Letter from Birmingham Jail

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was born in 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia, raised by his mother, an organist and member of the church choir, and his father, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Sr. His father was a strong influence on his life, laying the foundation for King's focus on Christianity and racial equality. King also personally experienced the pain of segregation as a child, when he and his white childhood friend began to attend the segregated Atlanta schools and were no longer allowed to play together. At 19, King graduated from Morehouse College with a degree in sociology and then went on to attend Crozer Theological Seminary. In 1954 he began working as a pastor in Montgomery, Alabama, and he received his Ph.D. in Theology from Boston University in 1955. At this time, King also became involved in the civil rights movement, leading the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955 and the March on Washington in 1963, where he gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. King was assassinated on April 4, 1968, in a hotel room in Memphis, Tennessee. He was in the city to lead a protest, and had to stay an extra night due to a bomb threat on his plane. That evening, James Earl Ray shot King, who died soon after at the age of 39.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s work focused on the repeal of unjust racial segregation laws and policies; this activism became known as the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s, which eventually led to significant changes in laws regarding the treatment of African Americans. Segregation had been an entrenched policy in the United States since the passing of Jim Crow laws that barred African Americans from using the same public facilities as whites, going to the same schools, or marrying whites. The 1896 Supreme Court case "Plessy vs. Ferguson" established the legality of segregation based on the concept that facilities would be "separate but equal." These laws and policies of racial segregation persisted through the 1950s, until groups like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference organized a series of protests in cities across the South to call attention to the injustice African Americans were experiencing. One of the major victories for civil rights was the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which ended discriminatory practices keeping African Americans from voting, effectively giving them a much-needed voice in American democracy.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s writings helped form the foundation of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, inspiring African Americans across the United States to continue to fight for their legal rights and for overall racial equality. Not long after writing his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," King wrote and delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech during the March on Washington, often deemed the most famous work of the Civil Rights Movement. A plurality of voices helped shape the movement, however, including Joseph Jackson's Annual Address to the National Baptist Convention in 1964, Zora Neal Hurston's Letter to the *Orlando Sentinel* in 1955, and creative works such as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*, both of which depict the psychological trauma of racism and segregation in America. While many leaders of the black liberation movements disagreed with King's philosophy of nonviolent protest, they shared many of the same frustrations regarding racism and segregation. Stokely Carmichael's essay "Toward Black Liberation" and Malcolm X's biography and various speeches provide a different, more radical and violent perspective on the struggle for civil rights.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Letter from Birmingham Jail
- **When Written:** April 1963
- **Where Written:** Birmingham City Jail
- **When Published:** May 19, 1963 (excerpts) in *The New York Post Sunday Magazine* and later in 1963 in its entirety in *Liberation*, *The Christian Century*, and *The New Leader* magazines
- **Literary Period:** Civil Rights Movement
- **Genre:** Essay
- **Setting:** Birmingham, Alabama
- **Antagonist:** The eight white clergymen, authors of "A Call for Unity"
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

A Letter in Pieces. While in the Birmingham City jail, Martin Luther King, Jr. had little access to the outside world, and was only able to read "A Call to Unity" when a trusted friend smuggled the newspaper into his jail cell. King wrote his response in the margins of the paper, in pieces, and they were smuggled back out to a fellow pastor, who had the responsibility of piecing the letter back together again.

PLOT SUMMARY

Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote his "Letter from Birmingham Jail"

in response to criticism of the nonviolent protests in Birmingham, Alabama in April 1963. In the letter, King responds specifically to a statement published in a local newspaper by eight white clergymen, calling the protests "unwise and untimely" and condemning to the "outsiders" who were leading them.

He begins his letter by calling the clergymen people of "genuine goodwill" and acknowledging the sincerity of their concern, setting a tone of reasonable dialogue. He then responds to the claims that he is an outsider by informing his critics that as the leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, he was invited to Birmingham to support the African American residents fight for their civil rights. Beyond that, he argues that he is in Birmingham "because injustice is here," and like the **Apostle Paul** and other early Christians, he must answer the call for aid.

King also rebuts the critics' argument that segregation laws should be fought in the courts and not on the streets, explaining that only through direct action can they force the white majority to confront the issue of racism and enter into true dialogue. While the protesters are breaking laws—which is precisely why King must write his letter from the Birmingham City jail—those laws are immoral and unjust, and civil disobedience is thus a patriotic response.

In addition to responding directly to the criticisms brought forth by the clergymen, King uses his letter to make his own judgments as well. He expresses his extreme disappointment at white moderates, whom he considers more detrimental to the cause of racial equality than the Ku Klux Klan. He condemns the fact that the moderate claims to support the mission while rejecting all attempts at direct action. He would rather be considered an extremist "for the cause of justice" than stand by and passively allow those injustices to persist, as the white moderate has done in the South.

King then extends his criticism to the leadership of the white church for championing the status quo. He expected more of the church, an institution that once "transformed the mores of society," but laments the fact that the contemporary church has fallen far from its early Christian origins to become "an irrelevant social club" rather than a source of inspiration. Yet with all of his concern about the lack of support for the cause of racial equality and desegregation, King closes his letter on a hopeful note, expressing his belief that African Americans will achieve the freedom and equality they are fighting for.

CHARACTERS

Martin Luther King, Jr. – Martin Luther King, Jr. was a Baptist minister, a leader of the Civil Rights movement, and the author of "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Responding to an open letter known as "A Call for Unity," written by eight white clergymen, King answers their criticism of his racial activism and defends civil disobedience as necessary in the face of the injustice African Americans experienced at the time. In the letter, King refers to himself as "the son, the grandson, and the greatgrandson of preachers," and contextualizes his protest within the history of Christianity, noting that the early Christians practiced civil disobedience as well and were "willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks rather than submit to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire." King's vast biblical knowledge and rhetorical skills are clear in this letter: despite being written in the margins of a newspaper in a Birmingham jail cell, King's letter is one of the most important works of the Civil Rights Era.

Eight White Clergymen – The Eight White Clergymen who wrote "A Call for Unity," an open letter that criticized the Birmingham protests, are the implied readers of King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail." King refers to them as "My Dear Fellow Clergymen," and later on as "my Christian and Jewish brothers." These men were Birmingham religious leaders from the Episcopal, Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist churches as well as a Jewish temple; during the Birmingham protests, they met to discuss their concerns and ended up publishing their open letter, in which they questioned the timing of the protests and recommended that African Americans fight their battle against segregation in the courts rather than in the street. Most significantly, they claimed that the protests were being conducted by "outsiders," referring indirectly to Martin Luther King, Jr., who was not from Birmingham. Their suggestion that outside activists should not be involved in Birmingham politics was the inspiration for one of King's most famous statements, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

TERMS

Southern Christian Leadership Conference – The Southern Christian Leadership Conference is a civil rights organization, of which **Martin Luther King, Jr.** was the first president. The organization was formed in 1957 with the original plan of desegregating bus systems throughout the South through nonviolent civil disobedience; later, the group expanded its focus to ending all forms of segregation. It was his leadership of the SCLC that brought King to Birmingham to protest the segregation of local shops. In response to critics referring to him as an "outsider," King notes that he was invited to Birmingham as the president of the SCLC: "the affiliate here in Birmingham asked us to be on call to engage in a nonviolent direct-action program," and he felt it necessary to answer that call. One of the core beliefs of the SCLC was that the Christian church should be an agent for social change and should, therefore, support the nonviolent protest of racial injustice. King makes this clear in his letter, condemning religious leaders

who refuse to take a stand against racism and segregation.

Lynching – Lynching is a form of murder, often committed by a mob of people taking the law into their own hands, and often in the form of a public hanging. Lynching was a common practice during the pre-Civil Rights era in the U.S., and some estimate that thousands of African Americans were lynched by white mobs during the first half of the 20th century. Over time, lynching transformed from a public punishment for a crime into a form of social and political control that whites used against African Americans. During the Civil Rights era, desegregationists and other protesters for racial equality were often targets of lynchings.

Nebuchadnezzar – Nebuchadnezzar I was the King of Babylonia from 605 BC to 562 BC, who is known in the Bible for invading Jerusalem twice and destroying the central Hebrew Temple. In the Bible, Daniel maintains his religious faith while the King tries to forcibly convert him and others to the Babylonian religious beliefs. In the end, Nebuchadnezzar recognizes the power of the Hebrew god after witnessing a series of miracles.

Boston Tea Party – The Boston Tea Party was a protest against the Tea Act of 1773, which allowed the British to trade tea in the American colonies without paying taxes. This was the culmination of years of tension between the British and their American colony, in which the colonists resented "taxation without representation." In one of the major events that led up to the American Revolution, protesters destroyed a shipment of tea from the East India Company.

Ku Klux Klan – Also known as the KKK, this extremist group maintains a platform of racial segregation, white supremacy, and anti-Semitism. They used violent means—including lynching—to oppose civil rights and racial equality in the 1950s and 60s. They were responsible for many of the bombings that **Martin Luther King, Jr.** mentions in his letter, but because many of their members held positions of power or had significant political connections, few were ever prosecuted.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

RACISM

Systemic racism throughout the American South is at the heart of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s letter, written in response to criticism of his nonviolent civil rights protest in Birmingham, Alabama. King writes his letter from jail, as he and other African Americans have been arrested for protesting the segregation policies and overt racism in Birmingham; those protests violated an injunction on parading, demonstrating, boycotting, trespassing, and picketing. He gives ample context for the protests he is leading, along with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, arguing that the city's "white power structure left the Negro community with no alternative." King establishes beyond a shadow of a doubt that the protests are a necessary response to the city's racist policies, as well as the only way to engage whites in substantive negotiations.

While racism and the policy of segregation was widespread throughout the South at this point in history, King calls Birmingham "the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States," giving concrete examples of the need to protest and bring national attention to their desegregationist cause. King establishes an exhaustive list of the burdens African Americans face on a national scale, and the detrimental effects those policies and actions have on mental health. He evokes images of physical violence such as lynchings and drownings, but also the economic violence of long-standing poverty, and the emotional toll of having to explain to his young children why they are treated as second-class citizens in their own country.

He goes on to point out Birmingham's record of police brutality towards African Americans, their unjust treatment in the courts, and the "unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches" as just some examples of the deeply entrenched racism in the city. He also points to negotiations with economic leaders in Birmingham earlier in the year, in which local merchants promised to remove "humiliating racial signs," only to break the promise and ignore the requests of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Some critics wondered why King did not give Birmingham's new mayor, Albert Boutwell, time to make a good faith effort at reducing segregation and racism in the city. In response, King explains that Boutwell is a segregationist like his predecessors, and will not be moved to change without intense pressure from African Americans and other desegregationists.

King also makes it clear in his letter that he believes discussion is not enough, and that he and his fellow protesters intend to create constructive tension in order to generate change. He laments the fact that negotiation is impossible within a system that is dedicated to "monologue rather than dialogue," in which African American voices have been silenced by the dominant, white powers of society. King then portrays himself and his fellow protesters as gadflies, who will create the necessary tension in society to provoke real, thoughtful dialogue between blacks and whites.

It is this tension that concerns his critics, but he defends the idea resolutely, arguing that while he opposes violence, the nonviolent tension he is advocating is necessary for the growth and development of American society. Finally, King points out that historically, "privileged groups seldom give up their

privileges voluntarily." It is only through nonviolent pressure and clear and persistent demands that African Americans will make any gains in their civil rights.

King describes the protests as inevitable at this point in history. African Americans have waited long enough for racial justice to come to them, and are now willing to go out in search of it. "Let him march," he implores, referring to the gatherings and protests in Birmingham, "and try to understand why he must do so." With this request, King humanizes his fellow protesters and reminds his critics of the painful effects of historic racism.

King also warns his critics that the most likely consequence of ignoring the needs of these nonviolent protesters is that they will turn to violence; he notes that this is not a threat, but a fact rooted in the history of oppression. He argues that frustration may drive many blacks to join black nationalist movements such as the Nation of Islam, which he describes as mired in "hatred and despair" rather than a constructive drive towards racial equality. Finally, King places this movement within the larger context of American history, reminding his critics that African Americans have endured even greater injustice under slavery and emerged unbroken. He proclaims that if "the inexpressible cruelties of slavery could not stop us, the opposition we now face will surely fail."

In "A Letter from Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King, Jr. provides a comprehensive evaluation of the deeply entrenched racism in America. He establishes the ways in which blacks have been degraded and dehumanized by segregation and racism in general, and then combats that dehumanization with several personal notes on the effects of racism on the African American psyche. Most importantly, he establishes the moral imperative to act now, in nonviolent fashion, as the only way to bring about change.

CHRISTIANITY AND MORALITY

In his letter, Martin Luther King, Jr. responds to criticism from eight Alabama clergymen; directing himself to them as a fellow Christian, he defends the Birmingham protests and his desegregationalist agenda by appealing to their Christian values and sense of morality. Of all of King's rhetorical strategies, this may be the strongest and most personal for him, as King sees racial equality not just as a political issue, but a moral and religious one as well.

First, King establishes his credentials as a fellow clergyman, which allows him to speak directly to his critics not as an African American political protester, but as a colleague and brother. He portrays himself as a man who is deeply loyal to the Christian church, and whose actions stem from that religious connection. He notes that he loves the church: "How could I do otherwise? I am in the rather unique position of being the son, the grandson, and the great-grandson of preachers." This positioning is essential to King's overall argument, establishing him as a religious authority with the power to engage in dialogue with the white clergymen who have criticized his actions.

King also distinguishes his movement, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, from other desegregationist movements led by blacks "who have absolutely repudiated Christianity," such as the Nation of Islam. Again, this helps King to portray himself as a Christian leader seeking racial equality, rather than simply as a racial agitator. Near the end of his letter, King offers an olive branch to his critics, reminding them that they share a religious vocation and beliefs regardless of their political leanings. He expresses his hope that he may meet his critics someday, "not as an integrationist or a civil-rights leader but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother." This helps King to close his letter on a positive and peaceful note, reminding his critics that they are Christians first and foremost.

In response to his critics' portrayal of the Birmingham protesters as troublemakers, King repeatedly draws parallels with early Christians. He reminds his Christian readers that their religious history is full of dissent and rebellion in the name of a higher moral calling; these comparisons also indirectly portray white racists as enemies of Christ, casting shame on their immoral actions. King notes that when "the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being 'disturbers of the peace' and 'outside agitators.'" He uses the same phrase, "outside agitators," that his critics have used to describe the African American protesters in Birmingham, making it clear that history will be on the African Americans' side as well.

King goes on to compare the protesters to the prophets of the eighth century B.C. and the **Apostle Paul**, noting that they too traveled out of their way to spread the gospel, just as King and his fellow protesters are spreading the word of racial equality. Responding to his critics' vilification of his civil disobedience, he references "the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar" as another form of rebellion that helped build the early Christian church. These biblical references support King's overall argument that while his protests may be illegal in the eyes of the law, they will eventually be revealed as morally appropriate and necessary, as were the acts of disobedience of the early Christians. Similarly, King uses Christian theology to challenge segregation on moral grounds, arguing that its legality does not make it any less sinful. Referencing the Christian philosopher Paul Tillich, King argues that "sin is separation," and that segregation is an expression of that sinful separation, and thus morally wrong.

Once King has established his own religious authority in his letter, he moves on to question the morality of the white Christian church with regard to its stance on segregation and racist social and economic policies. He expresses disappointment with an establishment that he once believed in,

and especially with the leadership of the church in the South, who should be responding to a higher calling. King points to the opponents of racial equality like the eight clergymen who criticized the protests in the first place, writing that they have refused to understand the movement and have misrepresented leaders like King. However, he also calls out moderate Christians who "have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows." As an overarching theme in his letter, King condemns the silence of those who have the power to enact change, and especially those whose religious values would require them to speak up.

King expects more of the church, an institution that he believes should be an agent for social transformation. He strongly disagrees with religious leaders who distance themselves from social issues, calling the white Christian church "an archdefender of the status quo." He questions whether or not organized religion is in a position to save the nation and world if white religious leaders are afraid to step up and protest injustice when they see it. King references a letter he received from a white Christian leader in Texas, who advised the protesters to slow down and wait passively for equal rights, which would happen in their own time, as the teachings of Christ come to earth. King's response to this argument is that progress does not happen without the "tireless efforts of men willing to be coworkers with God," and that Christians must make social change a priority as part of their moral values.

As a celebrated leader of the Christian church, Martin Luther King, Jr. is able to raise the question of civil rights to a level of moral and religious imperative. His letter provides his critics with a reading of the Bible as a history of rebellion, social change, and obedience to a higher moral calling, and calls on the contemporary church to continue that tradition by supporting racial equality.

EXTREMISM VS. MODERATION

Many critics portrayed civil rights activists as extremists, a term that King addresses directly in his letter. While he first rejects the idea that he is an extremist, he later embraces the term, again citing parallels from the Bible of "extremist" actions that served a higher moral cause. He also uses this opportunity to condemn moderates whose silence and apathy he finds more detrimental to the cause of racial justice than the direct opposition of radical segregationists.

King begins by rejecting the idea that his actions are extreme, arguing that he falls between two ends of the spectrum of black desegregationists, and then returns to the idea with a new interpretation of the term "extreme." He places complacent and defeated blacks on one side, unable to take action because they are so used to segregation or, in some cases, because they profit from it in some way; on the other side are the black nationalist movements, which he criticizes for their lack of faith in America and its institutions. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference are an example of a third way of reaching racial equality, "the more excellent way of love and nonviolent protest." He notes that without this path of nonviolence that King and his followers espouse, the streets would be flooded in blood.

Later in his letter, King changes his mind and embraces the term extremist, finding "a measure of satisfaction from the label." He then places himself within the context of Christian prophets, preachers, and American political leaders whose agendas were considered extreme at the time. He calls Jesus Christ an extremist for love, **Paul** for the Christian gospel, Abraham Lincoln for the abolition of slavery, and Thomas Jefferson for universal rights. Once again, King establishes a historical precedent for his work, citing the need for "creative extremism" as a catalyst for progress. He finishes his argument about extremism by redefining the term, specifying that by emulating Jesus on the cross, "an extremist for love, truth, and goodness," he will rise above the critics and take the high road.

What is most troubling for King, however, is the inaction of moderate Americans who are unable or unwilling to take action against racial inequality. Just as he imbued the term "extremist" with positive connotations, King strips the term "moderate" of its diplomatic value. He begins by expressing disappointment with white moderates, who he considers more dangerous to the cause of racial equality than the Ku Klux Klan. The archetypal white moderate is paternalistic and condescending to blacks who take direct action, has a shallow understanding of the cause and little interest in learning more, and "prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice." White moderates, in King's opinion, fear the tension that arises from direct action, and blame black protesters for creating that tension. However, as he notes, "we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive." This implies a willful ignorance on the part of moderates, a kind of racial malice disguised as moderation.

King also praises the white men and women who have not let complacency and willful ignorance take over and have joined the protests for racial equality. They, too, are considered extremists by authorities, or worse, "dirty nigger-lovers," and have suffered some of the same injustices as blacks at the hands of police and authorities. In contrast to moderate whites, these white supporters "recognized the urgency of the moment and sensed the need for powerful 'action' antidotes to combat the disease of segregation." By pointing to and praising white activists, King also reminds his audience that he is not anti-white, but anti-racist.

While his critics use the term extremism to marginalize the integrationist movement, King reclaims the word in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," drawing attention to the need for

extremism at a time when too many moderate Americans are passively condoning racism through silence. He continues to create parallels between his work and that of early Christians, who were also considered extremists, but were just taking the moral high ground, regardless of the unpopularity of their ideas.

JUSTICE

Martin Luther King, Jr. writes his letter from a small jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama, imprisoned for protesting racial inequality and segregation as a political and social policy in the South. Despite writing from a prison cell, however, King never considers his actions criminal, and uses his letter to argue that while the protests were illegal, they served a greater sense of justice. He was protesting laws that he considered fundamentally unjust for a number of reasons; this form of civil disobedience is both necessary and patriotic.

King notes that it is as important to disobey unjust laws as it is to obey just ones; as such, he presents various arguments to illustrate the injustice of the segregation laws in the South. King explains that laws are manmade but justice is divine, and for a law to truly be considered just, it cannot conflict with moral law. Segregation laws are therefore unjust, as they do not correspond to the law of God. Specifically, King notes, "segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality." There is no justice in a law that is morally wrong or sinful.

King's opposition to the segregation laws are not only religious; he notes that an unjust law legalizes difference, allowing a majority in power to place limits on the actions of a minority. If the law does not apply equally to white and black citizens, it is an unjust law and should not exist. King also notes that he and other blacks were not able to take part in the formation of these laws—they do not even have the opportunity to vote for their own leaders and lawmakers—and therefore the laws are not created within a truly democratic system.

In protest of the laws he considers unjust, King is willing to submit to jail time, an act that shows the highest respect for law the American political process. While legality does not equal justice, King is not interested in committing crimes for their own sake—he and his followers seek the consequences as well, to demonstrate their willingness to sacrifice for the cause. The foundation of civil disobedience is the willingness to face the consequences, regardless of how harsh they may be, in order to bring attention to the injustice of the law. This is a patriotic action, and one of the few ways in which African Americans could participate in American democracy at that point in history.

King and his fellow protesters have undergone the four steps of nonviolent protest—the first, of course, is to establish that there is injustice in the community, and King describes Birmingham as "engulfed" in racial injustice. They attempted the second step, negotiation, in vain. In the third step, self-purification, they prepared themselves to face the consequences of their protests, whether they be imprisonment or **bodily** harm. And once they had sufficiently prepared themselves, they moved on to the final step, direct action. The dire consequences of their nonviolent protests are an integral part of the movement towards justice, as the protesters respond patiently to the attacks by authorities upholding an unjust law. It is this willingness to sacrifice for the sake of progress and a future they may never see that reinforces the justice of their actions.

Near the end of his letter, King calls into question the justice of the police work in Birmingham. White leaders had praised the police for their work maintaining order and preventing violence amidst the protests, but King presents a very different perspective on the role of the police in the Birmingham protests. King denounces the violence with which the police have treated the protesters, including physically harming black women and children, turning their dogs on unarmed protesters, and withholding food from black prisoners. This is violence that his critics have ignored—in fact, when they praised police for "preventing violence," they were referring specifically and exclusively to black violence, ignoring the cases of police brutality. In public, however, the police seem to have avoided outright violence and maintained a sense of calm throughout the protests. Yet this is unsettling to King as well, as he asks, "for what purpose?" Good police work in service of a set of unjust laws and racist policies is not truly good work. In fact, King describes it as "just as wrong, or perhaps even more so, to use moral means to preserve immoral ends." Regardless of the police's behavior in response to the protests, they are working to uphold the unjust laws of segregation, and therefore King cannot commend them on their work.

King is aware of his status as a man who has been imprisoned unjustly, and defends the morality and overall patriotism of his actions. While he freely acknowledges the illegality of his actions, he argues that his form of nonviolent resistance is the best way to bring about change and racial justice. He cannot obey laws that he considers unjust, and in fact feels a moral imperative to disobey them and face the consequences in order to bring light to the injustice of the system.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

APOSTLE PAUL

Of all the biblical references that Martin Luther King, Jr. makes in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail,"

the most powerful is his use of the **Apostle Paul** as a kind of spiritual symbol for his work in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. His critics have described him as an "outsider" who has come to Birmingham to make trouble with his civil rights protests; in response, King draws a parallel with the Apostle Paul, noting that he too was obliged to travel beyond his homeland to enlighten others. He models himself after the Apostle, spreading an unpopular truth: just as Paul "carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town." His critics also call King an extremist, and again he responds with the image of Paul, whom he calls "an extremist for the Christian gospel." This comparison is personally meaningful for King—he clearly sees the Apostle Paul as a guiding spirit—but it is also a way of equating the fight for racial equality with the work of spreading the word of Jesus Christ, and segregation laws throughout the South with "certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire." By placing the protesters in such a biblical context, he tries to convince his critics that racial equality, like the Christian gospel, is a morally superior philosophy, despite being preached by outsiders and extremists.

BODIES

In "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King, Jr. presents the body as the field of battle for civil rights. He first calls attention to the physical act of protest, noting that he and other leaders helped prepare protesters for direct action by asking "Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?" and "Are you able to endure the ordeal of jail?" For most of the men and women involved in these protests, this is not a war of words but an actual physical battle, in which bodily harm is the most likely outcome. King then complicates this metaphor, citing the spiritual relationship between body and soul: he condemns some Church leaders for making a "a strange, un-Biblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular." To King, the body houses the soul, and any physical harm that comes to the protesters also brings about moral and spiritual damage. He discusses the image of the Christian church as the body of Christ, but laments the fact that many Christians "have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and through fear of being nonconformists." These literal and metaphorical bodies—the bodies of the protesters, the African American community as a social body, and the spiritual body of the church—all feel the damage brought about by the racist segregation that permeated the South.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Perfection Learning edition of *I Have a Dream* published in 2007.

Letter from Birmingham Jail Quotes

❝ Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

King makes this statement—one of his most famous and quoted—in response to being deemed an "outsider" by his critics, because he and other members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference have traveled to Birmingham, Alabama to protest segregation in the city. In response to this criticism, King notes that like the early Christians, he and his fellow activists must travel to spread their gospel of racial equality and integration. Like the Apostle Paul, he must answer the call for aid—in this case, support for a city-wide protest against segregation in local shops.

This statement establishes King's sense of community and the interconnectedness of his mission and places African Americans' protests in a global context: King and the SCLC are fighting injustice in Birmingham as part of a larger struggle for peace and equality across the country.

❝ We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

King continues to respond to criticism of the protesters, especially in relation to the tension that they are bringing to the city of Birmingham. He states that the goal of their protests is to create discomfort and tension among whites in the city, so that they feel enough pressure to engage in sincere dialogue about racial equality.

King's experience as a civil rights leader has taught him something that his white critics do not recognize: discomfort and pressure is the only way to create change. Only when the white authorities believe there is something to lose, or can no longer ignore the constant protests in the streets of their city, will they consider granting equal rights to African Americans.

> The answer is found in the fact that there are two types of laws: there are just laws, and there are unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that "An unjust law is no law at all."

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

King uses the words of St. Augustine, an early Christian philosopher, to defend the protests against segregation laws. The protesters were criticized for breaking the law, but King defends their actions by arguing that choosing not to obey an unjust law is equally as important as obeying a just one. King's use of Christian references further reminds his readers that he is not just a protester, or an African American, but also a religious scholar and a Baptist minister.

King uses this opportunity to focus the conversation not on the illegality of his actions, but on the validity of the laws he has broken. He goes on to argue that if a law is morally wrong, then it is also unjust, and that he has an obligation as a Christian to obey *moral* law even if that conflicts with the laws of the land.

> We can never forget that everything Hitler did in Germany was "legal" and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was "illegal."

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

King continues to question the moral basis for the laws of segregation, having established that the laws are unjust and therefore that he has no moral obligation to obey them. Now he brings up an example from very recent history to give further context to his argument, and to emphasize to his readers that just because something is legal, that does not mean it is morally right. His reference to Hitler is strategic, as the horrors of WWII and the Holocaust would still be very fresh in the minds of his readers at the time of writing.

After the destruction of WWII, many world leaders pledged to learn from history and never let such devastation happen again. Yet King is suggesting that white authorities in the southern United States have forgotten how destructive legal oppression of a minority group can become. His comparison is subtle, but the simple reference to Hitler's Germany is enough to remind his readers to learn from recent history.

> ...the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Councillor or the Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice...

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

After responding to criticism of his actions for much of the letter, King now offers his own criticism, directed at white moderates. This is one of the strongest points in his letter, pointing out that passivity and empty promises are as detrimental to the cause of racial equality as outright opposition.

While the Ku Klux Klan are very public enemies to African Americans, and have committed heinous acts against protesters, their tactics are known. The white moderate, on the other hand, often claims to be on the side of racial equality but is unwilling to make any sacrifices or give up his privilege for it. This hypocrisy is a kind of silent opposition that has as much effect on the struggle for freedom as do the voices and actions of avowed white supremacists.

> We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability.

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

King discusses a letter he received from a white man in Texas, who pleaded with him to be more patient and not to rush the cause of racial equality, which, the man argued, would come in its own time. This man referenced the extended timeline for nearly all of the changes within the Christian church and suggested that racial equality would take time as well. This anonymous letter writer serves as King's first example of the white moderate, who paternalistically sets a timeline and agenda for African Americans to gain their civil rights.

King responds to the letter writer—and, by extension, to all white moderates who caution him to wait patiently—that time itself is not enough to bring about civil rights. Change is not inevitable, King argues, because it relies on the actions of people who are dedicated to the cause. This is why African Americans must protest, create tension and discomfort, and push for those changes to happen.

> So let him march sometime; let him have his prayer pilgrimages to the city hall; understand why he must have sit ins and freedom rides.

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

King returns to the criticisms of the eight white clergymen, focusing now on their use of the word "extremist" to describe the protesters. King calls into question the term, explaining that he and his fellow nonviolent protesters actually fall between two extremes. They are neither resigned to the suffering of segregation, a feeling held by many African Americans due to a lifetime of frustration and disappointment; nor are they filled with the anger, violence, and hatred of whites that King attributes to black nationalist groups.

King then cautions his critics: if African Americans are not given the opportunity to participate in democracy and conduct nonviolent protests for their civil rights, they are likely to join up with those more violent factions and take to the streets again, with weapons and violent intentions. King asks that his critics attempt to consider the situation from the point of view of the protesters, understanding why they need to march, rather than simply condemning their actions.

> Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice, or will we be extremists for the cause of justice?

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

King now changes his mind about the term "extremist," and decides to embrace a redefined version of the word. While his critics have meant it to have negative connotations, King sees the value in extreme actions, especially those that are morally right despite conflicting with man-made laws. He returns to the idea that the laws of segregation are unjust, and that he and his fellow protesters are obligated to break those laws to bring attention to their injustice. If fighting for the cause of racial justice is extreme, King will embrace that term publicly.

King also places himself within a community of extremists from the history of Christianity, such as the Apostle Paul and even Jesus Christ, and from early American history, such as Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln. Each one of these men was willing to fight for a cause he believed in, despite its unpopularity, and may well have been called an extremist in his own time. Again, King finds this a reason to embrace the term extremist, as he is in good company and is working for a cause he believes to be morally just.

> We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom.

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

As King nears the end of his letter, he focuses on the overall righteousness of his goal, racial equality. King is relentlessly optimistic about the long-term outcomes of the civil rights campaigns, in large part because he knows that what he is doing is morally correct. Despite writing his letter from a jail cell, King maintains a moral high ground and does not apologize for the protests in any way; in fact, he uses this space to promote the work of the protesters and show his belief in them. He places them in the context of all American freedom fighters, maintaining the legacy of the American Revolution. The repetition of the word freedom helps to remind readers that like the African American protesters, the American colonists also fought for their freedom from oppression.

"One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters they were in reality standing up for the best in the American dream and the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage.

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

King concludes his praise of the protesters by reminding his readers that history will be on their side, and that while his critics may call them outsiders and extremists, in retrospect they will be considered heroes. He describes the protesters as children of God, emphasizing their lack of malice in the fight for civil rights; he uses the word "disinherited" to remind his readers of the struggles African Americans have endured throughout history. He strips the entire civil rights movement down to a simple act—sitting down at lunch counters—to emphasize that these protesters must fight and risk their lives to be able to perform an act so mundane that most white Americans take it for granted.

Yet this mere act of sitting down for lunch represents a huge step in human progress, King notes. The protesters are fighting for values that are central not only to American culture, but to the religious values that King shares with his critics. This assertion places the work of the protesters in a much larger context—they are not only fighting for their own rights, but for the betterment of all Americans and Christians as well.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

LETTER FROM BIRMINGHAM JAIL

Martin Luther King, Jr. directs his letter to the eight white clergymen who publicly condemned his actions in Birmingham, Alabama. He notes that he rarely pauses to respond to criticism, but he believes that these are men of good will, with sincere concerns, and so he is willing to respond to their statement in "patient and reasonable terms."

In beginning his letter by complimenting his critics, King establishes a tone of cordiality and rational dialogue. This is important, as the white authorities have attempted to portray the protesters as extremist law-breakers.

King begins his response by addressing his critics' concerns about the presence of "outsiders," referring indirectly to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He explains that the African American residents of Birmingham invited him, and needed his help organizing a direct-action campaign to fight the racial injustice in the city.

This is the beginning of King's point-by-point rebuttal of the criticisms leveled against him. King responds with complete confidence that he is in the right place at the right time, and that his actions are necessary.

In addition, King is also in Birmingham because he feels compelled to respond to injustice wherever he finds it. He compares his work to that of the early Christians, especially the **Apostle Paul**, who traveled beyond his homeland to spread the Christian gospel. Finally, he questions the idea that anyone in the United States can be considered an outsider within the country, and that the injustice affecting those in Birmingham is inherently connected to racial injustice on a national scale.

As a Baptist minister, King has a depth of knowledge of the Bible and history of Christianity, which he uses to his advantage in this letter. He knows that comparing the protesters to the early Christians places his critics in the role of the enemies of freedom. He then reminds his critics that the protesters are American citizens, and therefore they are not outsiders in their own country.

According to King, the systemic racism in Birmingham has left the African American community with no alternative to direct action. He points to the city's segregation, police brutality toward the African American community, their mistreatment in the courts, and the unsolved bombings of African American homes and churches as examples of the conditions that make nonviolent protest necessary at this point in history.

While his critics have expressed concern about his behavior, King turns the tables on them and focuses on the systemic racism that white authorities have ignored for far too long. King emphasizes that the protests are a necessary action based on African Americans' current social and political conditions.

In the past, the African American community has attempted to negotiate with Birmingham community leaders, but had their hopes dashed. King cites the local merchants' promise to remove their "humiliating racial signs" that established and supported segregation in downtown stores, in exchange for a moratorium on political demonstrations. Only a few merchants actually took down their signs, and even then, some put them back up after a while. This convinced the African American community that they needed to take direct action through civil disobedience.

King goes into detail about the steps that have gone into this decision to protest, and again focuses on the failings of the white authorities. By describing the signs as humiliating, King calls attention to the psychological effects of segregation for African Americans. The merchants' disingenuous dealings with African American leaders only exacerbates that humiliation.

King clarifies that the goal of the protests was to force the situation, and "to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation." He has found that overall, people will not give up their privileges without intense pressure to do so, and so they must apply that pressure through protest.

King asserts that the goal of the protests is to create an atmosphere of discomfort for whites in Birmingham. His critics' vehement condemnation of the protests, then, is a sign that they are, indeed, creating the pressure needed to spark change.

Some of his critics have described the protests as untimely, and suggested that the protesters wait for desegregation to happen on its own schedule. King replies that they have waited 340 years for their "constitutional and God-given rights," and that for him, the word "wait" is equal to "never" in the context of civil rights.

The question of time comes up often in the struggle for civil rights, and King dedicates a large portion of his letter to responding to this issue from the African American perspective.

To give his readers an idea of the racial injustice African Americans have experienced, King offers a list of injustices. He presents examples of lynchings and extreme police brutality, the "air-tight cage of poverty," and the emotional pain of explaining segregation to his young daughter, only to see "ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky." He delves into the psychological effects of being a second-class citizen in his own country and concludes that he can no longer wait for change to happen on its own and must go out and make it happen.

In this section of the letter, King humanizes African Americans by focusing on the emotional and psychological pain that segregation and racial inequality have caused. His anecdote about his daughter presents the human side of a heavily politicized issue. Alongside the more obvious threats of death, bodily harm, or imprisonment, African Americans suffer from more complex issues like financial uncertainty and a sense of inferiority.

King moves on to discuss the fact that he and the other protesters are breaking laws, which the eight white clergymen mentioned among their many criticisms. He specifies, however, that the laws they are breaking are unjust, and that he feels a moral obligation not to follow unjust laws.

Returning to the specific list of criticisms, King now focuses on distinction between law and justice. He does not deny that his protests are illegal, but instead calls into question the validity of the laws he has broken.

King establishes the grounds for deeming a law unjust, focusing specifically on whether or not the law—a man-made concept—corresponds to moral or natural laws, which are established by God. In this way, he deems segregation unjust because it is "an existential expression of man's tragic separation, his awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness." More concretely, he notes that a law is unjust if those made to obey the law (in this case, African Americans) had no opportunity to enact that law.

King presents a solid legal argument in this section, while still focusing on morality in a Christian context. Again, because he is attempting to engage in dialogue with his fellow clergymen, King reminds his readers that religious moral codes should have a higher status than the laws of the land. In this way, King establishes that segregation is an immoral—and therefore unjust—law.

Most importantly, King notes that he and his fellow protesters are willing to accept the punishment for breaking the law, and therefore they are showing the highest respect for the institution of law itself. He reminds his readers of the history of civil disobedience, which harkens back to the early Christians that resisted the unjust laws of Nebuchadnezzar and the Roman Empire, all the way to the Boston Tea Party, one of the foundational acts of civil disobedience in American history.

King establishes the difference between ordinary crime and civil disobedience. At the center of civil disobedience is the public nature of law-breaking: these African Americans are protesting publicly, and allowing themselves to be arrested, to bring attention to the unjust laws. King again compares the protesters to the early Christians, creating a moral and ethical connection between the two groups.

King then offers his own criticisms, condemning the white moderate for his passive acceptance of racial inequality, calling him more dangerous than the Ku Klux Klan. The white moderate is dedicated to order over justice, while King and his fellow protesters must disrupt that order to expose injustice.

One of King's central points in this letter is that moderation is not a politically prudent tactic, especially when African Americans find themselves in the kind of physical, emotional, and psychological danger that he described earlier.

To illustrate the white moderate perspective, King refers to a letter he received from a white man from Texas, who claimed that King was "in too much of a religious hurry" because equal rights would come on their own schedule. King contends that it is not just time what will bring about civil rights, but the "tireless efforts of men willing to be coworkers with God." The idea that time—without the support of human action—will bring about change is a tragic misconception of time itself.

King describes the white moderate as complacent, hypocritical, and condescending toward African Americans, agreeing on the surface with their overall goals (freedom, political participation, and equality) but unwilling to take any steps to fulfill them. King thus emphasizes the role of action (in the form of nonviolent protest) as the only way of making change.

King then addresses the description of the protests as extreme, arguing that he and the SCLC fall somewhere in the middle, between African Americans who have become complacent and have no desire to fight for their freedom, and the black nationalist groups that are consumed by bitterness and hatred of whites. Their movement is a third way of nonviolent protest.

The next critical point King addresses is the question of extremism, which his critics have used as an insult or warning, and by which they hope to de-legitimize the civil rights movement. King uses the example of the black nationalist parties as real extremists, especially due to their lack of Christian values.

The yearning for freedom is the result of centuries of pent-up frustration, and if African Americans do not have the opportunity to take action and participate in nonviolent protest, King argues, they will find refuge in the more extreme groups. He asks his critics to consider the circumstances that brought about these protests, rather than automatically condemning them.

King continues to request that his critics consider the issue from the point of view of the protesters, and this time he emphasizes the fact that there are other, much more extreme options for frustrated African Americans.

King then changes his mind about the term extremist, embracing the idea within the context of Christianity and American history. He notes that Jesus was an extremist for love, **Paul** for the Christian gospel, and Martin Luther for Reformation. Likewise, Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson were extremists for their causes, which eventually became fundamental values in American politics.

King redefines and embraces the term "extremist." Like the other extremists he lists, King believes that his cause will win out in the long run, and that he is on the right side of history. He also includes examples from American history, thus placing his critics in the place of historical villains, such as the British.

King returns to his condemnation of white moderates, lamenting the fact that they have not been able to see this fundamental need for civil rights. He points out, however, that there have been some exceptional allies, who have used their words and **bodies** to show their commitment to racial equality. He also commends one of the eight white clergymen specifically: Reverend Stallings welcomed African Americans to worship alongside whites, integrating his church service.

Throughout the letter, King has maintained a cordial and generous tone, careful to show respect for his critics even when they do not merit it. He now commends some of the white people who have supported the cause of racial equality in even the smallest ways, such as the Reverend Stallings.

With these notable exceptions, King comments, he is disappointed with the white church. He believed that as Christians, they would understand and support the cause and preach the gospel of racial equality as he does. What he has found is too much caution, and a desire to separate the church from the needs of the community.

King's commendation of these allies is strategic, however, as he then condemns the majority of the white church leaders who have not made the same small concessions that Reverend Stallings did. King returns to his criticism of white moderates and their unwillingness to take action.

He reminds his readers of the time when the Christian church was powerful and functioned as an agent of change; he no longer sees that in the contemporary church, which he calls "an archdefender of the status quo." If this continues, warns King, the church will lose the loyalty of millions and lose its relevance in the lives of young people.

King believes that one of the most important roles of the Christian church is to help drive transformation, and in this way, he links his objective of racial equality with their desire to stay relevant to modern Americans.

King again praises those who have taken the risk and joined the cause of racial equality, expressing hope that the rest of the church will follow their lead. Yet even without the support of white religious leaders, King believes that the protesters will eventually triumph. He announces that they will achieve the goal of racial freedom "because the goal of America is freedom."

King moves on to tie the current struggle for racial freedom to the historical struggle for American independence from Britain. These connections help to build community with his critics: the protesters are also Americans and members of the church, and should not be viewed as enemies.

In a final point before closing his letter, King notes that white leaders have commended the police for their work maintaining order and preventing violence. He takes issue with this commendation for two reasons: first of all, King argues that these white leaders have not seen the violent treatment of African Americans that hardly merits commendation, like physically abusing men, women, and children, and refusing them food in the city jail.

This final point in the letter returns to the present moment, where the police can abuse African Americans and still receive a commendation from leaders of the religious community. When these leaders praise the police for preventing violence, they are only concerned about violence against white citizens.

Yet even when the police have conducted themselves nonviolently in public, King argues that this is not worthy of praise, either. Regardless of their conduct, the police are working to preserve the racist and violent laws of segregation, and King does not see that as worthy of praise.

Focusing on the larger picture, King reminds his critics that the segregation laws are unjust, as he has shown, and thus that there is no justice in upholding unjust laws. The preservation of order is not as important as the fight for justice.

King expresses his wish that these same leaders had commended the protesters in Birmingham for their courage and discipline in the face of injustice. He argues that one day, these people will be the real heroes, commended for their suffering and persistence in the fight for racial justice and for supporting the democratic process that is the cornerstone of American history.

King takes the opportunity to praise the protesters, in part because no white religious leader will do so. In his praise, King shows his confidence in the righteousness of his cause and his belief that while he may not see the end of segregation, he knows history will be on his side.

King finishes his letter with a few final notes. First, he apologizes for the length of his letter, but reminds his readers that he is sitting in a jail cell, with nothing else to do but ruminate on the conditions that have brought him there. He then expresses a desire to meet with the eight white clergymen who have criticized the protests—not as an African American or a protester, however, but as a fellow clergyman. He completes his letter "yours in the cause of Peace and Brotherhood."

Signing off, King re-positions himself for his critics one final time: he is like them, a religious leader looking to spread the gospel of peace and community. Yet unlike them, he has been jailed for his actions. He uses the fact that he is writing from a jail cell to remind his readers of the injustice and absurdity of the situation.

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