

phries analyzes how Agee and other writers who published books between World War I and II employed elements of journalism to create innovative texts, a type of creative nonfiction.

Kramer, Victor A. *Agee and Actuality: Artistic Vision in His Work*. Troy, N.Y.: Whitston, 1991. A valuable resource for understanding Agee's aesthetics and the controlling themes of his works. Also discusses Agee's focus on details and "the real."

_____. *A Consciousness of Technique in "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men": With Thirty-one Newly Selected Photographs*. Albany, N.Y.: Whitston, 2001. Kramer focuses on the complex techniques that both Agee and Evans used to create *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Contains thirty-one photographs not included in the original published version of the book.

_____. *James Agee*. Boston: Twayne, 1975. This well-written work remains one of the more valuable sources on Agee for the nonspecialist, useful for its analyses, bibliography, and chronology of the author's life.

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Madden, David. "James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*: The Cruel Radiance of What Is." In *Touching the Web of Southern Novelists*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006. Madden analyzes the lives and works

of writers of the American South, including Agee, and examines how these same writers have inspired his own work.

Spiegel, Alan. *James Agee and the Legend of Himself*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998. This critical study of Agee's writing offers especially sound insights into the role that childhood reminiscence plays in the author's nostalgia. The extensive discussion of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* represents one of the best interpretations of this work.

Stott, William. *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*. 1973. Reprint. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986. In this classic work, Stott examines the documentary impulse of the 1930's in the United States, analyzing journalism, sociology, photography, radio broadcasts, and other media to determine their influence upon literature and the arts. Devotes two chapters to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, one discussing Evans's photographs and the other describing Agee's text.

Tindall, George Brown. "The Lost World of Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*." In *James Agee: Reconsiderations*, edited by Michael A. Lofaro. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992. Examines the literary and sociological interest of the 1930's in the southern rural poor, a trend that fostered Agee's and Evans's work.

Wagner-Martin, Linda. "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men—and Women: Agee's Absorption in the Sexual." In *James Agee: Reconsiderations*, edited by Michael A. Lofaro. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992. Examines the emphasis Agee places on the Gudger women, his awareness of their sexuality, and his own role as a voyeur.

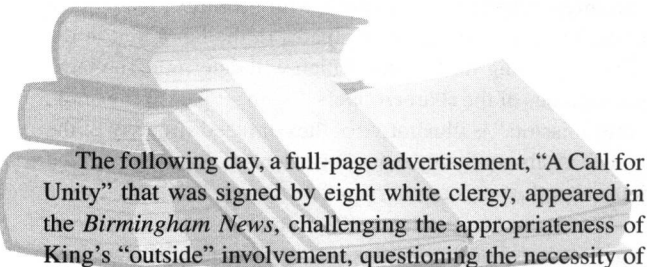
Letter from Birmingham City Jail

Author: Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968)

First published: 1963

Type of work: Social criticism

Letter from Birmingham City Jail is perhaps the finest literary achievement of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. It is indeed the most profound defense of his nonviolent program for the Civil Rights movement in the United States. Early in 1963, African American leaders in Birmingham, Alabama, had invited King to lead a local demonstration against segregation. King led a nonviolent protest march that resulted in his arrest on Good Friday, April 12, 1963.



The following day, a full-page advertisement, "A Call for Unity" that was signed by eight white clergy, appeared in the *Birmingham News*, challenging the appropriateness of King's "outside" involvement, questioning the necessity of demonstrations, and calling for "negotiation" instead. King responded with what came to be called *Letter from Birmingham City Jail*, which he had written on the margins of the newspaper and on toilet paper and had smuggled from the

jail. After eight days of incarceration, King was released. His letter was subsequently published in several periodicals. The events of Birmingham (owing in part to the effectiveness of King's letter) proved to be turning points in the Civil Rights movement.

King's article-length letter opens with a brief introduction that establishes a firm but irenic, or moderate, tone. Though jailed unjustly, King does not lash out angrily at his critics. Instead, he addresses them in disarming fashion, characterizing them as sincere men of "good will." After this introduction, King answers one by one the charges that had been leveled against him by the eight ministers, the first criticism being that he was an outsider meddling in local affairs. He explains that his role as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference demands that he assist local organizations that call upon him. Second, he argues that his work is like that of the biblical prophets and apostles who had traveled far afield to challenge injustice and to bring the "gospel of freedom." Third, he cites the principle of corporate solidarity, pointing out that the United States is a single nation whose citizens are bound in purpose and future. He states profoundly, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

King then takes exception to the idea that demonstrations are too unsettling and that patient negotiation with political leaders would be a more acceptable path to racial equality. He admits that direct action disturbs the community, but he insists that segregation and racial prejudice are even more disturbing. He provides ample details to show that racial injustice is an ongoing evil in Birmingham. King writes that negotiation is in fact his goal but that demonstrations are necessary to create the tension that forces the issues into negotiation. His own experience and the testimony of history show that "freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor." With a staggering flurry of examples, he illustrates the suffering of African Americans and insists that waiting for a more convenient season is not a viable option. The reader is forced to concede that serious injustices must be addressed without delay.

Next, in answering the charge that he and his fellow demonstrators are law breakers, King offers a defense of civil disobedience that stands in the tradition of Henry David Thoreau and Mahatma Gandhi. With impeccable logic he cites well-known philosophers and theologians to show the difference between just laws and unjust laws. Furthermore, he applauds famous examples of civil disobedience from the Bible and from history. He closes this section by starkly contrasting the legal but immoral acts of Adolf Hitler with the illegal but commendable acts of those who aided European Jews before and during World War II.

King follows up his logical argument for civil disobedience with a more personal and emotional appeal to the "moderates" who stand for equality in principle but who are unwilling to support direct actions that disturb the status quo. He pleads for immediate and concrete moves toward justice and racial integration. He refuses the label of "extremist," claiming that he stands in the middle between two extremes in the African American community. He insists that his position is more advantageous than either complacent acquiescence or violent activism. King, however, is willing to own the label of "extremist" when it registers his identification with other important extremist persons such as Jesus Christ, Saint Paul, Martin Luther, John Bunyan, Abraham Lincoln, and Thomas Jefferson.

More than moderates in general, it is the white church that disappoints King. He reveals his painful experiences of rejection that resulted in his disillusionment with white Christianity. He deduces that, unlike the early church, the present church is "a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound." Appealing to its conscience, its sense of right and wrong, and to divine will, King challenges the church to participate actively and wholeheartedly in the historic African American freedom movement. The rhetoric of this section (like other parts of the letter) reflects King's roots in the tradition of African American preaching. Although it is a written document, the letter is quite similar in style to oral discourse: the use of repetition, stock phrases, affective language, and figurative language. King shows himself to be a master of oral technique. The figures of speech, the emotional tone, and the large number of concrete examples invite the reader to enter King's world and to participate in his vision.

In a final point of disagreement with the eight clergymen, King chides them for their naïve commendation of Birmingham police. According to King, the police should not be commended, because in spite of their restraint they had mistreated a number of men, women, and children during and after the demonstration. Instead of praising the police, King praises the brave demonstrators who endured ridicule, remained calm in the face of provocation, and in some cases suffered personal injury. As in earlier parts of the letter, King names specific persons who are worthy of the title heroes.

In conclusion, King apologizes for writing such a lengthy letter. He begs forgiveness from his critics if he has overstated his case and from God if he has understated it. Finally, King offers a brief word of conciliatory hope toward his opponents, reaching out the hand of friendship to his fellow ministers. His optimistic vision for the future, his trust in democracy, and his confidence in the indomitable character of his people are evident here and throughout the letter.

King's most remarkable rhetorical accomplishment in *Letter from Birmingham City Jail* is its effective tone. He consistently maintains an astonishing balance between measured restraint and constant pressure, between humility and boldness. His repeated references to his imprisonment and to the suffering of the African American community create in the reader a consciousness of injustice and deep sympathy for the marginalized.

However, King never appears to be seeking special treatment or pity; he asks only for justice and equality. He displays no air of superiority, but neither does he cower in fearful hesitancy. Imprisoned, he writes with the mood of a free man. Denounced, he responds with charity toward his detractors. Without status, he writes with statesmanlike moral authority. Finally, the letter reflects seasoned theological reflection, a fully developed philosophy, and a sophisticated understanding of social and political realities.

Lee Roy Martin

Further Reading

- Bass, S. Jonathan. *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: Martin Luther King, Jr., Eight White Religious Leaders, and the "Letter from Birmingham Jail."* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001. A complete history of the circumstances surrounding King's work in Birmingham and the circumstances surrounding his writing of the letter.
- Calloway-Thomas, Carolyn, and John Louis Lucaites, eds. *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Sermonic Power of Pub-*

lic Discourse. 1993. New ed. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005. Nine essays, varying in approach, study King's style of oral rhetoric and examine five of his most famous works. Part of the Studies in Rhetoric and Communication series.

- Colaiaico, James A. "The American Dream Unfulfilled: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the 'Letter from Birmingham Jail.'" *Phylon* 45, no. 1 (1984): 1-18. A thorough study of the letter, with primary emphasis on King's philosophical process and political strategy.
- Garrow, David J. *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.* 1989. Reprint. New York: Perennial Classics, 2004. A balanced biography of King that is based upon interviews, King's personal files, and Federal Bureau of Investigation transcripts. Reveals King's strengths, weaknesses, and philosophy of nonviolent direct action.
- King, Martin Luther, Jr. *Why We Can't Wait.* 1963. Reprint. New York: Signet Classic, 2000. King's account of the events in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. Includes *Letter from Birmingham City Jail*. Also includes a new afterword by the Reverend Jesse Jackson.
- Tiefenbrun, Susan. "Semiotics and Martin Luther King's 'Letter from Birmingham Jail.'" *Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature* 4, no. 2 (Autumn, 1992): 255-287. An advanced study that utilizes linguistic approaches. Tiefenbrun argues convincingly that King's primary rhetorical strategy is based on the semiotic principle of similarity and difference.

Letters from an American Farmer

Author: Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur (1735-1813)

First published: 1782

Type of work: Essays

When, in 1759, Voltaire published his *Candide: Ou, L'Optimisme* (*Candide: Or, All for the Best*, 1759), Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur was already planning to cultivate his garden hewn out of the Pennsylvania frontier. Like Voltaire's naïve hero, Crèvecoeur had seen too much of the horrors of the civilized world and was more than ready to retire to his bucolic paradise, where for nineteen years he

lived in peace and happiness until the civilized world intruded on him and his family with the outbreak of the American Revolution.

The twelve essays that make up his *Letters from an American Farmer* are, ostensibly at least, the product of a hand unfamiliar with the pen. The opening letter presents the central theme quite clearly: The decadence of European civilization

