The ink on the New York Times is still wet. Its deepest, most essential article still resounds as a clarion call for us today. Yet the article never found its way to publication in the Times; rather, it filled the paper’s margins through the ink of Martin Luther King’s pen as he sat huddled in a jail cell. Though directed to an audience of eight local clergymen, the epistle is not merely a defense of his street demonstration in Birmingham, nor is it simply a treatise on the civil rights movement of the 1960’s. King’s letter unflinchingly sounds as a discourse on the nature of mankind. In all of King’s allusions, imagery, and metaphors he unequivocally declared that, amidst mankind, we have no enemies except enmity itself. Such a call for repentance, from my standpoint, is as much a reflection of King’s character as it is his words.

**Historical Background**

In 1957, Reverend Fred L. Shuttlesworth warned, “Judgment is at hand for our native state of Alabama and our lovely city of Birmingham” (465). His blood was boiling as he addressed the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, and with no scant motives. “Police brutality, chicanery between count and city officials, injustice and abuse in all the city and state courts, … the firing of helpless people from their jobs, the abuse of Negroes on the buses, the bombings by Klansmen, and the beatings by mobsters in this state and city, and many others too numerous to mention” strikingly set the stage for King’s street demonstration within Birmingham in 1963 (465).

King drank from the wave of oppression scorned by Shuttlesworth, not only on the streets of Birmingham as a demonstrator, but even more during his imprisonment in the city jail, which came as the swift
result of his activism. In the confinement of the sweltering Birmingham Jail is where he received a public rebuke in a local newspaper from eight of his fellow clergymen within the white church.

The letter resonated the enmity of the Birmingham police department, referring to King’s demonstrations as “actions [that] incite… hatred and violence” (Carpenter 193). Yet in contrast to the violent malevolence of the police officers to the demonstrators, the clergymen create a calm, cooled statement concerning the racial tension. As with the anesthesia of a surgeon, the clergymen cover the gaping wounds of the oppressed with misleading pleas for a need for the public to “show restraint” and “remain calm” and wait for “honest and open negotiation” instead of heeding the “unwise and untimely” “extreme measures” of “outsiders,” all for the purpose of “unit[ing] locally in working peacefully for a better Birmingham” (Carpenter 193). Such calmness, in addition to praise for the “calm manner” in which the police department attacked the determined demonstrators, worked to the effect of decrying King’s efforts and abusing the public’s view on the scene. However, in doing so, both the subtle clergymen and the brutal police officers set the context for one of America’s greatest discourses on tolerance and love.

Analysis

“I feel that you are men of genuine good will and that your criticisms are reasonably set forth” King warmly assures the clergymen in his response (195). His brief introductory exposition to the Birmingham demonstrations is followed by an explosion of depth; he expands the Birmingham crisis by declaring that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” (196). He clearly detaches his remarks from a surface level discussion of the local incident and dives into the deeper confrontation governing the entire struggle, hence avoiding “the superficial kind of social analysis that deals merely with effects and does not grapple with underlying causes” (196). His allusions to higher, universal sources indicate the magnitude of his approach. He paints with the rhetoric and conviction of the founding fathers as he compares the Birmingham protest to the Boston Tea Party, lays claim to the bounties of Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence, refers to the Plymouth pilgrims and relies on Abraham Lincoln’s undivided call for freedom (200, 202, 204). He ties the contemporary oppression to the atrocities of Hitler, sanctions the logic of Socrates, and defends the ethics of T.S. Eliot (197,
Turning most emphatically to religious figures, he applauds the civil disobedience of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, vindicates Jesus’ extreme love, harnesses Amos’ extreme justice, calls upon the testimonies of St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and Martin Luther, commends the counsel of the Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, refers constantly to the early Christians and prophets, and highlights Christ’s death, in addition to fourteen references to God Himself (196-206). King’s mindset is clearly not confined to Alabama; he is working on a higher, universal struggle.

By weaving from the tapestry of strong figures in mankind’s history, King accomplishes multiple effects. First, he supersedes the clergymen’s authority with his towering references to God, Christ, ancient prophets and church fathers (196, 202, 206). In addition, he derails the inclination to concede to the clergymen’s apathetic inoculations when he relates Alabama’s integration to America’s revolution, Hitler’s war campaign, Martin Luther’s protest, and early Christian persecution (200, 202, 204). Third, his claims to Socrates, Jefferson, and Lincoln establish a political philosophy that contrasts with the instability of the rash array of injustices administered by the Birmingham law enforcement and judiciary (197, 202). Hence, King’s chorus of allusions appeals to religious ethos, historical pathos, and political logos, harmoniously elevating the reader’s conscientiousness to a higher realm of contemplation concerning Birmingham’s crisis.

In all of his allusions, he turns to the Apostle Paul three times. King’s statements are drenched in the concept of conflict, and his ideology most closely resembles Paul’s declaration to the Ephesians: “for we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places” (Holy Bible, Eph. 6.12).

Rich imagery reinforces the fact that King’s battle is not against flesh and blood: he and his followers ask themselves, “Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?” “Are you able to endure the ordeal of jail?” (197). With these questions ringing in their ears, they plunge into a torrent of “dogs sinking their teeth into unarmed, nonviolent Negroes,” policemen who “slap and kick old Negro men and young boys” and “curse, kick and even kill …black brothers and sisters” (198, 205). Why would King call for non-violent action in the face of such tension? It’s undoubtedly because the policemen never were the enemy for King.
In all his metaphors and similes, not one is targeted against another human being; they are all targeted towards concepts, spiritual concepts, even “spiritual wickedness in high places” (Holy Bible, Eph. 6.12). While King is quick to decry “the deep fog of misunderstanding” he never makes an attack on a police officer; while he emphatically deplores “the dark depths of prejudice and racism,” he still refers to a critic as “a white brother”; and while he condemns “the paralyzing chains of conformity,” “the dark clouds of racial prejudice,” “the disease of segregation” and “the stinging darts of segregation,” his passion flares for the cultivation of “the solid rock of human dignity” and “the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood” (197, 198, 200, 201, 204, 206). Clearly, his object of defense is not himself, nor is it merely the black community as a whole; he reaches out his arm in concern for America and humanity, and does so most unmistakably by teaching and loving those who perhaps are most at fault in this issue: members of the white church.

King is full of stern correction toward the white clergymen of the South, even to the point that one may even be led to believe that he feels hostility toward them. However, such concerns are instantly washed away as he confesses for the first and only time in the letter that he weeps over a group of people—which doesn’t happen to be the Negroes. “I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love. Yes, I love the church” (203). King “felt that the white ministers, priest, and rabbis of the South would be among [his] strongest allies”; yet to these who willingly refused to be his allies, King readily attested that he was “a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother” (203, 206). Even in his aloneness, he fought the temptation to hold enmity towards those who rejected him; King never saw his fellowman as antagonists—he saw antagonism itself as the only actual foe.

**Personal Reflection**

To me there is nothing hazy about this work. I am moved by the incredible beauty of his authenticity. I believe that his sincerity fuels the power of his prose; the fact that he is kneeling as a prisoner, possessing every right to condemn his critics signifies that his pleas for unity are undiluted by hypocrisy. What he says he lives,
what he pleads he breathes, and his articulacy in doing so is only supplementary, not essential to the greatness of this piece.

I feel that I know him and his goodness personally because of this piece. So many authors cloud their thoughts and personalities with masks of genre, pleas for popularity, and shaky stances on their own personas; but King draws me in and sets me in the jail cell right alongside him. However, it’s not the jail cell that I feel when I read this article, it’s the “bright hills of creative protest” and “the carved …tunnel of hope” that overrides his prisoner experience (203, 204). Such simple genuineness is not worthwhile simply because it is genuine, but rather, because it is genuinely uplifting, upright, and enlightening. In short, I love this piece because King’s character dominates every page, and it is his character that I find equally, if not more enlightening than his literary technique.

Rarely does a New York Times article call for so much passionate thought. Between the lines and in the margins, one can still hear the echoes of the screaming King heard in his jail cell—the cry to take up his enmity and fight. Even stronger than this voice, however, we hear King’s unparalleled response: we hear a voice of reason, a voice of ethics—a voice of uncompromising love. What makes King great in his call for all men to ascend to “the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood” is the fact that he’s already standing on such heights (197). This letter was written with more than just ink. It was written with his life.
Works Cited


