

Diversifying Syllabi 2016 Text Summary and Teaching Tips

SECTION ONE: to be completed by presenter

Article/Essay Title: The Sword That Heals

Author: Martin Luther King, Jr.

Readability: Easy/Moderate/Difficult

Thesis: As King explains, the essay is an attempt at exploring the psychological and social conditions that sparked and inspired the civil rights movement (what King refers to as the Revolution) and tries to offer a historical and philosophical analysis of how nonviolent direct action became the distinguishing feature of this movement.

Key Definitions:

Tokenism: A sign, a mark, an omen, a promissory note in place of meaningful change and used to obscure the persisting realities of the oppressed – “he who sells you the token instead of the coin always retains the power to revoke its worth, and to command that you get off the bus before you have reached your destination. Tokenism is a promise to pay. Democracy, in its finest sense, is payment.”

Brief Summary:

Part I.

a) No sudden loss of impatience: King opens by discussing the historical origins of the Civil Rights Movement. He notes that the beginning of the movement does not indicate a sudden loss of patience:

“The Negro had never really been patient in the pure sense of the word. The posture of silent waiting was forced upon him psychologically because he was shackled physically.”

In the days of slavery, this oppression was open, public, and legally sanctioned. Black uprisings were thus thwarted through use of sheer violence. With the end of slavery after the Civil War, however, new mechanisms and devices had to be created in order to facilitate the continued oppression and suppression of Black people. Accordingly, subtler means of discrimination and disenfranchisement were instituted, especially in the Northern states, which, as King puts it, approached in their ugliness and terror the brutality of open racism in the South. King writes:

“The result has been a demeanor that passed for patience in the eyes of the white man, but covered a powerful impatience in the heart of the Negro.”

b) All you have gotten is tokenism: King talks about how the demand for change is often met with perfunctory, meaningless gestures of reform, with empty promises, with local and minor revisions to laws whose broad implications affect large populations of people:

*“Those who argue in favor of tokenism point out that we must begin somewhere; that it is unwise to spurn any breakthrough, no matter how limited. This position has a certain validity, and the Negro freedom movement has more often than not attained broad victories with small beginnings. There is a critical distinction, however, between a modest start and tokenism. The tokenism Negroes condemn is recognizable because it is an **end in itself**. Its purpose is not to begin a process, but instead to end the process of protest and pressure. **It is a hypocritical gesture, not a constructive first step.**”*

King thinks this explains change has to be systemic and structural, or why a half loaf is no bread. Black Americans are unmindful of the progress that has been made since the days of slavery, of the visible gains made on different fronts across the country. But this is simply not enough!

*“If he is still saying, “Not enough,” it is because he does not feel that he should be **grateful** for the halting and inadequate attempts of his society to catch up with the basic rights he ought to have inherit **automatically**, centuries ago, by virtue of his membership in the human family and his American birthright.”*

Part II.

Brief history of activism in the late 19th and early-mid 20th century: King discusses the ideas of Booker T. Washington, W.E.B Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey. Booker T. Washington advocated contentment, Du Bois followership of the aristocratic elite, and Garvey mass exodus to Africa. None of whose ideas were truly viable or politically promising. After the Garvey movement disintegrated, advocating legal reform became the mean vehicle for activism. But the faith in litigation as the dominant venue for change and the sole of struggle soon dwindled.

“Is is an axiom of social change that no revolution can take place without a methodology suited to the circumstances of the period.”

During this time the Nation of Islam (“Black Muslims”) began to preach and urge a permanent separation of races. This call only won fractional support from the Black community, especially amongst those who were already criticizing the freedom movement for its lack of militancy. By and large, King thinks this tactic was also a failure. Lastly, there was the attempt to unify the Black community with the disadvantaged whites of the South, whose needs for social change in some ways paralleled Black Americans’. But, again, King thinks this was ineffectual because immediate change was more urgently needed and demanded in the Black community.

“As individuals, the Whites could better their situation without the barrier that society places in front of a man whose racial identification by color is inescapable. Moreover, the underprivileged southern whites saw the color that separated them from Negroes more clearly than they saw the circumstances that bound them together in mutual interest. Negroes were therefore forced to

face the fact that, in the South, they must move without allies; and yet the coiled power of state force made such a prospect appear both futile and quixotic.”

Part III.

The doctrine of nonviolence: Nonviolent direct action was sought as the way to supplement and expedite the process of change through legal action. The program was simple: act in concert with others, in the forms of sit-ins, boycotts, protests, and so on, to demand constitutionally guaranteed rights. This tactic drew inspiration from the Christian tradition and the nonviolent ethic of Mahatma Gandhi. King describes the brilliance of this strategy as follows:

“Like his predecessors, the Negro was willing to risk martyrdom in order to move and stir the social conscience of his community and the nation. Instead of submitting to surreptitious cruelty in thousands of dark jail cells and on countless shadowed street corners, he would force his oppressor to commit his brutality openly—in the light of day—with the rest of the world looking on.”

This strategy was successfully tested during the 1963 Birmingham campaign, where confrontations between Black students and white authorities were widely publicized and eventually led the municipal government to change the city’s discrimination laws. As King goes on to explain, Birmingham was an illustrious achievement for a couple of reasons. First, the movement comprised people from different backgrounds and did not discriminate on the basis of age or physical ability. Second, there was no caste of economic, social, or political rank, no pledge, no color distinction. Participation was entirely inclusive and open to almost anyone.

Possible Applications:

Race, political philosophy, intro
Moral psychology, emotion

Complementary Texts/Resources:

Literature on anger and the positive role negative emotions can play in facilitating social change.

- Amia Srinivasan’s *The Aptness of Anger*
- bell hooks, *Killing Rage*
- Malcolm X, *The Ballot or the Bullet*
- Myisha Cherry’s work on anger

- Martha Nussbaum's Locke lectures on anger and forgiveness

Implicit bias literature: King is talking about how oppression is no longer explicit in law, but still prevalent.

- Dan Kelly

Facts supplemented/ updated by Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*

Iris Marion Young's "From Guilt to Solidarity" to flesh out what collective action means, and her "Five Faces of Oppression" to discuss mechanisms of oppression beyond economic

Franz Fanon's work to make sense of patience/impatience thread

Robin DiAngelo "White Fragility" to discuss responsibility and solidarity

Lisa Tessman's *Burdened Virtues*

Possible Class Activities:

Listening to speeches, analyzing political strategies that complicate the traditional ideology attributed to King.

Schematization of the Argument, argument mapping

Compare BLM strategies and tactics with civil rights era tactics and their relationship with the police

Protest participation, optionally and respectfully

Assign documentaries *We Were Here*, *How to Survive a Plague* on AIDS activism

What traditional texts might this text replace?

Aristotle on Anger, Thoreau on Civil Disobedience