International Journal of Research in English

ISSN Print: 2664-8717
ISSN Online: 2664-8725
Impact Factor (RJIF): 8.36
IJRE 2025; 7(2): 150-152
www.englishjournal.net
Received: 15-05-2025
Accepted: 18-06-2025

R Deekshitha
III B.A English, SRM Arts and Science College, Kattankulathur, Tamil Nadu, India

Dr. K Siva Sankar
Assistant Professor, Department of English Literature, SRM Arts and Science College, Kattankulathur, Tamil Nadu, India

Corresponding Author:
R Deekshitha
III B.A English, SRM Arts and Science College, Kattankulathur, Tamil Nadu, India

The impact and influence of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech on generation Z: A literary and cultural perspective

R Deekshitha and K Siva Sankar

DOI: https://doi.org/10.33545/26648717.2025.v7.i2c.448

Abstract
Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, delivered in 1963 during the March on Washington, stands as a rhetorical masterpiece and a moral lodestar in the global pursuit of justice, equality, and human dignity. Though born from the specific historical and racial struggles of the United States, its themes transcend national boundaries and generational divides. The speech has become a universal symbol of resistance against oppression and a beacon of hope for marginalized communities worldwide. This paper explores how Generation Z, raised in a hyper-connected digital world yet burdened by unprecedented social, economic, and environmental inequalities, engages with and reimagines King's vision. Far from seeing the speech as a historical artifact, Gen Z treats it as a living document, one that continues to speak urgently to the injustices of the present. By integrating perspectives from canonical English literature, this paper examines how King's dream resonates with longstanding literary ideals of justice, freedom, and hope. From Shakespeare's calls for moral introspection, to Blake's critiques of institutional cruelty, Shelley's revolutionary optimism, and Orwell's warnings against authoritarianism, King's message finds rich parallels and enduring relevance. Through this interdisciplinary lens, we analyze how literature and activism inform each other in the context of modern civil rights movements. Furthermore, we explore the role of social media in amplifying and reshaping King's message for new audiences. Ultimately, this study argues that King's dream is not a closed chapter in history but a continuing call to action revived and reinterpreted by a new generation determined to build a more just and inclusive world.

Keywords: Dream, justice, national boundaries, generation Z, human dignity

Introduction
The power of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech lies not merely in its historical significance but in its universal moral imagination. Its eloquence evokes a tradition of prophetic voices who, like King, sought a better world through the art of words. In his call for justice and brotherhood, one hears echoes of William Blake's cry against oppression "I will not cease from Mental Fight, nor shall my sword sleep in my hand" and Shakespeare's declaration in The Merchant of Venice: "Though justice be thy plea, consider this: That in the course of justice, none of us should see salvation." For Generation Z, King's speech is both inheritance and challenge. This generation, rose in an era of ecological crisis, systemic racism, and digital transformation, engages with King's words as both historical memory and living text. They not only commemorate the dream but seek to realize and expand it through protest, literature, art, and online activism.

Historical and Literary Backdrop of the Speech
King's speech was delivered during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in August 1963, a pivotal moment in the American Civil Rights Movement. His message of peaceful resistance and moral clarity echoed far beyond Washington, reverberating across decades and disciplines. The speech draws on the cadences of the King James Bible, the ideals of the Declaration of Independence, and the rhetorical traditions of African American spirituals. It also bears striking similarity to the utopian visions of Romantic poets like Percy Bysshe Shelley, who declared in The Mask of Anarchy (1819): "Rise like lions after slumber/In unvanquishable number/Shake your chains to earth like dew/Which in sleep had

fallen on you/Ye are many they are few!". King, like Shelley, believed in the transformative power of the people especially the young to awaken justice from sleep and tyranny from comfort.

Generation Z: A Portrait of Digital Activists

Born between roughly 1997 and 2012, Generation Z is the most racially diverse, technologically literate, and socially progressive generation in modern history. They inherit a world shaped by economic instability, pandemics, climate change, and racial violence but also one where voices can be amplified through the touch of a screen. King's dream resonates with this generation not as a relic of the past, but as an unfinished symphony a "promise," as he phrased it, that has not yet been fulfilled. To Gen Z, the dream is both real and elusive, both foundational and aspirational. As Hamlet declared in Shakespeare's tragedy, "What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! … And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?". King's dream, when viewed through Gen Z's eyes, is a paradox of nobility and failure man's capacity for justice often undone by his history of injustice.

Rhetoric, Relevance, and Revivals

King's use of ethos (credibility), pathos (emotional appeal), and logos (logic) mirrors classical rhetorical techniques that are also embedded in English literary tradition. His repeated phrase "I have a dream..." becomes a poetic refrain, not unlike the anaphora used by poets like Tennyson in "Ulysses": "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." For Gen Z, especially those immersed in digital storytelling and poetic activism, King's rhythmic phrasing offers both aesthetic power and ideological clarity.

Imagery and Hope

King's dream is rooted in vivid metaphor: "justice rolls down like waters," and "children will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." These are images that evoke the same visionary clarity as Wordsworth's invocation of the "still, sad music of humanity," or Blake's "mind-forged manacles." Such imagery appeals strongly to Gen Z, who are attuned to visual metaphors and symbolism through platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and art-based protest. Their memes and posters often remix King's metaphors, linking them to current issues like Tran's rights, gun violence, or climate justice.

Reinterpreting the Dream: Gen Z's Lenses

1. Intersectionality and Identity

Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of racial equality with a vision rooted in justice and dignity for all, but Gen Z reads his dream through an intersectional lens that expands its relevance. For this generation, King's message is not confined to race alone; it connects to LGBTQ+ rights, feminism, neurodiversity, and postcolonial struggles. Inspired by Virginia Woolf's insight in A Room of One's Own that "books continue each other" Gen Z sees King's dream as part of an evolving narrative that must include voices historically left out, even by progressive movements. In literature, this broadened understanding of justice resonates in works like Toni Morrison's Beloved, where the past is not past but lingers as a ghost, haunting the present. Morrison's narrative reflects how trauma, memory, and identity intersect mirroring how King's dream continues to be shadowed by enduring violence and injustice. Just as Morrison forces readers to confront the unhealed wounds of slavery, Gen Z challenges society to reckon with overlapping systems of oppression that persist today. By extending King's vision to a more inclusive and multifaceted understanding of justice, they not only honor his legacy but also insist that true liberation must encompass all marginalized identities.

2. Protest as Poetry

King's vision finds fertile ground in Gen Z's blend of protest and poetics. Just as Shelley said, "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world," King's dream is now legislated through chants, tweets, spoken word, and protest murals. Consider Amanda Gorman herself a Gen Z poet whose The Hill We Climb echoes King's cadence: "We are not broken/we are unfinished." Gorman's generation, like King's, believes in building anew from the ashes of systemic injustice.

Digital Activism: King's Speech in a Viral World

The Dream Goes Digital

The modern protest is not only held in streets—it unfolds in digital spaces. Hashtags like #I Have A Dream, #MLKNow, and #BlackLivesMatter have brought King's vision into millions of feeds. Generation Z does not merely commemorate King they collaborate with his legacy. TikTok users remix his speech with images of contemporary injustice. AI-generated recreations of the March on Washington are used in virtual reality classrooms. Art students reinterpret King's speech through animation and digital montage. As George Orwell warned in 1984, "Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past." In reclaiming King's legacy through digital means, Gen Z resists the sanitization or weaponization of his memory.

Case Studies: Dreaming in Real Time

Case Study 1: George Floyd and Global Protests (2020)

When George Floyd was murdered in 2020, protests erupted not only across the United States but around the world. People of all ages and backgrounds flooded the streets, demanding justice and an end to systemic racism. Among them, it was teenagers, university students, and young artists who often stood at the forefront—organizing vigils, launching campaigns, and circulating petitions that gained millions of signatures. Many protest placards echoed Martin Luther King Jr.'s iconic words: "I am the dream." One particularly powerful and viral image showed a young Black girl holding a handmade sign that read: "I have a dream too. Stop killing us." The heartbreak and clarity in her message distilled generations of pain into one sentence. It also brought to mind William Wordsworth's famous line from *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*: "The child is father of the man." In that moment, the innocence and moral clarity of youth exposed the deep failures of adult society. Far from being inexperienced or naive, Gen Z's youth becomes a source of moral authority; a demand for a better future, not just for themselves but for all. Their actions, fueled by a digital fluency and global awareness, challenge complacency and redefine activism for the 21st century. They connect historical struggles to present injustices, drawing lines between civil rights, police brutality, climate

justice, and gender equality. By invoking King's dream, they are not merely repeating history; they are rewriting it. In their voices, the dream is not a distant hope it is an urgent call to action.

Case Study 2: Literary Reinterpretation and Classroom Discourse

In high school English syllabi around the world, Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" is increasingly studied not only as a political speech but as a masterwork of rhetoric and lyrical expression. It is often taught alongside poems by Maya Angelou, Wilfred Owen, and even Shakespeare, inviting students to draw connections across genres and centuries. Students might compare King's soaring tone and rhythmic repetition to Hamlet's introspective soliloquies, or analyze how rhetorical devices like anaphora, metaphor, and allusion function similarly in both political speeches and dramatic monologues. In this approach to teaching, the boundaries between politics and poetry begin to dissolve. Language becomes not just a tool for persuasion but a vessel for vision, emotion, and collective memory. As King once urged, "We must use time creatively," a sentiment that resonates with T.S. Eliot's meditation in *Four Quartets*: "Time present and time past/Are both perhaps present in time future." Both King and Eliot speak to the layered nature of time—how the past informs the present, and how the future can be shaped by the words we speak today. In the classroom, this kind of analysis allows students to see literature not as static text, but as living dialogue.

Literary Critique and the Radical King

While the "I Have a Dream" speech is celebrated, Gen Z is increasingly drawn to King's more radical speeches and essays; especially those opposing capitalism, war, and imperialism. In his 1967 speech "Beyond Vietnam," King called the U.S. government "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today." This aligns with Gen Z's suspicion of neoliberal rhetoric and their affinity for dystopian fiction, such as Orwell's 1984 or Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale. For them, King is not merely a sainted figure of peace, but a radical truth-teller.

Conclusion

Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech endures not merely because of its historical significance or poetic beauty, but because it articulates a timeless and universal longing—for justice, dignity, and true belonging. His words reach beyond the moment in which they were spoken, offering a moral vision that continues to resonate deeply across generations. For Generation Z, growing up in a world marked by technological saturation, climate anxiety, social unrest, and ideological fragmentation, King's speech serves as a compass. In the swirl of disinformation and digital overload, his message remains clear, steady, and uncompromising in its moral clarity. His dream is not viewed by Gen Z as a relic of the past, but as a living document, a call to action and a framework for reimagining the world. Gen Z does not merely admire King's dream; they inherit it and reinterpret it. They bring it into dialogue with the issues of their time: racial justice, climate equity, LGBTQ+ rights, gender identity, mental health, and economic fairness. As Emily Dickinson once wrote, "Hope is the thing with feathers/that perches in the soul…" King gave voice to that hope, shaping it into powerful, unforgettable rhetoric. But it is Gen Z who gives it flight, carrying it into protests, classrooms, social media platforms, and policy debates. In doing so, they ensure that King's vision is not frozen in history but alive in movement. His dream lives on` not as nostalgia, but as a blueprint for building a more just, inclusive, and compassionate future.

References

1. Blake W. The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake. Erdman DV, editor. Berkeley: University of California Press; 2008.
2. Dickinson E. The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition. Franklin RW, editor. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press; 1999.
3. Eliot TS. Four Quartets. New York: Harcourt; 1943.
4. Gorman A. The Hill We Climb: An Inaugural Poem for the Country. New York: Viking Books for Young Readers; 2021.
5. King ML Jr. I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches That Changed the World. Washington JM, editor. San Francisco: HarperOne; 1992.
6. Morrison T. Beloved. New York: Vintage International; 2004.
7. Orwell G. 1984. Crick B, editor. London: Penguin Classics; 2000.
8. Shakespeare W. The Merchant of Venice. Mowat BA, Werstine P, editors. New York: Folger Shakespeare Library; 2010.
9. Shakespeare W. Hamlet. Mowat BA, Werstine P, editors. New York: Folger Shakespeare Library; 2012.
10. Shelley PB. The Mask of Anarchy. New York: Penguin Books; 1986.
11. Wordsworth W. Selected Poems. Gill S, editor. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2013.
12. Woolf V. A Room of One's Own. New York: Harcourt; 1989.