

Critical Analysis Essay

“I Have a Dream”

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Darkness and light. We tend to think of these two concepts as opposing forces. Two equal opponents who are battling against each other, yet, that is not so. Darkness, by its very nature, is the absence of, and cannot exist without light. Imagine yourself entering a brightly lit room. If you desired to extinguish the light, would you take your "dark light" and cast it around the room? Of course not. You would have to turn off the light. Darkness is subject to the light.

In the 1960s, America was mired in the darkness of the Vietnam War abroad and prejudice at home. Finding any light seemed a futile gesture. Within this darkness, the light of hope shown. That light was the masterful "I Have a Dream" speech delivered by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on August 28, 1963. On that day, a quarter of a million people gathered in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C., advocating together for justice for the African-American peoples. On the steps in front of the statue commemorating the founder of the Emancipation Proclamation and the end of slavery, Dr. King presented his speech on civil rights. In his clear and near musical cadence, he called for an end to prejudice and racism in the United States, and equality for black people.

When analyzing such an accomplished speaker, one cannot help but admire the skillful way Dr. King balances his words between three distinct audiences. While it is easy to say that his primary audience is those in the crowd before him, those who support the values of civil rights, that is perhaps short-sighted. Dr. King's goal was not to entertain his audience but to affect real social change. Therefore, his primary audience would be the government. More specifically, those in a position of elected power who could pass laws and bring about equality. He also addresses a second audience: Those who still cling to prejudice. He implores this group of people to change their thinking. Dr. King balances this second audience against his third audience, that being those who agree with him.

From that starting foundation, Dr. King employs his most effective weapon: His words. He does not simply state his view in a dry and academic way. Instead, he paints on a canvas of rich metaphor, supported by logical and historical facts. Within the early openings of his speech, he employs bright and hopeful imagery as he describes the end of slavery during the Civil War as a "joyous daybreak to end the long night." Even so, he does not dismiss the current social environment, but instead equates it to a new type of slavery, calling it "manacles of segregation" and "chains of discrimination." Dr. King also recognizes the fact that change is not immediate, but will take time and hard work when says that they will "hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope."

More importantly, he did not bury reason under mellifluous words. He reminded his audience of the documents our Founding Fathers composed, and the thread of justice for all people woven throughout their fabric. He balances his rhetoric with the foundational law from the Declaration of Independence which guaranteed all citizens the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Later, he reinforces his message by restating the immortal line "all men are created equal." Dr. King shows that he bases his desire for equality on sound reason and not just emotions. He reminds the country that laws for equal treatment already exist, but these laws are not being upheld. Dr. King concludes with his most famous of all lines, the anaphora of "I have a dream." Dreams which are not just his, but dreams that resonate with everyone.

All of which culminates to illuminate Dr. King's strategy for his entire speech. He uses his unique ability to unify his audiences, both for and against him. Dr. King did not call for the advancement of one race to the detriment of another; the gains of one through losses of the other. He did not promote violence as a means to the end. Instead, he advocated that, as a people and a nation, we are stronger together. He championed the integration of both white and black races for mutual benefit. A controversial attitude which other figures of the civil rights movement did not hold, such as Malcolm X.

Through his thoughtful and peaceful words, he appealed to the nation with reason and shared emotions, not with threats or harsh blame. He was able to show how humanity as a whole share the same hopes, dreams, and ambitions regardless of an individual's race. He built

his rhetoric around moral truths and not opinions so that all who heard would recognize that his words applied to everyone. Dr. King showed a way, then, now, and for the future, in which words can unite and inspire anyone who hears them.