

Doctor Martin Luther King's "Great March on Detroit" Speech

June 23, 1963

Speech Analysis

Historical References

- "This executive order was called the Emancipation Proclamation. . . . But one hundred years later, the Negro in the United States of America still isn't free." (January 1, 1863)
- "For Birmingham tells us something in glaring terms." (Project C in Birmingham, April-May 1963)
- "But then something happened to the Negro. Circumstances made it possible and necessary from him to travel more:" (Great Migration)
- "We know that our brothers and sisters in Africa and Asia are moving with jet-like speed toward the goal of political independence." (Post-World War II independence movements, decolonization)
- "And then we also need our support in order to get the civil rights bill that the President is offering passed." (JFK's televised speech on civil rights on June 11, 1963)
- "Before the victory is won, some like Medgar Evers, may have to face physical death." (Medgar Evers was assassinated on June 12, 1963)

Why does Dr. King make historical references in his speech?

Literary Elements

[8:17] Paragraph 1

I think one of the things that we can all say about our nation and about the world today...is that the wind of change is blowing. And in a real sense, it is sweeping away an old order, and bringing into being a new order. And as a result of this emerging new age, each of us confronts new challenges, and tonight as I think about world conditions and as I think about our own nation I would like to talk with you about the challenges that we face in this new age.

Extended metaphor : wind of change is blowing...sweeping away an old order
Introduces his challenges theme

[11:16] Paragraphs 1 and 2

You know it is possible because of the time difference to take a jet flight from Tokyo, Japan on Sunday morning and arrive in Seattle, Washington on the preceding Saturday night. And when your friends meet you at the airport and ask when you left Tokyo, you will have to say “I left tomorrow.”

Now this is a bit humorous but I am trying to laugh a basic fact into all of us, and it is simply this: that through our scientific and technological genius, we have made of this world a neighborhood. And now through our moral and ethical commitment, we must make of it a brotherhood. We must all learn to live together as brothers or we will all perish together as fools...This is the challenge of our[s].

Persuasive Techniques: word choice/usage: *Laugh* a basic fact into all of us

Metaphors: we have made of this world a neighborhood

We must make of [the world] a brotherhood

Similes: We must all learn to live together as brothers or we will all perish together as fools

Anecdote Tokyo story

Parallel Organization: The first of four *challenges* presented (audience awareness/memorable)

[15: 05] Paragraphs 1 and 2

John Donne caught it years ago and placed it in graphic terms. “No man is an island/entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, /a part of the main.” And he goes on toward the end to say “Any man’s death diminishes me, Because I am involved in mankind, / And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; / It tolls for thee.”

And the recognition of this, means that we are meeting the challenge of this new age which is emerging.

Allusion: famous Donne quotes applied to King, Jr.’s challenge of Black and White becoming a brotherhood

Organization: Allusion provides closure and transition to next “challenge”

Musical Passages

[22:39]

We must set out to do a good job, and try with all of our might to do that job so well that the living, the dead or the unborn couldn’t do it any better. And so to carry it to one extreme, if it falls your lot to be a street sweeper—sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures. Sweep streets...

Repetition/Rhythm: street sweeper...sweep streets...Sweep streets

Repetition and rhythm of this line creates a refrain-like line

[22:28] Paragraph 1

Somewhere along the way we must see that human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals who are willing to be coworkers with God. And without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the primitive forces of social stagnation. And so we must recognize urgency of the moment. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to get rid of segregation and discrimination in our nation. Now is the time to make democracy a reality...Now is the time to solve this problem

Repetition/Rhythm: Now is the time...

Reminiscent of "Dream" speech

[29:50] Paragraphs 2 and 3

It was on a sweltering afternoon last June that a young, vigorous, intelligent, dedicated president stood before the nation and said, in eloquent term: "The issue that we face in civil rights is not merely a political issue, it is at bottom a moral issue." He went on to say, "It is as old as the scriptures, and as modern as the Constitution. It is a question of whether we would treat our Negro brothers as we ourselves would like to be treated."

And on the heels of that great speech, he went and offered to Congress the most comprehensive civil rights package ever presented by any president of our great nation. But since that sweltering afternoon last June, our nation has known a dog day and a dreary night. For that same president was cut down by an assassin's bullet on Elm Street in Dallas, Texas. And I think the greatest tribute of respect that the United States of America can pay to the late John Fitzgerald Kennedy is to see that this Civil Rights Bill is passed...without being watered down.

Ballad qualities: story-like

it was on a sweltering afternoon

but since that sweltering afternoon

president was cut down by an assassin's bullet

Repetition: it is...a political issue...it is...moral issue

Rhythm: it is as old as the scriptures, and as modern as the Constitution

Word choice: sweltering

dog day and a dreary night

cut down by an assassin's bullet