Critical Essays: Analysis

In key respects, King’s oratory bore resemblance to the poetic expressions of African American discontent seen in Harlem Renaissance writers such as Langston Hughes and Claude McKay. Hughes’s “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” was not unlike most of King’s works in that it frankly acknowledged the pain of African American history while holding out hope for future fulfillment of the American Dream. McKay, too, expressed this kind of realism-optimism as he nostalgically reviewed love, nature, and faith and subtly reminded his readers of the promises of American democracy in such poems as “If We Must Die” and “America.”

Thus, King was not an isolated modern innovator or revolutionary in his orations, but rather a modern prophet with substantial linkage to the African American literary theme of struggling from internalized values to a better external world. King drew upon the African American cultural legacy as well as his training in mainstream Euro-American thought, the Social Gospel philosophy of Walter Rauschenbusch, and his own middle-class upbringing under the shadow of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta.

As literature, several of King’s speeches stand out as paradigmatic. The “I Have a Dream” speech has often been used in speech classes to demonstrate effective technique, and its content has been reviewed in countless books and articles. The metaphor of a “dream” to express the almost ineffable concept of a community at harmony with itself and the world has had an impressive impact even upon the organizational identity of the movement. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) under King’s successors found the idea of keeping the “dream” alive to be its most effective theme for maintaining some continuity with the heyday of the Civil Rights movement. Other nonviolence oriented organizations such as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) have also found this imagery and other King rhetorical symbolism useful to their efforts. The reason seems to be that King clearly articulated both the needs and hopes of African Americans.

There is clearly an institutional as well as a historical orientation in King’s speeches that is consistent with African American literary tradition. The black church, the family, hard work, and the variegated network of adjustment mechanisms are all emphasized. If there is a high degree of Gandhian influence, there is also much that is distinctively African American. If there is paradox in King’s juxtaposition of a midnight of racism and a dawn of hope, there is also much realism, discipline, and measured optimism. Perhaps the most effective expression of their confluence can be seen in the stirring conclusion of “I Have a Dream”: So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire; let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York; let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania; let freedom ring from the snowcapped Rockies of Colorado; let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California. But not only that. Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia; let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee; let
freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring.

“And when this happens,” he continued, people of all races and faiths will cooperate in bringing about the kind of just community envisaged by the founders of the United States and be able “to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: ‘Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty, we are free at last.’”

Analysis: Form and Content

The sermons and speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., mirrored the southern black preaching tradition that surrounded his childhood in Atlanta. King’s father, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Sr., was the pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church and a seminal influence in shaping his son’s commitment to racial justice and his confidence that carefully chosen words were crucial to attaining it.

As a boy, King witnessed many occasions when his father and mother refused to be intimidated by segregationist policies; his parents always linked their resistance to moral values. Above all, young King developed a passion for learning to express himself with “big words” such as his father and his maternal grandfather, the Reverend Adam Daniel Williams, before him delivered from the pulpit at Ebenezer. The cadence and forceful tones of this southern black preaching style stimulated the future civil rights leader’s mind before he could read and remained a decisive element in his public career. Although he did not plan to become a minister, his experience at Morehouse College changed his thinking and led him to further study in theology and philosophy at Crozer Theological Seminary and Boston University and prepared him for his first pastorate in Montgomery, Alabama. There, he emerged as an effective civil rights spokesman during the historic bus boycott of 1955-1956. One major result was a long series of speeches and sermons, including several that have been published in many languages that are considered to be models of rhetorical effectiveness and important contributions to African American social thought.

King’s first speech to a national audience was his “Give Us the Ballot” address during the Prayer Pilgrimage to Washington, D.C., in May, 1957. By then King was taking an important place among such familiar civil rights leaders as Asa Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, and the Reverend Charles Kensie Steele; the “Give Us the Ballot” speech propelled him further as a major advocate of civil rights. Although some considered its judgment premature, after the speech New York’s Amsterdam News hailed King as the “number one leader of sixteen million Negroes” and said that “the people will follow him anywhere.”

His rhythmic repetition of the phrase “give us the ballot” had counterparts in several of his most influential addresses of the following decade. In August, 1963, during the massive March on Washington by some 250,000 people in behalf of jobs and freedom, King delivered his best-known speech. This time the pivotal phrase was “I have a dream,” as King surveyed the broad landscape of African American history in the United States and expressed his hope for a better future. The next year, he modified his style somewhat in his speech in Oslo, Norway, as he accepted the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize, but his quintessential rhetorical form was reflected in his thematic emphasis upon peace both as a possibility and as a necessity for survival of the human race. It was a speech marked by King’s frequent proclamations of faith in his vision for the world, modified at each change of topic to fit the specific point such as world peace or economic justice. “I refuse to accept the cynical notion,” he affirmed, “that nation after nation must spiral down a militaristic stairway into a hell of thermonuclear destruction.” With equal fervor, he told the crowd of marchers who gathered in Montgomery on March 25, 1965, after their fifty-mile trek from Selma, Alabama, in behalf of voting rights that “Confrontation of good and evil compressed in the tiny community of Selma generated the massive power to turn the whole nation to a new course.” In each case, content and method revolved around a central concept based on a synthesis of historical black experience and faith in the power of idea-charged words as a catalyst for change.
All King’s major speeches were historical sermons, focusing on the moral dimensions of the struggle for human equality and the nonviolent method that he believed essential to its success. Frequently, he drew illustrations from religious writings and experiences, as well as from quotidian details of the life of the poor and oppressed.

After the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, he retained his earlier style but increased his emphasis upon socioeconomic problems and the escalating Vietnam War. In April, 1967, at New York’s famed Riverside Church, he delivered a controversial speech in which he looked “Beyond Vietnam” and the destructive conflict he now openly opposed. King clearly saw his criticism of the war as consistent with his earlier position of nonviolence, but he had yet to learn just how much it would damage his previously amicable relationship with President Lyndon B. Johnson, who strongly supported the war, and even many of his associates in the civil rights struggle. In that sense, King’s later speeches were more divisive politically than before. He averred at Riverside that needed social programs were being destroyed by the heavy cost, both moral and economic, of the conflict in Southeast Asia.

The year following the Riverside speech was a difficult one for King. He was losing support among highly visible black leaders who feared, as indeed was true, that his stance on the Vietnam War would alienate the Johnson administration and thus reduce its support for civil rights reform. His speeches and sermons inevitably echoed his discouragement over the erosion of the consensus that had produced the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act a year later. His plans to lead a Poor People’s March on Washington were ended by his assassination in Memphis, Tennessee, where he had gone to help striking sanitation workers, on April 4, 1968. Even there, just before his death, King delivered a somber, but typically hopeful, final address often called “To the Mountain Top.” In it, King virtually predicted his own death without losing confidence that black Americans would reach that better condition he called “the promised land.” “I may not get there with you,” he told a stunned audience, “but I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the promised land.”

The contents of King’s major addresses are varied, since they were delivered over a period of more than a decade and in shifting contexts. All of them were signposts of the nonviolent Civil Rights movement and the prevailing concerns of many black Americans. The “Give Us the Ballot” speech addressed the rising interest among black organizational leaders and grassroots support groups in obtaining the right to vote. That, said King, was pivotal for any future gains. If African Americans could obtain the unhampered opportunity to vote, they could remove segregationist officials from office and thus facilitate other reforms. In Washington in 1963, his “I Have a Dream” speech reflected the uncertainty about the Birmingham campaign recently completed; black leaders had obtained an agreement with local officials and business leaders to increase employment of blacks and to remove other racial barriers, but the agreement was not yet secured by enforceable laws. The elusive goal of enlarging employment and educational opportunities was basic to the Birmingham effort and very much on King’s mind in the nation’s capital.

King recognized in himself the dual and sometimes contradictory roles of a black man struggling for his own freedom and a public figure created in part by the press. After King received the 1964 Nobel Prize, this dichotomy was widened as he became a global figure. His increased stature can be seen in the broadening content of his speeches and writings, which increasingly incorporated issues of world peace and justice. If this seemed to burden King with an impossible task, it also reinforced his commitment to nonviolence as the key to creating communities freed from racial and other artificial barriers. Those concepts were fundamental premises of his Riverside and Memphis speeches of 1967 and 1968.

The linkage in King’s speeches between African American history and broader American and global experience is both visible and complex. Frequent quotations from poems, biblical passages, and seminal figures in intellectual history such as Thomas Aquinas and Reinhold Niebuhr echoed not only his particular educational experience but also his belief that politics, faith, and freedom were all intricately connected. In
Oslo in 1964, he told the audience of world leaders that the African Americans’ struggle in the United States was actually part of a global movement for justice. He accepted the prize not for himself, he said, but for a movement still short of having “won the very peace and brotherhood which is the essence of the Nobel Prize.” As usual, he would not claim full victory. The tension between reality and possibility, a characteristic feature of his speeches, was obvious, yet neither would he yield to pessimism even about prospects for genuine human community. “I refuse to accept the view,” he insisted, “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.”

Most of his later speeches contained a similar blend of growing concern over the post-Selma decline of multiracial support and an ardent expression of the need to continue the movement on its nonviolent course. His final address in Memphis in 1968 was the clearest expression of this polarity. That his presence in Memphis was a detour from the planned Poor People’s March on Washington to revitalize public support by focusing on the urgent needs of poor people of all races reflects the complexities of the time. He and others hoped that the march and related lobbying of government offices in Washington would engender the kind of positive response witnessed after the 1963 march, but fatigue, repeated threats on his life, and public criticism of his statements were taking their toll. King’s last speech in Memphis was stunning to his aides, as they watched him virtually collapse into his chair after talking pointedly about the possibility of dying soon. However, as he had done so often in the past, he spoke of hope and practical steps that could be taken to alleviate social inequities. He urged blacks not to do business with companies that practiced racial discrimination and called for building a “greater economic base” for black Americans.

The most familiar part of his Memphis speech remains the closing section, which clearly demonstrates that King sensed his impending death. “Well, I don’t know what will happen now,” he reflected in a serious tone that long haunted his close friends: We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn’t matter with me now. Because I’ve been to the mountaintop. And I don’t mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I’m happy, tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

Early the next evening, King was shot to death as he stood on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, preparing to attend yet another rally.

King’s speeches were shaped by his background, his education, and his distinctive synthesis of Gandhian nonviolence and the black religious experience. He saw himself and his message as rooted in the prophetic tradition of social criticism grounded in the eternal truths of divine revelation. Frequently, he quoted biblical passages such as “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream” and echoed Christ’s emphasis on preaching good news to the poor and freedom to prisoners.

Instinctively and by training, King preferred nonviolent persuasion, but he understood the need for nonviolent coercion through such means as boycotts, litigation, and pressure on legislators. An interesting blend of these elements can be seen in several of his addresses. In 1963, he frequently drew the audience’s attention to what he called the “promissory note” of the Constitution and Declaration of Independence. That debt, he said, had not been honored. Millions still lived on an “island of poverty” amid an ocean of plenty. Nor did he fail to warn of possible negative repercussions if the promises of the Constitution and the Emancipation Proclamation were not realized in the future. “This sweltering summer of the Negro’s legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality,” he predicted.
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