peaceful protest.

King increased his speech’s power in its most famous section by the use of repetition and simple language. King said the words, “I have a dream” nine separate times. Each repetition described what his dream was. His dream was the American dream. It was a dream that America would truly be a place where all men were created equal. It was a dream that the sons of slaves and slave owners would sit together at a table of brotherhood. It was a dream that Mississippi would transform into a just state. It was a dream that one day children would be judged by their character and not the color of their skin. It was a dream that one day in Alabama white and black children would join hands as brothers and sisters. It was a dream that one day all the glory of the Lord would be revealed.

Martin Luther King, Jr. certainly had a dream.

Towards the end of his speech, King spoke the phrase, “Let freedom ring” seven times, each time calling for freedom to ring from a different place in the country.

He concluded his speech with a moving call for unity among all races and religions.

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 Negro spiritual. “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!”

At the end of his speech, King invoked, or called upon, an “old Negro Spiritual.” A “spiritual” was a song that was sung by slaves. Remember that King began his speech by mentioning the Emancipation Proclamation and claimed that African Americans were still not free. He ended his speech by referencing a slave song and crying out the moving words, “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!”

His optimistic message for a greater America combined with his natural gift for public speaking created one of the most **historical** and **culturally significant** speeches in American history.

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## Growth & Assessment

1. Which great American did King refer to at the beginning of his speech?
  - a. Thomas Jefferson
  - b. Benjamin Franklin
  - c. Abraham Lincoln
  - d. George Washington
2. King claimed that Negroes were still not free one hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation.
  - a. TRUE
  - b. FALSE
3. How many times did King say the words, “I have a dream” in his speech?
  - a. Once
  - b. Nine
  - c. Seven
  - d. Ten
4. What is a “spiritual”?
  - a. A ghost
  - b. A séance
  - c. A type of protest
  - d. A song sung by slaves
5. With what line did King end his famous “I Have a Dream” speech?