

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

# Martin Luther King, Jr. Nobel Acceptance Speech

By Martin Luther King, Jr.  
1964

*Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968) was an American Baptist minister and activist who became the most prominent leader of the Civil Rights Movement. He was known for his use of nonviolent civil disobedience to protest against racial injustice. In 1964, King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his contributions to the Civil Rights Movements. As you read, identify and take notes on examples of figurative language in King's speech, as well as how they contribute to an understanding of racial inequality in America.*

[1] Your Majesty, Your Royal Highness, Mr. President, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I accept the Nobel Prize for Peace at a moment when 22 million Negroes of the United States of America are engaged in a creative battle to end the long night of racial injustice. I accept this award on behalf of a civil rights movement which is moving with determination and a majestic scorn for risk and danger to establish a reign of freedom and a rule of justice. I am mindful that only yesterday in Birmingham, Alabama, our children, crying out for brotherhood, were answered with fire hoses, snarling dogs and even death. I am mindful that only yesterday in Philadelphia, Mississippi, young people seeking to secure the right to vote were brutalized and murdered. And only yesterday more than 40 houses of worship in the State of Mississippi alone were bombed or burned because they offered a sanctuary to those who would not accept segregation. I am mindful that debilitating and grinding poverty afflicts my people and chains them to the lowest rung of the economic ladder.



*"Martin Luther King, Jr. Statue" by B.C. Lorio is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.*

Therefore, I must ask why this prize is awarded to a movement which is beleaguered<sup>1</sup> and committed to unrelenting struggle; to a movement which has not won the very peace and brotherhood which is the essence of the Nobel Prize.

After contemplation, I conclude that this award which I receive on behalf of that movement is a profound recognition that nonviolence is the answer to the crucial political and moral question of our time — the need for man to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to violence and oppression. Civilization and violence are antithetical<sup>2</sup> concepts. Negroes of the United States, following the people of India, have demonstrated that nonviolence is not sterile passivity, but a powerful moral force which makes for social transformation. Sooner or later all the people of the world will have to discover a way to live together in peace, and thereby transform this pending cosmic elegy<sup>3</sup> into a creative psalm<sup>4</sup> of brotherhood. If this is to be achieved, man must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love.

1. **Beleaguered (adjective):** persistently troubled or harassed

- [5] The tortuous road which has led from Montgomery, Alabama to Oslo bears witness to this truth. This is a road over which millions of Negroes are travelling to find a new sense of dignity. This same road has opened for all Americans a new era of progress and hope. It has led to a new Civil Rights Bill, and it will, I am convinced, be widened and lengthened into a super highway of justice as Negro and white men in increasing numbers create alliances to overcome their common problems.

I accept this award today with an abiding faith in America and an audacious<sup>5</sup> faith in the future of mankind. I refuse to accept despair as the final response to the ambiguities of history. I refuse to accept the idea that the "isness" of man's present nature makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal "oughtness" that forever confronts him. I refuse to accept the idea that man is mere flotsam and jetsam<sup>6</sup> in the river of life, unable to influence the unfolding events which surround him. I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality.

I refuse to accept the cynical<sup>7</sup> notion that nation after nation must spiral down a militaristic stairway into the hell of thermonuclear<sup>8</sup> destruction. I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right temporarily defeated is stronger than evil triumphant. I believe that even amid today's mortar<sup>9</sup> bursts and whining bullets, there is still hope for a brighter tomorrow. I believe that wounded justice, lying prostrate<sup>10</sup> on the blood-flowing streets of our nations, can be lifted from this dust of shame to reign supreme among the children of men. I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits. I believe that what self-centered men have torn down other-centered men can build up. I still believe that one day mankind will bow before the altars of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed, and nonviolent redemptive good will proclaim the rule of the land. "And the lion and the lamb shall lie down together and every man shall sit under his own vine and fig tree and none shall be afraid."<sup>11</sup> I still believe that We Shall overcome!

This faith can give us courage to face the uncertainties of the future. It will give our tired feet new strength as we continue our forward stride toward the city of freedom. When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds and our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, we will know that we are living in the creative turmoil of a genuine civilization struggling to be born.

Today I come to Oslo as a trustee,<sup>12</sup> inspired and with renewed dedication to humanity. I accept this prize on behalf of all men who love peace and brotherhood. I say I come as a trustee, for in the depths of my heart I am aware that this prize is much more than an honor to me personally.

- [10] Every time I take a flight, I am always mindful of the many people who make a successful journey possible — the known pilots and the unknown ground crew.

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2. **Antithetical (adjective):** directly opposed or contrasted; opposite
  3. a sad or mournful poem, especially for a funeral
  4. a sacred song or hymn, in particular any of those used in the Bible
  5. **Audacious (adjective):** extremely bold or daring
  6. useless or discarded objects from a ship
  7. **Cynical (adjective):** believing that people are motivated by self-interest
  8. relating to nuclear reactions that occur only at very high temperatures
  9. a short, light cannon used to shoot shells high into the air
  10. lying stretched out on the ground with one's face downward
  11. a verse from the Old Testament of the Bible
  12. one who is responsible for caring for someone else or managing their affairs

So you honor the dedicated pilots of our struggle who have sat at the controls as the freedom movement soared into orbit. You honor, once again, Chief Lutuli of South Africa, whose struggles with and for his people, are still met with the most brutal expression of man's inhumanity to man. You honor the ground crew without whose labor and sacrifices the jet flights to freedom could never have left the earth. Most of these people will never make the headline and their names will not appear in Who's Who.<sup>13</sup> Yet when years have rolled past and when the blazing light of truth is focused on this marvelous age in which we live — men and women will know and children will be taught that we have a finer land, a better people, a more noble civilization — because these humble children of God were willing to suffer for righteousness' sake.

I think Alfred Nobel<sup>14</sup> would know what I mean when I say that I accept this award in the spirit of a curator<sup>15</sup> of some precious heirloom which he holds in trust for its true owners — all those to whom beauty is truth and truth beauty — and in whose eyes the beauty of genuine brotherhood and peace is more precious than diamonds or silver or gold.

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13. the American publisher of directories containing short biographies  
14. the founder of the Nobel Prizes  
15. a manager or guardian of something valuable

## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following identifies the central idea of the text?
  - A. The Civil Rights Movement must remain peaceful in the struggle against injustice because using violence would cost the movement the public's support.
  - B. There have been times in history when violence was necessary to resolve mankind's problems, but the Civil Rights Movement is not one of those moments.
  - C. Too many American leaders have been willing to accept violence, and it will not be possible to achieve equality if they don't adopt King's peaceful activism.
  - D. Citizens and leaders must work together to reject violence and promote peace, which will allow them to fulfill the goals of the Civil Rights Movement and eradicate racial injustice.
  
2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
  - A. "I am mindful that only yesterday in Birmingham, Alabama, our children, crying out for brotherhood, were answered with fire hoses, snarling dogs and even death." (Paragraph 2)
  - B. "I conclude that this award which I receive on behalf of that movement is a profound recognition that nonviolence is the answer to the crucial political and moral question of our time" (Paragraph 4)
  - C. "I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits." (Paragraph 7)
  - D. "I think Alfred Nobel would know what I mean when I say that I accept this award in the spirit of a curator of some precious heirloom which he holds in trust for its true owners" (Paragraph 12)
  
3. PART A: What is the effect of King describing passivity as "sterile" in paragraph 4?
  - A. It contrasts passivity with nonviolence, which is a more effective path to social change.
  - B. It stresses the idea that neither passivity nor nonviolence lead to peace.
  - C. It reinforces the idea that passivity is a safer way to create change than nonviolence.
  - D. It portrays passivity as more important than nonviolence in fighting injustice.
  
4. PART B: Which quote from paragraph 4 best supports the answer to Part A?
  - A. "the need for man to overcome oppression and violence" (Paragraph 4)
  - B. "civilization and violence are antithetical concepts" (Paragraph 4)
  - C. "but a powerful moral force which makes for social transformation" (Paragraph 4)
  - D. "sooner or later all the people of the world will have to discover a way to live together in peace" (Paragraph 4)

5. Which statement best describes how the style of the text contributes to its persuasiveness?
- A. King uses figurative language and repetition to emphasize the most important points in his speech to the audience.
  - B. King describes the injustices that African Americans have faced in great detail to evoke sympathy from the audience.
  - C. King uses simplistic language so that he can appeal to more people and better convey abstract ideas to the audience.
  - D. King uses language that unifies the audience to encourage them to put their differences aside for the movement.
6. What is the effect of King comparing freedom movement to the flight of an airplane in paragraphs 10 and 11?

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