MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR’S “I’VE BEEN TO THE MOUNTAINTOP” SPEECH: A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF HIS EFFORTS TO MOTIVATE HIS AUDIENCE AND TO RE-ESTABLISH HIS LEADERSHIP IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

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An Independent Study Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Course Requirements for Senior Independent Study: The Department of Communication

March 13, 2015

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s rhetorical motives behind his final speech, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.” King faced opposition towards his leadership and his civil disobedience method due to failed events prior to the oration. His goals for his delivery of the “Mountaintop” speech included reinstating his leadership as well as reinvigorating his nonviolent approach in the Civil Rights Movement in Memphis. I employed a cluster agon analysis, which is a branch of dramatism, to the speech. This Burkean method of analysis involved the examination of “God” and “Devil” terms and how they conveyed the ultimate ideal message King wanted his audience in Memphis and beyond to follow as well as the ultimate evil message King wanted them to avoid. King offered his audience of sanitation workers as well as others involved with the Civil Rights Movement a choice of whether to accept his message or not, while using his rhetorical discourse to eliminate division among the audience and convince them to go in the direction of nonviolent demonstration for civil and economic rights. This study helps uncover how “God” and “Devil” terms help speakers persuade their audience to take action.

Key Words: cluster criticism, cluster agon analysis, Martin Luther King, Jr., “God” and “Devil” terms, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” motive, Civil Rights Movement, injustice, unification
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I must begin with thanking my mother, father, sister, grandmother, teammates, and all my close friends who have supported me with their consistent love and encouragement while writing.

Thank you to Ms. Gillian Lee and the rest of The College of Wooster Writing Center, it was a privilege working with all of you. Without the knowledge of your experienced tutors, I would not be writing as well as I am now.

And I acknowledge The College of Wooster graduates who have went through this process; reading over your work inspired me to create mine.

Finally, I must thank my advisor, Dr. Denise Bostdorff, and the rest of The College of Wooster Communication Studies Department for providing myself, along with the other students, this wonderful opportunity to work side by side with you all while you guide us through to graduation from The College of Wooster.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

When Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke during the Civil Rights Movement, he desired peaceful approaches towards racial equality; however, as time went on, protestors became impatient and began to resort to violence. Other civil rights leaders began to advocate harm in their rhetoric. In this study, I am interested in how King combatted strong opposition, when hope faded for a peaceful Civil Rights Movement, with his rhetorical messages of love, harmony, peace, and equality. One goal of this study is to examine how one of the most famous orators in history conveyed these messages to the various audiences of the Civil Rights Movement in his final speech, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.” Chapter I will highlight the purpose of this study, contributes rationales for the analysis of the speech, defines the required terms for the study, and explains the method of analysis.

Purpose

Through the rhetorical method of dramatistic cluster criticism, this study analyzes how King used “God” and “Devil” terms to motivate his audience and legitimize his leadership as well as his nonviolent approach in Memphis and beyond during his final speech. Recent racially fueled events such as the Ferguson riots as well as the latest proposition of the Texas State Voter ID bill emphasize how the reforms of racial equality King fought for are still sources of contention. The main goal of this qualitative study is to shed new light on the meaning of King’s final speech, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.”

Rationales

This study of King’s “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech is significant for three reasons. The first rationale highlights how past research has not examined this speech through
cluster criticism, a rhetorical method that may provide us insight into the motives King offered during a difficult time in the Civil Rights Movement. In the past, Thomas Rosteck and Bethany Keely studied this speech using narrative criticism, focusing on themes in speech (Keely; Rosteck). Some of the themes in King’s final speech include, but are not limited to; unity, nonviolence, religion, redemption, and the overcoming of obstacles. Christopher Lynch focused on how rhetorical form and message contributed to storytelling in the “Mountaintop” speech (Lynch 16). None of these scholars, however, explained how “God” and “Devil” terms played a role in the meaning of the speech, which is the objective of cluster criticism.

This study is also important because it will teach listeners how to break down and analyze speeches for themselves. My second rationale for this case study is that it might provide deeper awareness to the discourse of a highly skilled orator who others might learn from for their own rhetoric. To be an effective speaker, one can study strategies from previous speeches to apply those skills to their own rhetorical speeches. This study aids future speakers to prepare to use their own “God” and “Devil” terms effectively. When upcoming leaders identify the form of the speech, they organize what they heard and analyze what the studied speaker delivered critically. In essence, the future speakers will distinguish what tactics the orator uses in his or her speech. The more speakers who know about rhetorical strategies such as “God” and “Devil” terms, the better they can utilize the terms to convey messages in their own speeches.

Along with the impact messages have on future rhetoricians, it is also important to understand King’s message in the “Mountaintop” speech. My third rationale for this study is that King’s messages on civil rights are still relevant today. King’s goal to obtain comprehensive equal rights for African-Americans through nonviolent, direct action still applies in current situations, such as the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and the ‘Walmart’
shooting of John Crawford III in Cincinnati, Ohio. The protests within the communities these young men belonged to contrasted significantly. On the talk show program, *Democracy NOW!*, Amy Goodman and Juan González interviewed Rashad Robinson, executive director of Color of Change, who highlighted the similarities between these cases and stated both cases relate to protests for social justice and civil rights (Goodman and González). The difference he noted between the two was how one protest resorted to violence and another employed a peaceful demonstration. These shootings highlighted the need for the continued discussion for civil rights as well as King’s message in the “Mountaintop” speech.

**Definitions**

Three terms must be defined for readers to understand this study. First, Burke defined the term *rhetoric* as language used to create different attitudes and inspire action in an audience (Foss 63). When orators use rhetoric for this purpose, they need to have structure, so the audience will have the ability to grasp the overall message of the speech they present. Daughton and Hart define structure as “the apportionment and sequencing of message elements” (103). Structure is vital to my study because many of King’s speeches, mainly his “Mountaintop” speech, involved a sequence of events for the reader or listener to anticipate what the next part is (Holland 354). The “Mountaintop” speech can be ruled as a problem-solution sequence. According to Daughton and Hart, this sequence is when the speaker’s rhetorical function is to support specific actions needed to solve problems (109). An advantage of this sequence is how it helps establish a common ground within the audience, especially if both the rhetor and the listeners are attempting to overcome the same obstacles. In his “Mountaintop” address, King and the audience tried to obtain better working conditions for the sanitation employees in Memphis, Tennessee. They also fought for complete racial equality. I will analyze how King used structure
to keep the audience following a systematized storyline that led to maintaining a peaceful Civil Rights Movement.

King structured his speeches so the listener respected and understood the oration further. King constructed his “Mountaintop” speech with the epic narrative elements necessary for the audience to respond appropriately. The elements included identity, patience, self-sacrifice, The Promised Land, and hope (Keely 283). If an orator structures a speech with effective rhetoric, then the audience will understand and take in the significance of the message. Rhetoric is a type of communication that can help an orator address a problem and provide solutions.

Speakers can define a problem and specify the solutions for the problem through the use of “God” and “Devil” terms, which are also known as ultimate terms. “God” and “Devil” terms are ambiguous, efficient, hierarchial, anticipatory, and they are always interchangeable in meaning (Daughton and Hart 155-56). Ultimate terms are abstract, meaning they “refer to ideas rather than objects” (155). This way, different rhetorical theorists can study these terms and assign different meanings. Ultimate terms can be used for their original purpose or they can exaggerate the circumstances. This displays how ultimate terms have unstable or interchangeable connotations. They can “change in meaning from age to age, from topic to topic but their form never does” (156). Daughton and Hart used the term equality to explain. From one time period to the next, equality has meant “different things to different people at different times in U.S. history” (156). During the Revolutionary War, equality meant colonists were deemed free of British control and were granted independence, yet African-Americans remained enslaved. In the late 19th and mid-20th century, equality meant everyone possessed the same rights and access to services, yet the facilities were separate and worse for African-Americans. Daughton and Hart’s use of equality displayed ultimate terms as efficient. The word efficient means accomplishing a
task with the smallest but most effective amount of resources. Daughton and Hart further demonstrated the efficiency of ultimate terms when they used the example pig as a “Devil” term, because it can inflict many strong emotions (155). The term pig, in the sixties, defined the police as “filthy” when they abused their power and used unethical practices upon many civil rights activists, including King (155).

Ultimate terms are also hierarchial, which is why they are called ultimate. They are terms that are at the pinnacle of society’s values and subvert all lesser terms (156). Ultimate terms are used to make a rival case small or unimportant, while building up the rhetor’s case at the same time. This leads to anticipation of what reforms can come from the orator’s use of these terms, which make ultimate terms pre-emptive, where they allow a speaker “to carve out rhetorical territory then seal it off from others” (156). This means that listeners can take away what an orator preaches due to the use of ultimate terms, depending on whether a speaker uses “God” or “Devil” terms to convey the message. This helps speakers deliver their message, cut it off, and provide the audience with a sole outlet leading them to the speaker’s direction.

Ultimate terms form a consistent message among the audience, and the orator can exchange words throughout the speech to provide effect. The rhetor uses words that are attached to a similar meaning that is clustered towards the direction of the message provided. These are labeled ultimate terms because “Devil” terms embody the ultimate evil, whereas “God” terms characterize the ultimate ideal for an orator (Foss 67). Rhetors may use “God” and “Devil” terms to group words together under one category (Ronis 4). According to Ronis, “Burke uses the phrase ‘god-term’ to refer to a word or phrase that has the power to subordinate and thus color all other terms that follow as part of its linguistic routine” (1). For example, if I make “success” a “God” term, then words such as freedom, graduation, and winning must somehow relate or build
up to the concept of “success.” It is the same with “Devil” terms. If “sin” is the “Devil” term, words that will be categorized or lead up to the concept of “sin” may include adultery, lust, theft, and murder.

**Description of Method**

I apply the rhetorical method of cluster criticism, which is a branch of Burkean dramatistic criticism, in this study. According to Foss, cluster criticism examines what key terms structure drama, the speaker’s motive, discourse and how meaning is assigned to the terms (83). The key terms on which my study will focus are known as “God” and “Devil” terms. These terms allow me to analyze the text of “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” centering my attention on how King created meaning around key terms to motivate his audience to keep pushing the Civil Rights Movement forward.

**Conclusion**

As the Civil Rights Movement progressed, the method activists used to obtain equality turned from peaceful to violent. Rival leaders of King, such as Stokely Carmichael, became agitated and advocated violent methods as well as encourage separatism from whites. To combat this, through King’s final speech, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” King attempted to find a way to encourage members of his audience in Memphis to get the movement back on a nonviolent path. In this chapter, I examined the “Mountaintop” speech through the rhetorical method of cluster criticism, and have provided a brief description of the method. I chose this method because it has not been applied to the “Mountaintop” speech before my study. The intent of this study is to make sure speakers and listeners are aware of the tactics King used in his “Mountaintop” speech, so they can critique his use of “God” and “Devil” terms and perhaps
emulate this strategy in their own speeches. In Chapter II, I will move to the literature review to further explore the context of the entire Civil Rights Movement.
CHAPTER II:
LITERATURE REVIEW

My literature review will encompass the Burkean theory of Dramatism, the rhetorical branch on which cluster criticism is based. Prior to embarking on the cluster analysis, my readers must understand the comprehensive history of The Civil Rights Movement, as well as the obstacles which impeded audience agreement with the orator. I will also discuss Martin Luther King, Jr. and the past research on his rhetoric, as well as introduce King’s final speech prior to his assassination, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” and past research on that speech.

Dramatism

Burkean Dramatism is the theoretical perspective of my study. In the following, I explain the assumptions of Dramatism and then discuss two concepts important to this study: Ultimate terms and identification.

Assumptions of Dramatism

When Burke explained the main principles of Dramatism, he discussed rhetoric and how it functions similar to drama. Humans use rhetoric to create meaning in the world because humans are symbol-using beings (Burke, Language as a Symbolic Action, 53). Symbols begin relationships with others, as well as influence the social world (Hauser 206). A dramatistic approach to oratory allows us to comprehend the broad range of rhetoric. Burke examined all forms of discourse because all messages can be rhetorical (Daughton and Hart 263). According to Hauser, due to symbolic language, humans create images; without symbolic language, humans are no different from any other animal (204). With symbols, humans create rhetoric every time they speak. While rhetoric is present everywhere, Burke also thought drama is present wherever a mass gathering occurs. Burke assumed all life is considered drama; therefore, rhetoric provides
drama (Daughton and Hart 265). To clarify this assumption, to be a successful orator, one must use rhetoric as a course of dramatic action.

A main assumption of Dramatism states motives are always present in rhetoric because a rhetor’s description of a situation encourages the audience to act accordingly. To engage in a Burkean analysis of a speech, a critic must delve into the orator’s vocabulary of motives, which is defined as the rationalization of actions through discourse (Daughton and Hart 266). According to Burke, “our words for motive are…words for situation” (qtd. in Bost dorff 14). Burke meant that motives explain and display why a rhetorical situation occurred, meaning they help the critic understand the situation. Burke also noted how a speaker’s discourse can clarify the “strategy the rhetor has taken to deal with the situation” (Bost dorff 16). Not only do motives explain why the situation occurred, but also how the rhetor used motives to solve the problem. For example, occasionally on the news we see a mother or father shoplifting toys or food for a holiday from a department store. Initially, when we hear about this, we may think this parent is lazy and simply steals for their child’s benefit (or even themselves) without working or paying for the goods. When we hear the reasoning of the shoplifter, which is that he or she does not have the finances to buy the food or toys, as viewers of the speaker or rhetorical actor we feel sympathetic. While we do not condone the parent’s actions because he or she disobeyed the law, we still understand the motive behind his or her situation. The parent shoplifted to try to make amends for the lack of money to buy food and toys for his or her children for the respective holiday. The shoplifting parent is representative of the Burkean statement that terms for a situation are equated with terms for motive. The choices orators make portray their motive for the rhetorical situation they address.
The choices the speaker makes are relevant to a secondary assumption of Dramatism: hierarchy is vital to the human creation of symbolism and imagery. According to Hauser, a use of symbolism involves organization, which initiates hierarchy (Hauser 205). Human symbol-users organize the world into hierarchies, where they are driven to move toward what is considered to be the ultimate good or ultimate evil (Daughton and Hart 268). The message can encourage the audience to move in favor of the positives or the negatives based on what the orator tries to convey. In the “Mountaintop” speech, King incorporated audience encouragement to “rise up tonight with a greater readiness…stand with a greater determination…move on in these powerful days, these days of challenge to make America what it ought to be. We have an opportunity to make America a better nation. And I want to thank God, once more, for allowing me to be here with you” (King, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop”). In this section of the speech, King urged his audience to take the ever-present opportunity to improve America not only for African-Americans, but also for all citizens. He used strong ultimate terms such as “rise up,” “stand,” “move,” and “opportunity” to pass the initiative on to the audience.

**Ultimate Terms**

According to Burke and his theory of Dramatism, when humans speak, they act out rhetorical symbols verbally (qtd. in Holland 352). Sometimes, these symbols take the form of ultimate terms, or “God” and “Devil” terms. For instance, “terrorism and security are key terms, with terrorism a devil term and security a god term” (67). The orator will categorize multiple terms to provide the audience with a pattern of messages the audience will take to stay safe and secure. The speaker will also associate various terms to create a pattern of messages that condemn terrorism and showcase it as an evil. If audience members identify with the rhetor’s
ideal world view, they will not likely question the rhetor’s use of ultimate terms, which are powerful symbols which contribute to meaning making.

Rhetors construct different views of the world with ultimate terms. Through the use of “God” and “Devil” terms, orators apply symbols to influence and encourage an audience to view the world from the speaker’s rhetorical perspective. “God” and “Devil” terms make the message persuasive, as well as reflect the rhetor’s vocabulary of motives (Burke, *Grammar of Motives* 109; Hauser 215) When rhetors urge their listeners to follow their path or challenge them to take the rhetor’s desired course of action for their audience, they provide their audience with motives for action. For example, a speaker could argue for their audience to be selfless as well as avoid greed. How orators incite their audience to identify with their speech depends on how they employ ultimate terms.

**Identification**

If a rhetor can encourage his or her audience to identify with the message, then the rhetor can persuade the audience successfully. According to Burke, identification and persuasion are equivalent to consubstantiality, “to describe this association, as two entities are united in substance through common ideas, attitudes, material possessions, or other properties, they are consubstantial” (qtd. in Foss 63). Burke argued even though division in an audience is present, it can be overcome through identification, persuasion, and consubstantiality (Burke, *Grammar of Motives*, 109). If the speaker who delivered the rhetoric conveyed his or her message, the rhetoric could unify the audience while addressing the specific issue (Hauser 214). Identification is important to my analysis of the “Mountaintop” speech because I will examine how King attempted to unite the audience of the Civil Rights Movement, although divided on the best approach to civil rights, through the use of ultimate terms that encouraged them to identify with
his leadership. To portray a message to the whole audience, a rhetor must have the ability to use ultimate terms not only to provide motives but also to encourage identification with the audience.

Ultimate terms work together to present a particular version of reality. Some audience members identify with the orator, while others do not. Both ultimate terms and identification promote the motive for the audience to take a rhetor’s course of action. Ultimate terms are the language that passes the initiative to the audience to identify his or her message and either follow or ignore. For example, if the speaker uses ultimate terms to promote violence, the listener may identify the message as a violent course of action and will therefore have motive to ignore the speech’s message. Ultimate terms and identification not only played a major role in King’s “Mountaintop” speech, but also played a major role in the entire Civil Rights Movement. In my next section, I will discuss the historical background of the Civil Rights Movement to provide context to what became King’s final speech on April 3, 1968, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.”

Civil Rights Movement

To qualify as a social movement, a movement must be an uninstitutionalized yet organized association that is large in scale, must “promote or oppose change in societal norms and values,” face opposition, and attempt to persuade (Stewart, Smith, and Denton 25). In the fifties and sixties, African-Americans were displeased with the unfair treatment they received from the majority-ruled white United States. They expressed dissatisfaction with white-enforced policies such as unequal access to both public and private facilities, restrictions on the right to vote, and unreasonable pay as well as poor working conditions (Schloeder 153, 154). The frustration with the lack of civil rights for African Americans led to “a powerful social movement sparked by the [chemistry] of civil rights activists…and black and white radicals” (Hall 1245).
The Civil Rights Movement was the main social movement of the fifties and sixties. Rustin stated the Civil Rights Movement began with the *1954 Brown vs. Board of Education* decision. Multiple civil rights protests and demonstrations followed the *Brown* case in various cities with racial issues, and continued through the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (111). For years, the Civil Rights Movement has been identified as the reaction African-Americans had towards segregation, institutional racism, and racial inequality. Those who fought for civil rights, including the young and old as well as black and white, were discontented with the racial atmosphere. Altogether, the Civil Rights Movement engulfed every aspect of African-American political, economical, educational, and social life in the United States of America (Joseph 1003).

In my section on the Civil Rights Movement, I examine “Jim Crow,” the chronological time frame of the movement, the key events that shaped the Civil Rights Movement, as well as the persuasive challenges that movement leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., faced.

**“Jim Crow” Laws**

The Civil Rights Movement of 1954-1968 faced a number of challenges. Some of the problems addressed included the multiple segregation laws of “Jim Crow.” After slavery became abolished and reconstruction failed, the South implemented laws to separate African-Americans and whites completely, “Jim Crow” laws. In this section, I will discuss the origins of “Jim Crow” and the meaning of segregation, as well as the implementation of “Jim Crow” in daily life.

Segregationists established “Jim Crow” laws a few years after The Civil War because animosity still lingered from whites towards African-Americans. Due to “Jim Crow” laws, racial subordination continued in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th century. Initially, segregationist authorities designed “Jim Crow” to prevent racial discrimination on railroads.
While “Jim Crow” did ensure that everyone received equal treatment, it still enforced separate rail cars for both whites and African-Americans (Folmsbee 245). Authorities in charge of transportation services enforced early segregation on trains. According to Smythe, “Jim Crow” identified African-Americans as second-class in the American system (46) Essentially, African-American citizens were at the bottom of the social hierarchy in 20th century America. Law enforcement officials and authority figures across America, mostly in the South, implemented “Jim Crow.” Sandoval-Strauz defined “Jim Crow” as “legally mandated racial separation” (56) that had to be carried out at all costs.

Society implemented “Jim Crow” throughout daily life during the early 20th century, including its presence in the American government. During President Woodrow Wilson’s presidency, Wilson “pushed to institutionalize segregation within the federal service” (O’Reilly 117). President Wilson wanted to make segregation legal, which required complete separation of facilities for both races officially. He viewed segregation as rational and scientific. Wilson and his Cabinet were in full favor of country-wide segregation. Comprehensive segregation included segregation in all public accomodations, such as “hotels, trains, restaurants, steamboats, theaters, buses, motels…” (Sandoval-Strauz 53). Segregation also controlled public restrooms as well as neighborhoods. According to Wynes, cities and towns had the power to assign certain districts as “white” or “colored” neighborhoods depending on the percentage of residents in the area (418). The classification of American neighborhoods spurned de facto segregation, which meant segregation was not written on paper, but whites enforced racial separation socially. “Jim Crow” created a plantation mentality, which reminded African-Americans of their subordination to the white man during slavery (Hall 1240). The plantation mentality was the view African-Americans had towards their place in society during the 19th century. They viewed their situation as
comparable to slavery due to “Jim Crow” that kept them below whites. While white citizens did not have to follow segregation code, African-American citizens were. If a white man sat in a train car in Louisiana designated for African-Americans, no one said anything, whereas Homer Plessy was arrested for sitting in a train car for white passengers because he contained a small percentage of African-American blood. The plantation mentality prevented African-Americans from access to decent jobs, schools, and houses, which created an economic class system based on race.

“Jim Crow” reinforced a widespread racial divide in America, in the South primarily. “Jim Crow” survived because officials as well as other citizens of America turned a blind eye towards the segregationist Southern laws, which permitted the South to extend the divide between African-Americans and whites further. “Jim Crow” was a set of unwritten social laws, which Sandoval-Strauz defined as “a state power in the service of racism, an unholy alliance which is only defeated by protests against an overreaching state and in favor of formal legal equality” (93). The issues with “Jim Crow” led to an urge from African-American civil rights activists to form legal, racial equality.

Chronology of the Civil Rights Movement

While African-Americans made efforts toward civil rights in America since the Civil War, one can argue the Civil Rights Movement for the twentieth century began with The 1954 Supreme Court Decision Brown vs Board of Education Topeka. Then, the Civil Rights Movement broke open with Rosa Parks not giving up her seat on the bus in Montgomery in 1955 (Hall 1234; Hon 167). The Civil Rights Movement eventually led to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, “enacted by Congress to protect the negroes in the enjoyment of those rights which are generally conceded to be fundamental and inherent in every free man”
The Civil Rights Movement then declined in pace after Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination on April 4th, 1968, after his “Mountaintop” speech he delivered on the evening of April 3rd (Hon 167).

**1896 Plessy vs. Ferguson.** Homer Plessy was “arrested in Louisiana where he had violated the state law requiring separate accommodations for the races in intrastate travel” (Bernstein 197). The Louisiana law enforced separate train cars for African-Americans and whites on the railroad as well as other facilities. Even though Plessy was only part African-American, he still had to sit in the train car designated for African-American passengers. Since the state court rejected the case, Plessy took the case to the Supreme Court. When the authorities forced him to sit in an assigned train car, Plessy claimed they violated the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery and involuntary servitude, and deemed the Louisiana state law unconstitutional. Plessy further explained how the law of separate accommodations of the train cars justified the state to “require separate cars to be provided for certain hair color, aliens, certain nationalities, or to enact laws requiring the colored to walk on one side of the street and white people on the other, or requiring whites’ houses to be painted white and the colored black…” (‘Plessy vs Ferguson’).

Plessy then argued if the state had the power to segregate one aspect of life, it had the power to establish segregation everywhere. His argument concluded that the government could not segregate everything, so segregation should be outlawed. The Supreme Court justices did not agree with Plessy, and stated “state laws requiring racial segregation did not constitute a violation of civil and political rights” (Bernstein 199). The Supreme Court justices warranted their ruling when they stated segregation followed the cultural norms of society, which made the Louisiana state law reasonable. This means the laws and courts cannot eliminate natural actions of people.
of a different racial background. Ironically, even though the Supreme Court’s ruled separate train cars as constitutional as long as there were “separate but equal” facilities in *Plessy vs Ferguson*, it created political inequality. Eventually, in 1954, The Supreme Court overturned *Plessy vs Ferguson*, and the fight for civil rights commenced (Boozer 1).

**1954 Supreme Court Decision Brown vs Board of Education.** The 1954 Supreme Court Case *Brown vs Board of Education Topeka* arguably sparked the battle to end segregation and racial discrimination in America. African-Americans attended schools of lower quality than whites. The Brown case exposed the inequality of the schools in regards to academics and resources, such as old textbooks, due to the racially divided districts (Boozer 1). According to Fairclough, the Brown case represented “the momentous decision whereby the U.S. Supreme court turned its back on the ‘separate but equal’ principle and declared segregated public schools unconstitutional” (Fairclough 417). The *Brown* decision created a rhetorical position that made sure no one defended segregation in schools anywhere in the United States (Frank and McPhail 213). Although the *Brown* case established segregation as unconstitutional in schools eventually, the feelings towards African-Americans remained. Segregation was prevalent in other aspects of society, such as restaurants, religious institutions, and the busing systems (Sandoval-Strauz 53).

If African-American citizens sought for civil rights reforms in all facilities, they had to fight for them, which broke open the Civil Rights Movement protests.

**Mississippi: The Murder of Emmett Till, 1955.** Arguably, the most violent occurrences happened in Mississippi. New York City’s Communist newspaper, *The Daily Worker*, even referred to Mississippi as the “State of Terror” due to how it dealt with the race issues (Grindy 40). Some segregationist Mississippian murdered African-Americans. One African-American murder victim named Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old from Chicago, visited his uncle Moses
Wright and family for the first time in Mississippi, near the Tallahatchie River in August of 1955 (Grindy 39). Mississippi was not comparable to Chicago; one could not get away with acts that touched off the racist nerves of others. Till made a deadly mistake when he flirted with a white woman, a strong breach in racial etiquette down in a Mississippi area where society already had zero tolerance towards African-Americans. According to Grindy, Till flirted with a grocery store owner’s wife. She stated Till grabbed her, tried to seduce her, and told her he had been with other white girls and needed to be restrained (Grindy 41). His friends recalled the event as a dare to talk to the white woman and that he only said “by baby” as he left the store with his purchase of bubble gum (Goldsby 249). News of the incident spread across the small town fast, and eventually, the store owner, Roy Bryant, received word as well. Bryant became angry when he found out what happened and called his half brother, J.W. Milam, to get revenge on Till (250).

First, Bryant and Milam kidnapped Till at gunpoint at the home of Moses Wright. Second, Bryant and Milam drove Till to a shed in a nearby county, bludgeoned Till and shot him, then loaded Till back in their truck and took him to the Tallahatchie River (Goldsby 250). When they got to the river, Till was dead, his body disfigured. Bryant and Milam then tied Till to a heavy cotton gin and wrapped him in barbed wire and tossed him into the river, where a fisherman discovered his body several days later (Breed 292). Bryant and Milam both claimed to commit the gruesome murder alone to make an example of Till and preserve the honor of white womanhood, as well as uphold white power in Mississippi (Grindy 42). New evidence, however, has suggested many others in the Mississippi town were involved in Till’s murder as well. In the documentary, The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till: New Documentary Uncovers Evidence in 1955 Murder, Amy Goodman interviewed Mamie Till Mobley (Emmett’s mother), Reverand Al Sharpton, and Keith Beauchamp, the producer and director of the documentary. When Goodman
interviewed Beauchamp in the documentary, she asked him about the new evidence in Till’s murder. Beauchamp answered, “up to 14 people [were] involved with the kidnapping and murder of Emmett Louis Till. Five of these people were black. They were employees to J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant, and we believe they were forced to participate” (qtd. in Goodman and González). Beauchamp uncovered evidence that showed how this was a collective effort to commit Till’s murder. The justification of a ferocious atrocity committed by one human being towards another explained how Mississippi was the state of terror adequately. Mamie Till was appalled someone could ever murder someone similar to how Bryant and Willam murdered her son (43).

Till’s mother, upon hearing the news of her son’s murder, demanded him to be delivered back to her in Chicago. When she witnessed the body, she was mortified. Mamie Till then wanted everyone to see the body so they could understand how bad racism is and what its acts can do to another human being (Grindy 43). Mamie Till’s desire to publicize the death of her son to the media ignited the aspirations of other African-Americans to expel racism and segregation completely. After newspapers published Till’s body in its casket, tens of thousands packed the streets of multiple major cities such as Chicago, New York, and Detroit to express their anger towards the situation (Goldsby 254). The murder of Emmett Till arguably sparked the Civil Rights Movement further. After Till’s death, more demonstrations against racism and discrimination took place, such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955.

**The Montgomery Bus Boycott, Alabama, 1955.** The Civil Rights Movement involved multiple types of protests. Examples of protests included sit-ins, strikes, and boycotts. In Montgomery, citizens became annoyed with segregation and unequal treatment on the bus because of their race. The MIA (Montgomery Improvement Association), which Martin Luther King, Jr. spearheaded, led the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955. The MIA formed when the bus
boycott began due to Rosa Parks’ arrest (Hon 169). Prior to her arrest, Rosa Parks attended the Highlander Folk School, a Tennessee social justice center responsible for training civil rights activists. The trainers there taught Parks to say “I’m tired” when refusing to give up her seat on the bus to a white passenger (Theoharis 129). Because of Parks’ arrest, King and other ministers convinced their congregational members to use an alternative way to travel. They decided to begin the boycott on December 1st, 1955 (Owens 5).

Unfortunately, the Montgomery Bus Boycott placed stress on the African-American community as people worked together to establish a carpool system. The boycott led to numerous arrests; “At the end of January, police began ticketing and arresting the drivers of vehicles that were part of the car pool that enabled the bus boycotters to get to work” (Barkan 555). The city of Montgomery used arrests to counteract the boycott and discourage the protestors from taking part in the demonstration. The difficulty of finding replacements for arrested carpool drivers presented a major obstacle. Also, the MIA spent money fast, and found it difficult for them to maintain morale in the Montgomery community (Selby 73). Nevertheless, the boycott of the bussing system began to take its economic toll on the city. As negotiations stalled, both Montgomery and the bus company lost money, and there almost no one rode the buses. The longer the boycott continued, the more national attention it received. The boycott put a lot of pressure on the bus company administration, and they negotiated with the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and the MIA. The Montgomery Bus Boycott ended officially after 381 days on December 20th, 1956 (Wright 123).

“Little Rock Nine,” Arkansas, September 1957. Less than a year after the Montgomery Bus Boycott ended, Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas was supposed to be the first integrated school in the country; however, white supremacists convinced Governor Orval E.
Faubus to halt the desegregation of schools, which caused a racial catastrophe (Handlin 44). It was easy to convince Faubus to cooperate because Faubus already desired to keep segregation in Arkansas schools; “During his renomination campaign, Faubus pledged that ‘no school board will forced to mix races in schools when I am governor’” (Bartley 120). President Dwight D. Eisenhower understood that Deep-South segregationists controlled Arkansas, so Eisenhower met with Faubus to discuss providing the Arkansas National Guard to ease the integration, because Little Rock police had little to no experience and had not received training for riot conditions; therefore, the local police could not control a mob (116).

On September 2nd, 1957, Faubus challenged the Eisenhower administration openly and defied local, state, and federal courts when he sent the Arkansas National Guard to support the Arkansas segregationists and prevent the integration of Central High School (Kirk, “The 1957 Little Rock Crisis,” 91). When nine black students, known as the “Little Rock Nine,” arrived at Central High School in Little Rock, a violent riot broke out, which forced the school officials to keep the students off school grounds for their safety (“The Little Rock Crisis,” 92). President Eisenhower delivered a speech on September 23rd, which condemned Faubus and the Arkansas state administration for creating calamity as well as defying the federal court system intentionally (Eisenhower). On September 24th, 1957, Eisenhower dispatched federal troops to permit the “Little Rock Nine” to enter Central High School. The incident drew criticism both from those who thought the federal government should stay out of “state” business and out of civil rights, as well as increased disapproval from those who thought Eisenhower did not do enough to resolve the racial crisis. Bartley argued either way, the local, state, and federal government delayed their responses to the Little Rock situation too long and the amount of chaos in Little Rock would have been averted with careful planning as well as prompt leadership (124).
At the same time the battle to integrate schools took place, so did the struggle to earn the right to vote.

*Albany, Georgia, 1961.* Students protested for the right to vote in Albany, under the leadership of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), but the civil rights leaders from the NAACP often saw members of the SNCC as troublemakers. After Martin Luther King, Jr. arrived, the NAACP gave more public attention to the protests. The major civil rights organization King helped lead, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) made voter registration of African-Americans one of its top priorities (Hon 179).

Along with the voter registration drive, Albany tried to promote nonviolent action in the demonstration. Tension rose in Albany, but the event appeared to avoid violence because of the Chief of Police, Laurie Pritchett (180). Pritchett arrested the student protestors and then released them, rather than using force. Pritchett’s civil arrests made King and the SCLC appear to cause more trouble than reform, because Pritchett showed he could employ nonviolence as effectively as the civil rights protests. Out of frustration with the lack of progress in Albany, people began to throw rocks and bottles at the police and National Guard, in violation of King’s strategy of nonviolence (Adelman and Johnson, *Remembering Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 63). The voter registration drive was unsuccessful because King’s supporters became impatient due to the failure to achieve reforms through nonviolent action, and Pritchett appeared successful because he and his crew carried out arrests without harm. Even though Albany repealed segregation as a law as a result of the voter registration drive, King knew some would still discriminate and create de facto segregation in Albany facilities (Hon 180). The SCLC members sought to learn from their mistakes in Albany and gain insight on how to improve their next civil rights protest.
The events that quickened the pace of The Civil Rights Movement included the Birmingham protests, Kennedy’s civil rights morality speech of 1963, the murder of Medgar Evers, the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, and the Birmingham church bombings.

**Birmingham, Alabama.** The increase in civil rights protests caused an increased urgency in the Civil Rights Movement. King, the SCLC, and other civil rights organizations invited citizens to participate in protests such as sit-ins, picketing, and marches in Birmingham, Alabama. These methods of peaceful protests intended to demonstrate patience and not cause any harm while demonstrating for civil rights. Peaceful protest rested on the concept that white authorities could either grant activists their civil rights or negotiate. Birmingham, however, was arguably the most segregated and violent city involved in the Civil Rights Movement (Hon 181; Joiner 7). Obstacles that faced the Birmingham campaign included police intimidation, activist skepticism amongst civil rights organizations, and the complications of arranging transportation (Fairclough 437). The police chief of Birmingham, Eugence “Bull” Connor showed no mercy to the protestors. He ordered his police squad to unleash police dogs, beat demonstrators, and use fire hoses upon the marching African-American men, women, and children. As a result, serious injury and death to innocent marchers transpired. “Bull” Connor’s brutality provided the SCLC and King with events to publicize to the media to convince people civil rights held importance for everyone (Hon 181). Oates described the scene:

With scores of reporters and TV cameramen recording what happened, the firemen turned on their hoses, which exploded with a noise like a machine-gun fire and sent columns of water crashing into children and adults alike, knocking them down, ripping their clothes, smashing them against the sides of buildings, sweeping them back into the
street, driving them crying and bloodied into the park. When Negro bystanders hurled bricks and bottles in retaliation, Connor unleashed the dogs. They charged into the Negroes’ ranks with fangs bared, lunging wildly at running children and biting three severely. (234)

King and the SCLC chose to publicize “Bull” Connor’s orders because they knew how he would react to the march and wanted to display his reaction to the American public. The media captured the photos and sounds of Birmingham to portray Southern segregation to the rest of the country via television and radio. The pictures and descriptions of excessive police force sickened President Kennedy and made him worry other events could occur in neighboring towns of Birmingham (Friedman and Richardson 225). These publicized acts eventually convinced Kennedy to speak on national television on efforts to raise civil rights as a moral issue in June of 1963. In other words, King knew the media could grab the audience’s attention and appeal to emotions. According to Gray, “news is a stylized artifact shaped by decisions made within the media profession and influenced by the larger societal culture” (qtd. in Friedman and Richardson 375). Society provides the media with a routine setting. If something happens which appears to be out of the ordinary, the media will report on the events that transpire. Mass media coverage drew attention to Birmingham as well as America as a whole and portrayed segregation negatively (Friedman and Richardson 226). The news also covered the retaliation of African-Americans against whites due to impatience with the path of nonviolence. Birmingham authorities threw King in jail for leading protests prior to the main demonstration. Since King was in jail, he did not lead the main Birmingham protests. King’s followers feared that they, along with others they loved, could get hurt or jailed as well, so King’s supporters began to fight
back in anger. They began to throw rocks and bottles at policemen, which caused police to unleash their dogs, beat protestors, and release tear gas (Barkan 559).

Since the protests turned to violence, Ralph Abernathy, King’s partner and friend, exclaimed to the protesters that they must not react to the police when they strike on the marchers (Selby 144). When the marchers took the course of nonviolent action in a mass crowd and combatted their opponents with peace, the opponents’ violent methods of rebellion became ineffective. As a result, the Birmingham protests became “one of the most highly organized and successful of all the civil rights campaigns” (Brink and Harris 108). Even though Birmingham provoked some of the most violent reactions from authorities, Birmingham also became the model for civil rights demonstrations for the rest of the Civil Rights Movement.

**Kennedy Speech Makes Civil Rights a Moral Issue.** On June 11th, 1963, Kennedy delivered a speech on civil rights. According to Evers and Szanton, it was “the best speech John Kennedy ever gave…. President Kennedy said that civil rights was a clear-cut moral issue” (126). Martin Luther King, Jr., also commended the speech as one of the most direct calls for civil rights and freedom ever delivered from a president (Carson et al. 56). Kennedy’s speech focused on morality. Kennedy claimed if African-Americans cannot enjoy the same quality of life as whites, then they are not free; “This nation, for all its hopes and all its boasts, will not be fully free until all its citizens are free” (Kennedy 970). Kennedy declared to his national audience he had a “legal and moral responsibility for intervention in protecting citizens from civil rights abuse” (Dionisopoulos and Goldzwig 190). Kennedy devoted himself to civil rights as a moral cause, despite criticism he received for a slow response to the civil rights issue (Dionisopoulos and Goldzwig 188; Hon 194).
In his speech, Kennedy attempted to convince whites who were undecided or predisposed against civil rights that change had to come. Kennedy also clarified to the strongest opponents of integration how he would take the most necessary action as president to implement civil rights in America. Kennedy understood although the Declaration of Independence states; “All Men Are Created Equal,” the whites in control of society did not include African-Americans. He clarified how the Declaration of Independence did not exclude African-Americans. As Kennedy explained, “This nation was founded by men of many nations and backgrounds under the principle that all men are created equal” (Kennedy 970). From there he spoke about how American citizens must have the same rights as each other regardless of skin color or religion. Kennedy wanted to please everyone, both African-Americans and whites, but he knew he had to lead a country through a civil rights crisis. According to Gilbert, Kennedy’s courage in delivering a speech of high magnitude helped land him a spot in the heart of the Civil Rights Movement (396). In his speech, Kennedy touched on the morals of the American people as a whole to propel the civil rights cause further (Dionisopoulos and Goldzwig 191). He displayed moral leadership and pointed out what needed to be done in regard to civil rights reform. Kennedy’s speech can be classified as a problem-solution speech. He identified the problem of segregation and provided the solution of civil rights legislation on school integration, open accommodations, and voting rights to work toward making equal rights a reality.

*Murder of Medgar Evers.* Hours after Kennedy spoke to the nation and elevated civil rights to a moral issue, an estranged war veteran named Byron de la Beckwith shot Medgar Evers, a key NAACP field secretary, on Evers’ front porch in Jackson, Mississippi (Gwin 11). Evers had just come home from a long day at work. As he walked toward his house from his car, Beckwith shot him in the back while Evers’ family watched (Evers and Szanton 129).
Evers was significant for all civil rights activism in the South, in particular, Mississippi. While his NAACP organizational branch wanted to fight segregation in the courts, Evers tried to employ direct action, which helped him stay in contact with Martin Luther King, Jr. and collaborate with King’s organization, the SCLC (Carson et al. 90). Evers was a hero to many liberty-deprived African-Americans in Mississippi. He worked hard to end segregation in a state where whites encouraged and supported violence and murder against African-Americans. (Gwin 5). Evers was also a controversial figure who organized public protests as well as instilled confidence in the African-American community, all while taking significant personal risks.

When he joined the NAACP, Evers organized its programs, went to events, held press conferences, and inspired peers to say no to racism and to have no fear (Evers and Szanton 84). Medgar Evers worked hard to integrate his home state and end racial violence, and in Mississippi in the early 1960s, he was clubbed, beaten, threatened, and murdered for his attempts (84).

Evers’ murder led to black anger towards whites and even more protests. Not only did anger rise towards whites, but also tension increased between civil rights organizations. According to Charles Evers, Medgar Evers’ brother; “When Medgar was killed, Martin [Luther King Jr.] called Roy Wilkins, suggested they jointly announce a national day of mourning…Roy told Martin to butt out, because Medgar was an NAACP man. The top NAACP brass in New York often kicked sand at the top brass from the SNCC, the SCLC, and the CORE [Congress of Racial Equality]” (Evers and Szanton 143). Wilkins was one of the leaders of the NAACP branch in New York, so he did not want any other civil rights organizations involved in making decisions about the response to Medgar’s murder.

Many events occurred after the murder, such as voter registration drives, speeches, and marches. One event in particular was the voter registration drive in Mississippi when a Jewish
college professor named Allard Lowenstein arrived from North Carolina in July of 1963 (Evers and Szanton 152). Charles Evers saw the professor as an excellent speaker. Lowenstein also brought many volunteers to persuade African-Americans to vote and promote the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party; the group received 80,000 votes (153). Although 80,000 votes was not enough to convince the authorities of Mississippi to grant the right to vote to African-Americans, civil rights leaders saw the high number of votes as a significant leap forward, especially as civil rights activist groups organized the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom (154).

March on Washington For Jobs and Freedom, August 1963. After Evers’ murder, civil rights organizations scheduled the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom for August 28th, 1963 (Hon 182). If King and other civil rights activists wanted to encourage the country to concentrate on the issues of the movement, such as the African-American right to vote, they had to target the nation’s capital. To grab the nation’s full attention, the March on Washington maintained its main focus on “obtaining federal legislation to ban racial discrimination in civic and political life,” as well as demanding economic freedom and jobs (Gaines 59). All the civil rights organizations worked together to bring people to speak and to listen at the Lincoln Memorial to help fulfill the goals of the march.

Economic reform for African-Americans was a prime goal of the march. According to Carson, leaders of the various civil rights organizations submitted a letter of intent to President Kennedy calling for a “comprehensive civil rights bill that did away with segregated public accommodations, protection of the right to vote...a massive federal works program to train and place unemployed workers, and a Federal Fair Employment Practices Act barring discrimination in all employment” (Carson et al. 204). Hon also cited a blueprint description from the SCLC
public relations department, which stated the march’s purpose to arrive at the nation’s capital to force the government to negotiate and grant equal, economic reforms for all American citizens (182). These two examples indicated how The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom portrayed the effort to gain economic rights for African-Americans as much as to gain political rights. Here is a picture of citizens both black and white, picketing for decent housing, jobs for everyone, voting rights, and equal pay as well as decent working conditions (Hall 1252).

Many protestors arrived with picket signs for the cause for economic reform. According to the National Park Service of Washington, D.C., between 670,000 and 1,004,000 attended the march, with the best specific estimate being 837,214 (qtd. in Boyd 12). Citizens from across the country came to witness the orations and take part in the demonstrations of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. According to Branch, a boy rollerskated to Washington, D.C., from Chicago with a “Freedom” sash; a young man biked to the nation’s capital from South Dakota, while an 82-year-old man traveled on his bike from Ohio (King Years, 61).
Even if the marchers who came from all over the country did not fully believe in the aims of the demonstration or their likelihood of success, African-Americans still came to support their people’s efforts. Some marchers may have become impatient with speeches as a form of demonstration for civil rights; maybe some were afraid but wanted to support the general cause of civil rights. As marcher Marlene Nadle explained: “It’s like St. Patrick’s Day to the Irish. I came out of respect for what my people are doing, not because I believe it will do any good” (Nadle 2, 3). Essentially, some African-Americans traveled to Washington, D.C., not to join the common cause of the marchers, but to support citizens of their common race. The protestors knew attending the march at the nation’s capital made a difference because the size of the protest grew. Indeed, the large scale of the demonstration grabbed the attention of the media, which reached millions of Americans through televisions and radios nationwide. Then, the audience listened to and interpreted King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. This speech set King as the true leader of the Civil Rights Movement because “the emotional command of the oratory gave King authority to reinterpret the core intuition of democratic justice…the timber of his voice . . . projected him across the racial divide and planted him as a new founding father” (Branch, King Years, 67). King’s rhetorical skill helped him command the entire Civil Rights Movement; however, King’s persuasive discourse did not help him completely win the war against “Jim Crow” without violent interference.

**Birmingham Church Bombings.** In the sixties, Birmingham, Alabama was a significant location for civil rights events. Carolyn McKinstry, the former Sunday School secretary of the church, described growing up in Birmingham: “Martin Luther King, Jr. used to say Birmingham was probably one of the most segregated cities in America and I think he may have been very very right about that” (qtd. in Joiner 7). Birmingham provided multiple predicaments for its
African-American citizens when it came to segregation. Gill confirmed McKinstry’s statement as to how white authority figures of Birmingham institutionalized segregation and authorities firmly enforced it (Gill 30).

The notorious act known as the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church took place in Birmingham. On September 15th, 1963, four little girls—Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, Addie Mae Collins, all 14, and Denise McNair, 11—were killed in the explosion (Gill 31; Joiner 7). The bombing launched panic, terror, and riots throughout the city. Alabama University professors, Dr. Slack and Dr. Davis, both agreed although intolerance is the greatest sign of immorality in society, no condemning reaction is almost worse than intolerance itself (“Alabama University” 112, 114). No one arrested the culprit who committed the bombings until 38 years later. A jury of mixed race convicted Thomas Blanton, Jr., a Ku Klux Klan (KKK) member in 2001 (“Alabama University” 110). Blanton Jr.’s conviction in Birmingham indicated citizens of Birmingham have taken steps forward when it comes to racial tolerance.

**War on Poverty.** In January of 1964, shortly after the Birmingham Church Bombings, President Lyndon B. Johnson took office, and he set out to declare war on poverty. Instrumental legislation acts to the War on Poverty included the Revenue Act, and the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (Zarefsky 45). According to President Johnson, the goal of these programs was “to break the cycle by raising their education, [economic] skill, and health levels of the younger generation…” (Johnson 183). The anti-poverty programs highlighted Johnson’s focus on domestic issues as opposed to international issues. While Johnson intended to assist the future generations of America, he also exaggerated the proposed programs to gain the trust of his citizens. In *War on Poverty*, Zarefsky cited examples of exaggeration in Johnson’s quest. Johnson continued to define the “war” as a moral obligation and claimed the American people
had fully adopted anti-poverty as their personal cause (61). Johnson took an economic issue and turned it into a morality cause for the American people.

As Johnson voiced his ideas on how to eliminate poverty with his programs, he became invested in the Vietnam War. According to the Congressional Research Service, The Johnson administration invested $111 billion in the war (Daggett 4), which depleted the resources for Johnson’s anti-poverty programs. As Vietnam eliminated the focus towards the War on Poverty, Martin Luther King, Jr. began to label Vietnam as the main monetary challenge to run the programs Johnson proposed (Dionisopoulos et al. 98).

**Legislative Success but Continued Frustration**

While legislative success occurred with regard to civil rights reform, acts of civil rights frustration also transpired both from civil rights protestors as well as their opponents. In this section, I will outline the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and what it meant to civil rights reform, Malcolm X’s assassination, as well as “Bloody Sunday” in Selma, Alabama. I will also cover Johnson’s “We Shall Overcome” speech in response to the events of Selma, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the race riots of 1965-1966.

**Civil Rights Act of 1964.** African-Americans did not completely achieve the right to vote until the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Frank and McPhail 218). The government took steps towards racial tolerance when the Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed into law. After 82 days of filibustering from Southern senators, Congress approved the bill (Santoro 1393). Kennedy had proposed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to integrate all public facilities and abolish the “separate but equal” clause. Even though Brown vs Board of Education made segregation illegal, a major racial divide still existed. Prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1957 “allowed the Attorney General to
initiate court injunctions for voting violations, strengthened the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department, and accredited the Civil Rights Commission” (1393). The Civil Rights Act of 1957 started to define civil rights, but did little to increase the push for the right to vote for African-Americans. Kennedy did not live to see his proposed amendment for a comprehensive civil rights bill passed due to his assassination, but his successor, President Lyndon B. Johnson made sure the bill became a law.

Under the leadership of President Johnson, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 became a law because the Johnson administration prioritized civil rights legislation in America. Instead of judging whether African-American rights were violated or not, Johnson helped ban segregation in schools, outlaw racial discrimination in any employment setting, as well as dismiss segregation in any public facilities such as swimming pools and parks (Robinson 150). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was a big step for the Civil Rights Movement in regards to obtaining racial equality.

**Malcolm X Assassinated February 1965.** While civil rights reform occurred in politics, Malcolm X was assassinated on February 21st, 1965 (Breitman et al. 5). Malcolm X was a Muslim minister and a civil rights activist who emphasized self-defense rather than King’s method of nonviolent action. The organization Malcolm X participated in, The Nation of Islam, believed Allah and his messenger stated one has the right to self-defense when attacked (29). Malcolm X never advocated violence, but he desired African-Americans to let white attackers understand they would defend themselves entirely, even if they had to become aggressive. Eventually, Malcolm X split with the Nation of Islam to form the Organized African-American Unity program in the summer of 1964 (31). Malcolm X’s break from the Nation of Islam led to multiple questionable events throughout the summer of 1964 up until his assassination on
February 21st, 1965. First came the verbal threats. According to Evanzz, in a December issue of *Muhammad Speaks*, Louis Farrakhan, a Boston minister in the Nation of Islam organization, stated how “such a man as Malcolm is worthy of death” (Evanzz 264). The verbal threats stemmed from Malcolm X’s split with the Nation of Islam because he no longer agreed with their teachings.

After the verbal assaults came the physical acts of violence towards Malcolm X. One incident involved the bombing of his house, and the police hinted Malcolm X carried it out himself. As Malcolm X pleaded for an FBI investigation of the bombing at a press conference at the Audubon Ballroom in New York, a fray broke out among the audience. A week later, the scuffle happened again in the same setting, and someone shot and killed Malcolm X (Breitman 14, 50). The assassination ignited outrage across the country, especially with how the FBI and the courts handled the situation. According to Breitman, “the ‘several’ police agents didn’t do anything to catch the men who shot Malcolm down right in front of them. Talmadge Hayer…would have gotten away if it had depended solely on the cops” (59).

Talmadge Hayer was a member of the Nation of Islam. The jury at the trial convicted Hayer and two other men of the assassination and sentenced them to life. The government’s version of the assassination affirmed the “three defendants had killed Malcolm because of the bitterness and strife had developed between the Nation of Islam and Malcolm after he split from the Nation and formed competing organizations” (7). While this may be true on some accounts, some believe the police had an indirect role in the assassination. According to Perry, people could not understand how Hayer and the two others entered the ballroom so easily, as well as the police’s inability to preserve the crime scene in detail (Perry 372). The views of the police and
the African-American public contradicted each other and sparked debate for a long time after the assassination.

**Selma, Alabama, “Bloody Sunday”, March 1965.** While the nation debated Malcom X’s assassination, the success of The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom encouraged King and the SCLC to venture back to Alabama to fight “Jim Crow” in Selma. The activists tried to model Selma after Birmingham and Washington, because Selma offered a stage similar to the previous two events in the Civil Rights Movement; “It provided a stage for [King’s] organizational genius. It presented the possibilities of spectacle. It provided hissable villains—segregationist governor George Wallace, white supremacists led by Sheriff Jim Clark…” (Adelman and Johnson, *Remembering Martin Luther King, Jr.* 90). Selma was another tough pro-segregationist city in Alabama. Pauley stated how the events at Selma were an obvious case of “racial disenfranchisement” or marginalization of race (Pauley 33). The goal of Selma remained the same as Birmingham: to entice Congress to pass the voting rights legislation for African-Americans. Governor George Wallace announced state troopers with tear gas would prohibit the march if it took place, and signed a decree that forbade it (Barkan 562). King was in Atlanta when the governor forbade the march, and he asked the SCLC to postpone the Selma march to be fair to his congregation in Atlanta because he wanted to preach there that day. Some marchers who disapproved of King’s decision went forward before the march’s set date, and state troopers used excessive police force upon the protestors. Due to violence against civil rights protestors in Selma, Alabama, this day has become known as “Bloody Sunday” (Hon 184; Ling 183).

During the preparation for the march from Selma to Montgomery in pursuit of the African-American right to vote, Alabama state troopers shot and killed churchgoer Jimmy Lee
Jackson while he attempted to protect his mother and grandfather from harm (Adelman and Johnson, *Remembering Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 94). The shooting made a multitude of activists angry and irritated towards the delay of the march and led to their criticism that King, the SCLC, and the SNCC activists strategized too much. On March 7th, 1965, while King was in Atlanta, SCLC and SNCC representatives Hosea Williams and John Lewis organized 600 marchers, set out earlier than planned to march from Selma to Montgomery, and crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge just outside of Selma (Garrow 72). The marchers protested prematurely because they became impatient with King’s slow planning process. Jim Clark stationed Alabama state troopers and other law enforcement officials at the bridge, because they knew the march had to go across the bridge. Since the march was small, the number of Alabama state troopers and law enforcement officials outnumbered the activists. The troopers and the rest of Clark’s men met the civil rights protestors with tear gas and ruthless beatings, and continued their assault even when the protestors attempted to retreat back across the bridge (Hon 184).

The televised events in Selma were very graphic and disturbing to watch. The broadcast exhibited protestors being beat with batons as well as whips and cattle prods (Pauley 34). The national “Bloody Sunday” broadcast on radios and television provided the SCLC an opportunity to reach the public and the White House to put the issue of the African-American right to vote on the map. According to Barkan, after Johnson announced he would submit the legislation on March 15, “on Sunday, March 21, more than 10,000 people marched from Selma to Montgomery. At the latter city they were joined by 25,000 others from many other states” (Barkan 562). After witnessing the “Bloody Sunday” broadcast, more people wanted to fight for the African-American right to vote. Selma was a pricy victory for King and the SCLC’s campaign, and African-Americans as well as white activists looked toward President Lyndon B.
Johnson to respond. Soon after “Bloody Sunday,” on March 11th, white segregationists in Selma murdered white Unitarian minister James Reeb, who came to Selma from Boston to participate in the protests for African-American voting rights (King, *Autobiography*, 282). James Reeb’s murder exacerbated the protests and pleas for President Johnson to step in and address the issue of civil rights reform and violence.

**Johnson’s “We Shall Overcome” Speech and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.** President Johnson delivered a speech labeled as one of the most impressive speeches on March 15th, 1965, as a response to the events at Selma. Pauley stated, “the president wanted to respond effectively to the national situation following Selma, a situation which demanded both a legislative and spoken response” (37). Johnson recognized how Selma provided an opportunity for the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to pass, because the events that transpired in Selma shocked the entire nation. Also, Johnson adopted “We Shall Overcome.” Arguably the key anthem of the Civil Rights Movement, “We Shall Overcome” made his speech moving to his audience. The original song was a cry for civil rights reform for the supporters of civil rights for African-Americans. When Johnson appropriated the song into his speech, he united both African-Americans as well as white supporters for the cause of civil rights in America. Since Johnson knew he possibly had both African-Americans and whites’ attention due to “We Shall Overcome,” he encouraged them to join him in his tireless efforts to help Congress permit The Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Pauley 39).

According to Carson, Johnson believed the right to vote was “the most powerful instrument ever devised by man for breaking down injustice and destroying the terrible walls which imprison men because they are different from other men” (qtd. in Carson *et al.* 305). Johnson’s agitation over Selma, as well as his recognition of the country’s disarray over the
African-American right to vote, prompted him to push Congress to pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 outlawed the use of the disenfranchising poll tests and allowed federal authorities to guarantee a fair system (United States, *Voting Rights*, 9). In the first Congressional session, former U.S. Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach described the bill as the Voting Rights Act of 1965, “a bill to enforce the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States…no voting qualification or procedure shall be imposed or applied to deny or abridge the right to vote on account of race or color” (862). Section 3 elaborates further, stating no one should be restricted suffrage in any election whether federal, state, or local (862). The Voting Rights Act of 1965 made the legal voting rights of African-Americans more attainable.

**Race Riots, 1965-1966.**

In the early stages of the Civil Rights Movement, African-American activists and citizens practiced nonviolent actions to obtain civil rights, such as sit-ins, marches, lobbying, as well as gatherings for empowering speeches. They protested the unfair treatment white authorities cast upon African-Americans. Carson defined protests in the Civil Rights Movement as “a product of widespread black dissatisfaction with the pace of racial change…” (“Black Freedom Struggle” 22). Around 1965 and 1966, African-Americans became too frustrated and impatient with the method of nonviolent direct action, and began to fight back against whites, which caused race riots. Sometimes a riot itself can be considered a form of protest. Lieberson and Silverman defined a race riot as an assault on a mass group of people because the ones rioting are part of a smaller, oppressed group (887). A race riot in the Civil Rights Movement usually happened when a white authority figure used excessive force to subdue a protestors or an unruly citizen, and
other protestors turned to violence. The original brewing of the race riots appeared to be the whites’ perception that African-Americans had already achieved equal rights and any further requests for civil rights were considered excessive (Hon 185). In this section, I will discuss the infamous race riot in the Watts District of Los Angeles as well as other race riots that stemmed from Watts.

In the Watts District of Los Angeles, one can conclude the act of protest turned into a riot. After the Voting Rights Act of 1965 became a law, a violent race riot ensued. Matei and Ball-Rokeach stated a cop who allegedly used excessive force to subdue an African-American drunk driver ignited the riot (302). The arrest turned into a symbol of discrimination towards African-Americans.

The statistics stemming from the arrest were staggering. According to Jeffries and Ransford, when the rioting and looting took place from August 11th through August 17th, 1965, thirty-four people had been killed, 1,032 injured, 3,592 arrested, and the destruction damage cost estimated to around $40,000,000 or higher (312). From the statistics provided, one can conclude Watts was arguably one of the most catastrophic race riots in the history of the Civil Rights Movement. Some studies argued the aggravation of the multiple historical injustices piled on top of African-Americans caused the riot, as well as police brutality, poor housing conditions, and segregation (Jeffries et al. 444). On August 11th, 1965, African-Americans became so frustrated with these elements of discrimination that they resorted to violence.

The African-Americans as a racial group felt isolated, powerless, frustrated, and dissatisfied. Dr. H. Edward Ransford, in a 1968 study, interviewed African-American subjects and determined those who felt isolated, powerless, and racially dissatisfied were the ones who were most likely to resort to violence. “we find that isolated Negroes with intense feelings of
powerlessness and dissatisfaction are more prone to violent action than those who are less alienated” (Ransford 590). Ransford explained how the white establishment made African-Americans in the Watts community feel weak and disappointed. As a result, African-Americans’ frustration increased, which led to racial tension in Watts reaching its climax. Once citizens of Watts rioted, other communities in other cities began to have their own racial uprisings as well.

African-Americans in Watts took action against alienation, so African-Americans in other frustrated communities and cities who heard about Watts decided to take action as well. Watts set off riots in Cleveland, Detroit, Newark, Cincinnati, Milwaukee, and various major cities across the United States. African-American groups in these cities saw what occurred in the Watts District and felt they could accomplish their goals if they fought back as well. According to Button, “the effectiveness of black violence is consistent with segregationist violence” (159). Button argued how the riots brought attention national attention; however, they did not help the cause for civil rights because the riots took place during a time period of sympathy (159). Button contended here that the race riots only unleashed aggression and caused African-Americans to be viewed a threat to authorities. The riots demonstrated the disagreement over how to complete the struggle to acquire civil rights. Martin Luther King, Jr. led the side that pleaded for a peaceful movement, and the other advocated aggressive retaliation. Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, and Huey Newton, co-founder of the Black Panthers, were some of the main leaders of the new resistance tactics (Joseph 1011).

**Black Power as Opposition to King’s Leadership**

According to Joseph, scholars often view Black Power as the rival of civil rights. The Black Power Movement perpetuated unnecessary violence and self-destructed due to some Black Power supporters’ own anger (1002). Here, Joseph stated how anger drove some Black Power
supporters’ methods, which led to aggression as well as violence towards whites. Stokely Carmichael, arguably one of the most influential Black Power activists, developed the slogan of Black Power out of annoyance and exasperation with Dr. King’s method of nonviolent, direct action (Brockriede and Scott 33; Joseph 1008). Carmichael spoke heavily in favor of unifying the African-American community and used the slogan to mobilize black identity as well as pride to benefit the community. He defined the Black Power slogan as a program to solve the two main problems African-Americans had; they were poor and already disadvantaged in society due to the color of their skin (Bosmajian 102). Black Power was also born out of frustration from the belief that America was so racially corrupt that African-Americans could not progress with simple protests. Essentially, members who believed in the Black Power movement cried despair and disappointment due to white authorities leaving African-Americans with little to no support (34). Aside from the Black Power slogan, I will cover how Black Power stemmed from the ashes of Malcolm X’s theory of self-defense, as well as the definitions of Black Power through an economic lens. I will also highlight the importance of unification to African-Americans as well as the militant attitude of Black Power and the negative reactions towards their message. **Black Power and Relation to Self-Defense.** The rhetoric of Malcolm X possessed words of hostility, but did not advocate violence necessarily. He sought for African-Americans to be empowered and to defend themselves from segregationist violence. Malcolm X inspired many black nationalists from SNCC, CORE, and other civil rights organizations involved in the movement through his rhetoric. According to Newman, after Malcolm X’s assassination, black nationalists in CORE and some in the SNCC rejected nonviolence and began to move towards a solely African-American organization (119, 120). Malcolm X’s rhetoric created an understanding of nonviolence as unproductive and dividing. From Malcolm X, activists such as
Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, and members of the Black Panther Party delivered speeches that hinted at violence and retaliation to the abuse whites and authorities placed upon African-Americans (Joseph 1004). Impatience with the slow government progress accomplishing reforms justified the unity of African-Americans to assist in the needs of each other, not just socially, but economically. Brockriede and Scott mentioned sources of multi-billion dollar funds went to African-Americans directly, such as financial aid from the CORE and the SNCC (193). The aid African-Americans received came at a slow pace, so they had to help one another to relieve their community.

**Economic Drives of Black Power.** When Black Power advocates focused on economic reforms such as improving jobs, housing, schools, and eliminating poverty, Black Power built a sense unification of the African-American community. Black Power called “for the pooling of black financial resources to achieve economic security” (Brockriede and Scott 39). Different organizations, such as CORE and NEGRO (National Economic Growth and Reconstruction Organization), were main financial resources to African-Americans. The CORE created jobs and businesses in cities with high black populations, such as Cleveland, Chicago, Detroit, and New York. NEGRO encouraged hard work over welfare from whites (Brockriede and Scott 183-185). African-American communities then prospered, and the hard work invigorated African-Americans to become independent from their white superiors economically. According to Brockriede and Scott, the goal of each program was “to free as many black people as possible from economic dependency on the white man. It has been this dependency in many places that has hampered effective independent political organizing” (184).

CORE and NEGRO desired to improve the economic conditions African-Americans faced as well as to place them in control of how they succeeded in their jobs and businesses.
Carmichael defined success in his speech to his audience in Detroit as “coming back into your community and using your skills to help develop your people” (118). Carmichael explained how to triumph as an African-American. He described how one must be educated in a good school, get a job or become involved in a business, and help others in the African-American community. He viewed Black Power as a “black declaration of independence…” (Brockriede and Scott 117). Black Power called for a share of control and proper representation in the African-American community.

**Militancy of Black Power.** Carmichael and other activists had intentions for a successful, mobilized, economic transition for African-Americans. Brockriede and Scott stated: “The Black Power advocates consciously feel that they are the most militant group in the Negro protest movement” (5). The Black Power advocates did not refer to the Civil Rights Movement as the Civil Rights Movement because civil rights protests advocated direct action and nonviolent protest. Black Power advocates named their undertaking the “Negro Protest movement” to identify the movement as one for only African-Americans. The “Negro Protest movement” involved methods of “defense” which became interrelated with violence. H. Rap Brown, a radical Black Power activist, fully advocated for African-Americans to own guns and take part in guerrilla warfare (Newman 137). Violence also broke out in Oakland after authorities arrested and jailed Huey Newton, co-founder of The Black Panther party, for the murder of a police officer in 1967 (125).

Although activists such as Carmichael did not directly call for their audiences to commit violent acts, their rhetoric as well as their actions implied violence. When Carmichael denounced nonviolence as an adequate method, he began to preach Black Power. In his “Black Power” address at the University of California-Berkeley, Carmichael used lines that appeared to refer to
African-Americans retaliating against whites, such as “they (whites) ought to start defending themselves as to why they have oppressed and exploited us” and “move over, or we’re going to move on over you” (Carmichael). These lines did not directly state African-Americans should attack whites violently, yet Carmichael implied how he wanted African-Americans to retaliate towards oppression if necessary. Black Power activists such as Carmichael, Brown, and Newton called on African-Americans as a whole to stand up and defend their rights as humans, and they wanted their audience to be unified as an exclusive African-American community.

**Black Power and the Unification of Black Community.** In a speech to a white audience in Whitewater, Wisconsin, Carmichael declared his desire for African-Americans to grasp their self-identity, as well as take pride in their history (Brockriede and Scott 99). Brockriede and Scott described three key ideas to Black Power. **First,** the prominence of black pride and having the right to define racial equality; **second,** groups of African-Americans must be organized as one to improve conditions; **finally,** to gain reforms forcefully (195). To have power as a people, African-Americans had to be comfortable with their race and unite over the cause of obtaining civil rights. Carmichael’s ideas displayed how African-Americans had to work together to participate in everyday society; “Many advocates of Black Power argue that only when black people unite as a separate community can they make their power felt, power that will help build a decent life for themselves and power that may help transform American institutions for the better” (6). Power, according to Carmichael, was the only characteristic people respected (33), and he planned to achieve power and respect at any cost. Brockriede and Scott explained how Black Power spoke only members of the black community, but their rhetoric intimidated whites such as Senator Hubert Humphrey from Minnesota as well as African-Americans such as Martin Luther King, Jr. (77).
King believed violence was the wrong way to approach the civil rights issue and desired his traditional nonviolent methods of protest as well as patience. He believed Black Power exhibited impatience and frustration. King also saw the goal of a solely black movement as separatism, which he thought could not succeed because of the isolation (Brockriede and Scott 47, 48). Separatism could have been understood as autonomy or independence during the Black Power movement, but King felt separatism did not help in general because whenever the minority group members ostracize themselves, the majority group will continue to target them further. Senator Hubert Humphrey and NAACP executive secretary Roy Wilkins shared King’s ideas on Black Power as separatism. Wilkins described how Black Power meant the reversal of white power and doing everything themselves, which is considered separatism. Humphrey echoed Wilkins statement, “we seek advancement, not apartheid” (Brockriede and Scott 77). Humphrey amplified how African-Americans should not take the same action towards whites that whites took towards African-Americans. He labeled Black Power as reverse-racism (77).

In this section, I have discussed the slogan of Black Power, its derivation from Malcolm X, the economic drives, the militant attitudes, the call for unification of the African-American race, as well as the reactions to Black Power. The movement grouped organizations within the Civil Rights Movement that advocated self-defense to empower African-Americans against white oppressors, and alliances intended to strengthen the African-American community economically. If the Black Power Movement had focused on solely economic gain and remained civil with the progress of civil rights, the movement may have been more successful.
The Later Years of the Civil Rights Movement

The later years of the Civil Rights Movement challenged King the most. King addressed the housing issues in Chicago, opposed Vietnam publically, and spoke to a sanitation workers’ strike on economic injustice in Memphis.

Chicago, 1966. Most of King’s civil rights work took place in the South, so he desired to continue his civil disobedience tactics further North, in Chicago. According to Lewis, Chicago consisted of 3.5 million citizens, and of that population, one million of them were black; half of them were impoverished (313); “Negroes earned an average of $4,700 yearly and some black families were crammed ten to a flat…slumlords charged them $90 per month” (Adelman and Johnson, *Photobiography*, 230). King viewed housing in Chicago as a surrogate for economic imperialism, which involved the slums, schools, “unemployment and underemployment, segregated and inadequate education, welfare dependency and political servitude” (King, *Autobiography*, 307). Housing in Chicago in 1966 was a problem during the Civil Rights Movement, so King, the SCLC, and the Chicago CCCO (Coordinating Council of Committee Organizations) began a plan to eliminate the Chicago slums. According to Hon, the main plan of the SCLC-CCCO alliance in Chicago was to “update building codes, open occupancy legislation, and enforce existing housing statutes” (186). When building codes are updated, apartment complexes have to be inspected at a basic standard to make sure they have the rudimentary requirements for living conditions, such as a bathroom, a kitchen, and solid paint on the walls so children would not be exposed to lead poisoning if they ate chipped paint. King hoped the SCLC-CCCO plan would put an end to slums to increase morale, as well as improve living conditions and financial success in the Chicago community.
King and the SCLC attempted to conduct various housing marches throughout the community of Chicago, but they were difficult to organize. Chicago was a big city that had multiple events, which took place all over the area, unlike cities such as Birmingham and Selma where the march engulfed the whole atmosphere (Hon 186). Also, instead of direct targets to pursue, the opponents were abstract. The villains included corrupted politicians, businessmen, and the concept of economic inequality. Also, no authority figures were present to protect the marchers from any sort of attacks. According to King, members of the government opposed the demonstrations so much that some national government officials attempted to blame King and the peaceful Chicago Freedom Movement for the 1966 Chicago riots (King, Autobiography, 304). When Mayor Richard Daley refused to meet with King and his supporters in the SCLC-CCCO, King hastened the plea to meet the demands of the marchers (Adelman and Johnson, Photobiography, 238). Marches were also difficult to organize due to the amount of violence that occurred in Chicago.

Along with the issue of poverty and difficulties to organize the march came the issue of violence in Chicago. According to Adelman and Johnson, two people per day, whether white or black, were murdered (Photobiography 125). Murder and race riots occurred regularly in Chicago. Throughout the summer of 1966, King and the SCLC attempted to march for improved and open housing. Most demonstrations in Chicago became violent. Opponents threw bottles and bricks at the protestors, gangs encouraged riots, as well as regular fires (King, Autobiography, 305). While violence and multiple opponents made Chicago difficult, the SCLC-CCCO coalition managed to gain some improvements with regard to housing.

As President Johnson noticed Chicago unfold, he proposed the Civil Rights Bill of 1966, a bill to protect African-Americans as well as civil rights activists, from harm and extortion. The
bill would also prevent racial discrimination in the workplace and in housing districts across America, not just Chicago (Ralph Jr. 173). The most important part of the Civil Rights Bill of 1966 proposal was the fair-housing section, which made refusing to sell, rent to, or negotiate with a buyer based on color, religion, or socioeconomic class illegal (Ellis 229). The proposed bill intended to protect the African-Americans as well as other minorities from housing discrimination. Eventually, in April of 1968, Congress passed Johnson’s Civil Rights Bill of 1966, also known as the Fair Housing Act, which officially “prohibits discrimination in Residential real estate transactions” (United States, Enforcement, 2). The law, according to Representative John Conyers, Jr. from Michigan, if used to its economic purpose effectively, would become one of the most influential laws of the Civil Rights Movement (“Enforcement” 4).

In general, the racial and economic issues of Chicago set the stage for King’s opposition of the Vietnam War and the Memphis sanitation workers’ strike.

**King’s Response to Vietnam, 1967.** Originally, King’s main goal of the Civil Rights Movement was to obtain full civil rights for African-Americans peacefully (Dionisopoulos et al. 97). During the sixties, however, Black Power emerged and civil rights supporters became impatient with King’s nonviolence philosophy. The supporters also became aggravated with the slow pace of economic reform, and the Vietnam War began as well. King’s followers urged him to deliver a speech opposing the war, but King remained focused on achieving civil rights for African-Americans. He thought to send a letter to all warring national leaders, including Ho Chi Minh and Diem, as well as Mao Zedong and President Johnson to bring their differences to diplomacy, but King did not oppose Vietnam publically (“Beyond Vietnam” 259). King explained his objection: “he did not have the strength to fight Vietnam along with the civil rights issue” (260). For two years, King deliberated on whether to make a speech against Vietnam or
not. He pondered what Johnson would think about his opposition especially after Johnson helped King pass two comprehensive civil rights acts, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Eventually, King decided to speak out against Vietnam. Similar to Johnson when he gave his speech condemning Selma, timing had to be right for King’s rhetoric to be persuasive. On April 4th, 1967, King addressed an audience of 3,000 at the Riverside Church in New York City, known as the “Beyond Vietnam” oration (Dionisopoulos et al. 92). King delivered the speech because he despised poverty and the economic conditions placed on African-Americans, and after two years of delaying the address, opposition towards Vietnam rose significantly (Darby and Rowley 43). King had to be political as well as moral at the same time. He felt he had to be a leader on both sides because he wanted to speak as a leader, but also as a human being (Dionisopoulos et al. 93). Dionisopoulos, Gallagher, Goldzwig, and Zarefsky highlighted three thematic movements in King’s Vietnam speech: the necessity of protest, the Vietnamese perspective on the war, and starting a moral revolution (99-102).

There were many specific reasons why King needed to speak out against Vietnam, “it distracted the nation from civil rights and poverty…he would prefer to focus on the needs of the poor” (Dionisopoulos et al. 100). Aside from social civil rights, King also fought against poverty and attempted to help gain economic equality for African-Americans as well. From 1965 to 1968, King’s focus moved from civil and human rights to unsolved economic issues (Kirk, “State of the Art,” 343). As I have mentioned prior, King declared the Vietnam War the main enemy of the poor (Darby and Rowley 43). King called for financial importance, which prioritized the proposed anti-poverty programs. The social welfare programs had the capacity to help both African-Americans and poor whites, but Vietnam interfered. When King delivered his
“Beyond Vietnam” speech, he desired his audience to act economically and place financial stability above the Vietnam War (Dionisopoulos et al. 98).

African-Americans who died for the cause of freedom in Vietnam also prompted King’s public opposition to the war. Ironically, the United States sent African-Americans overseas to fight for freedom in another country, yet they had not even achieved full freedom in America. King’s speech against Vietnam pointed out how the war took away “black young men who had been crippled by our society…to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia that they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem” (King 143). King’s view of how the United States acted towards Vietnam was no different from how he saw whites act toward African-Americans. The number of young African-American deaths contradicted King’s method of nonviolence. Vietnam was a violent war the American government advocated, and it took place at a time in the Civil Rights Movement when violence became an acceptable method. Even prior to speaking out against Vietnam, when King struggled to persuade African-Americans in the North why violence was not the answer, they responded with: “Isn’t our government using mass amounts of violence to solve its problems?” (King 44). This question eventually forced King to speak out against the war, because he knew the audience members in Chicago had a point. America used violence to achieve its goals of freedom when it went to war with another nation. Based on his position as a minister as well as a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, King felt obligated to speak out against the Vietnam War (Dionisopoulos et al. 100).

As I mentioned previously, timing was a rhetorical factor. Timing created “situations to which Americans had to react by passing judgment on themselves” (Halberstam 308). When he spoke out against Vietnam, King desired to inspire Americans to reconsider the war. King instructed the audience at Riverside Church to re-evaluate their thoughts on Vietnam, even
though King knew a low percentage of the country opposed Vietnam at the time. Even though some Americans disapproved of the speech, eventually, the opposition to Vietnam increased, and Americans no longer viewed the Vietnam War as a beneficial cause due to the depletion of the “resources needed to combat poverty and the effects of discrimination in the workplace and housing in the workplace and housing nationwide” (Gaines 59). Major issues to African-Americans across America included the high death toll as a result of Vietnam and discrimination in the workplace. Within the Civil Rights Movement, with his “Beyond Vietnam” oration, King lost a notable amount of support. King understood he had to make a drastic impact at the next event in the Civil Rights Movement in Memphis, where he addressed an adversarial sanitation workers’ strike on economic injustice in the workplace, to regain supporters of his leadership in the movement.

Memphis, 1968. The chronology of the Civil Rights Movement was crucial in leading up to King’s “Mountaintop” speech in Memphis, Tennessee. The issues King faced throughout the Civil Rights Movement were all present in Memphis. Memphis encompassed the violence and anger, opposition against King, as well as demonstrations for racial and social, political and economic reforms. Memphis also reflected King’s change of direction in regard to the type of reforms he sought. According to Keely, people challenged King’s credibility increasingly after he positioned himself towards economic issues such as improved conditions in the workplace (Keely 281). King lost some of his audience to factors such as violence in Memphis on March 28th as well as negative media perception, labeled “Chicken-a-la-King” and “Martin Loser King” due to his loss of control of the movement (Osborn, “The Last Mountaintop,” 152). Memphis held a civil rights protest for the first time, which resulted in explosive fights between police and protestors. On April 3rd, 1968, King delivered the “Mountaintop” speech at the Masonic Temple.
In the next pair of sections, I will examine the persuasive challenges of the Civil Rights Movement, King and some of his biographical background, prior studies of King, as well as further context of “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.”

**Persuasive Challenges of the Civil Rights Movement**

I have provided a brief yet detailed history of the Civil Rights Movement from 1954 to 1968. Civil rights activists faced a number of obstacles. In this section, I will discuss how the different protest methods of various civil rights organizations caused dissent within the movement. I will also examine the challenge of untrustworthy institutions and those in charge of them, the negative interpretations of civil rights rhetoric, encounters with hostile audiences, and failed attempts to change whites’ attitudes and values.

**Different Protest Methods of the Civil Rights Movement**

Civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. not only worked with their organization, but also worked against other civil rights organizations with the same goals in the Civil Rights Movement. Each civil rights organization had different approaches to attack racial injustices. Part of this can be attributed to how “these organizations operated in a constant, changing context to which they were forced to respond” (Carson, “Black Freedom Struggle,” 31). Carson explained how the various civil rights organizations were always placed in situations that forced them to act, which made groups disorganized and frustrated, and inconsistent methods of fighting for civil rights rose.

Many civil rights organizations such as the SCLC, SNCC, the CORE, NAACP, as well as the multiple Black Power organizations were involved in the African-American Civil Rights Movement. To highlight differences, as I have mentioned previously in the Medgar Evers section, the NAACP wanted to fight segregation in courts while others in the smaller groups
desired direct action. According to Fairclough, the national leadership of the NAACP disagreed with mass action such as civil disobedience, a protest strategy that involves a multitude of people who demonstrate against a law peacefully while willing to subject themselves to punishment (Cook 1027; Gorsevski and Butterworth 54). Civil Disobedience attempted to change the law while eliminating violence. The CORE, one of the smaller civil rights groups, remained “passionately committed to nonviolent direct action” (Fairclough 422, 423) Due to the disagreement of methods between these organizations, the difficulty to achieving civil rights increased.

An example of dissent between civil rights organizations occurred after a sit-in in Greensboro, North Carolina. The SCLC, CORE, and NAACP tried to exhibit specific guidelines for how to hold a protest. Student activists involved in these groups chose to form their own assembly and break off from the major civil rights organizations, but they could not maintain control of the sit-in (Carson, “Black Freedom Struggle,” 25). The sit-in at Greensboro highlighted the conflict of the experience factor of the organizations versus the desire of the young activists, impatient with the slow progress of the movement. Even Martin Luther King, Jr. faced opposition regarding how to lead the SCLC. Ella Baker, known as King’s female counterpart in the movement, contended for leadership from below in an independent SNCC, which meant quicker mobilization of action and a mass following; however, King called for organization and viewed the SNCC as an activist training system of the SCLC (Frank and McPhail 219). The dissent between Baker and King entailed how the SCLC wanted the SNCC to cooperate with any method the SCLC desired, and how the SNCC desired to break away and fight civil rights their own way. According to Carson, there was always a perpetual strain between many civil rights leaders throughout the movement (“Black Freedom Struggle,” 27).
Due to opposing approaches to obtain civil rights, the Civil Rights Movement slowed comprehensively as well as experienced tension throughout the undertaking. Because of contrasting methods, not only did activists fight against segregationist whites, but also each other as well. This made earning civil rights for African-Americans more difficult. King maintained, “each group’s strategies were not contradictory, but supplemental…there might not always be uniformity, but there is certainly unity” (Hon 190). King preached if civil rights groups used each method collectively, they would have been more successful. He meant that the strategies could not work against each other, but had to work together to win the right of racial equality.

People in Power of Untrustworthy Institutions

While civil rights activists attempted to cooperate to obtain equality, the whites in power of many institutions were diligent in delaying the process. Even though some establishments assisted in civil rights reform, most did not. Specifically, African-Americans labeled the criminal court systems including the police departments, the city and state governments, as well as the federal government as untrustworthy. People in power of these institutions were either not responsive or against the cause of civil rights completely, so it was hard to believe in their rule of their systems.

According to Barkan, when it came to civil rights protest, “arrest was a daily threat…Southern police made arrests in virtually any kind of sit-in, march, or demonstration, and also arrested known activists in the absence of actual protest activity” (555). Here, Barkan showed the difficulty of carrying out a peaceful demonstration and progressing with protests when law enforcement officials detained any activist who attempted to make a difference. When the police arrested a lead activist, they took away the one who directed what path to follow and what goal to accomplish, which caused confusion and chaos. A pair of police chiefs, Laurie
Pritchett of Albany and Eugene “Bull” Connor of Birmingham, opposed civil rights efforts. Activists did not trust “Bull” Connor, known for his hostile methods (Hubbard 5, 6). As I discussed in the Albany section, Laurie Pritchett appeared to be accommodating, yet arrested many activists peacefully and quietly. When some arrested activists in Albany went on trial, it appeared to be a quick decision whether guilty or innocent. According to an account of a minister who witnessed the trial, “the judge had his opinion and judgment written out when he came into the court” (qtd. in W. Miller 133). In Albany as well as other cities, the activists’ fates were pre-determined and one could not expect a ruling to go in the favor of civil rights.

Other institutions that enforced the negative civil rights rulings included the state and federal governments. When it came to state governments and civil rights, African-Americans realized that some state governments, such as Virginia and Arkansas, were solely white-controlled (Wynes 420). As far back as Woodrow Wilson, as I mentioned prior, “Jim Crow” spread throughout the federal government (O’Reilly 121), so African-Americans could not expect any help from the majority white segregationist government. In Virginia, authorities enacted a segregation law to separate whites from African-Americans in train cars without major opposition. In Arkansas, Governor Faubus defied the federal government’s 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education. Faubus’ defiance outlined the disagreement between state and federal government. When dissention occurred between state and federal government, events in the Civil Rights Movement became unpredictable and African-Americans could not depend on either government to assist the quest for civil rights.

Doubt also rose in the federal government as well as the state government. When Faubus defied Eisenhower’s orders, civil rights leaders criticized the Eisenhower administration for not intervening in a timely manner. Instead of an intervention, “the federal government cloaked its
unresponsiveness under the guise of federalism, arguing that the primary responsibility for the maintenance of law and order is lodged in state and local authorities” (Hon 193). As the federal government placed the authority into the state government when it came to law and order, the ability to have faith in the Eisenhower administration diminished. Civil rights leaders also questioned the Kennedy administration after King condemned Kennedy’s leadership for the delay in delivering a speech about civil rights as an important issue. As more violent events happened, such as the James Meredith shooting and the bombing of 16th Street Baptist Church, African-Americans felt helpless, and they perceived the Kennedy administration as unconcerned (Hon 195). At the same time, when the presidents delivered their speeches on their respective civil rights events and issues, their rhetoric became interpreted as a positive step in the direction for civil rights.

**Interpretations of Rhetoric**

Along with the use of persuasive symbols to produce or bolster audience’s attitudes and motivate an audience, rhetoric determines the flow of the speech and whether or not the messages make sense. Audience members’ understanding of civil rights rhetoric was a challenge because some speeches were hard to follow. Some scholars who studied Martin Luther King, Jr., criticized his messages in his speeches. Lynch criticized the “Mountaintop” speech, “King’s speech seemed rambling and incoherent…Critics see little connection between King’s points, and note that his conclusion rambles on for another ten minutes” (Lynch 16). For the audience, Lynch explained how difficult it was to notice King’s message when there was superfluous detail in the speech. He also noted how contradictions in a speech made rhetoric difficult to follow. According to Roshco, when Johnson delivered his “We Shall Overcome” speech in 1965, some audience members interpreted it negatively, “he spent 10 minutes threatening the disorderly
Negroes and then his voice became somber and he asked us to pray. When our ancestors were threatened and killed they were asked to pray also” (8). According to this account, Johnson’s rhetoric was contradictory because when one threatens an audience and then tries to ask them to take an action the orator prefers, the audience will either interpret the rhetoric as intimidating or become less inclined to take the course of action the rhetor suggests.

Civil rights rhetoric created numerous interpretations, as well as divided the audience. The understandings of rhetoric were a persuasive challenge because of the competing rhetoric within the movement, between King’s nonviolent direction and the more aggressive path of Black Power (Ross 219). King’s nonviolent rhetoric intended for peaceful protests and progression of civil rights efforts, such as the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, the voter registration drive in Albany, Georgia, as well as the Montgomery Bus Boycott. In contrast, “some militant Negroes preferred more direct action than the creative dissent of the nonviolent demonstrators; such slogans as ‘Black Power’ came to mean one thing to whites and something else to Negroes” (Bosmaijan 7). The competition of civil rights rhetoric created division in the audience. King’s nonviolence supporters interpreted the peaceful rhetoric in the sense that they attempted to earn civil rights with their words, because the community did not provide reason to receive harm from authorities (Bosmaijan 8). King thought Black Power carried the negative connotation of violence (Brockriede and Scott 32).

The Black Power advocates appeared frustrated and distrustful of all establishments, black or white. A complicated relationship existed with Black Power on the subject of violence in the Civil Rights Movement. Malcolm X, as I have mentioned previously, set the violent stage of the Civil Rights Movement with his rhetoric on self-defense and physical retaliation against violent acts (Joseph 1003). Malcolm X’s rhetoric encouraged an understanding that self-defense
was an acceptable method to acquire civil rights. After Malcolm X’s assassination, the later
Black Power rhetoric drove frustration further. Speakers who used Black Power rhetoric
convinced their audience that the original civil disobedience method was not progressive towards
their Black Power movement or the Civil Rights Movement.

Hostile Rhetoric and Violent Actions from Civil Rights Protesters

The lack of progression in gaining civil rights caused hostile and violent feelings in the
audience. The Watts riot was an example of hostility and racial violence (Ransford 583).
Arguably, the Watts riot was the beginning breach from King’s traditional nonviolent method. It
is difficult for an orator to persuade an angry or hostile audience. Also, the increase in violent
rhetoric drove hostility. Activist “Rap” Brown conveyed messages that violence was an adequate
method to obtain civil rights; “Violence is as American as cherry pie” (Joseph 1014). Brown
used his ability to speak fast, similar to a rap, to grip his audience and entice them to support his
violent views. His rhetoric made violent reactions to discrimination seem acceptable to African-
Americans. The more requested demands from activists whites rejected, the more displeased and
violent the civil rights crowd became (Hon 185). In Chicago in 1966, for example, King led a
march for a new housing agreement. Citizens, both African-American and white, began to riot
and create a violent atmosphere in Chicago. In his autobiography, King noted how even in
Mississippi, he had never seen “mobs as hostile and as hate-filled as in Chicago” (King,
Autobiography, 305). Chicago was hostile because the city had a diverse population that had a
different range of opinions. Some believed in King’s nonviolence while others believed in Black
Power and retaliation towards whites. Since King’s nonviolence method took more time than
expected, some became hostile and frustrated, and took their anger out against whites who were
against the movement.
Hostility was a persuasive challenge during the Civil Rights Movement because a multitude of unreceptive audience members believed in one way and became angry if they were not appeased. In Chicago, audience members became angry because of activists’ failure to accomplish civil rights goals the way they desired. Changing the beliefs, values, and attitudes of the audience when they already have their opinion set is an arduous task for an orator, especially when the audience is hostile.

Failed Attempts to Change Values

When one has been taught a specific value for so many years, he or she is less inclined to show the willingness to change. The attempts to change values of some segregationist whites through civil rights speech proved to be a huge obstacle for King and other civil rights organizations. Segregationists passed the unwritten ideals of “Jim Crow” down to their children, and the children were expected to uphold the racial policy. According to Rountree, in a review of Ritterhouse, “white children learned racial identity-their own and others’- through direct and indirect parental and community instruction…these lessons were taught in the form of ‘racial etiquette,’ expected social behaviors used to establish, reinforce, and sustain racial hierarchies” (Rountree 172). Rountree further elaborated on how white children learned how to “interact with adults and children from different races in public and private spaces…In doing so, white children learned they were superior to African-American adults and children alike…while the same segregation system taught African-American children the opposite” (172). Teaching segregation to the next generation of children in the late 19th and early 20th century cemented the feelings of white superiority and African-American inferiority.

As far as the era of Reconstruction, segregationist whites sought to institutionalize segregation, which solidified the ideals and values of racism. African-Americans who fought for
civil rights reform learned that white citizens who strongly believed in segregation were hard to persuade otherwise. Segregation was uncompromising and inflexible due to the inheritance of “Jim Crow” throughout white families in the late 1800’s and early to middle 1900’s. The next generation of segregationists assumed they had the responsibility to enforce the “unwritten rules that govern day-to-day interactions across race lines” (Ritterhouse 4). Progression of civil rights development became a laborious task because it was hard to convince a generational segregationist side of the American audience to accept integration into the American social, political, and economic life.

**Perspective of Poor Whites.** African-Americans already held the lowest socioeconomic status in America, which involved working for lower wages. Race and socioeconomic class were interconnected because “Jim Crow” kept African-Americans inferior to whites in all aspects of society, including economics. African-Americans made very little money and had worse living conditions than the poorest of white citizens, which is why poor whites desired to keep segregation the most. This issue of socioeconomic class triggered the lower class whites to desire segregation even more, so there was a greater push for “Jim Crow.” According to Bernstein, lower class whites competed for an edge over African-Americans for wages. African-Americans recognized that the more pressure they faced from the economy, the more poor whites pressured for “Jim Crow” to enter society (202). Lower class whites held the level above African-Americans in regards to socioeconomic status, and they desired to keep segregation because that was the only way they were superior to African-Americans. While the lower class whites pushed segregation further, African-Americans had to make a living, so they had no choice but to work hard for their money and expect “Jim Crow” to make African-Americans socioeconomically inferior to whites. Due to the failed attempts to change values and the perspective of lower class
whites, Martin Luther King, Jr., one of the greatest leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, found it hard to earn civil rights under these difficult circumstances.

**Martin Luther King, Jr.**

King wanted the Civil Rights Movement to be a nonviolent movement where African-Americans obtained their civil rights through the method of civil disobedience. King’s vision during the Civil Rights Movement formed a persuasive discourse that demanded peace and time (Keely 290). King brought social justice to the issue of civil rights, and advocated nonviolence as the main avenue to success.

**Biographical Information**

Martin Luther King, Jr. was born in Atlanta, Georgia, on January 15th, 1929. Most of his male lineage preached for the Baptist church. His family lived in a religious Atlanta neighborhood. Aside from the religious trait, King discussed how he developed his general characteristics from his parents in his autobiography: “I think that my strong determination for justice comes from the very strong, dynamic personality of my father, and I would hope that the gentle aspect comes from a mother who is very gentle and sweet” (Autobiography, 3). His father modeled how to stand up for his beliefs in and his mother taught him the message of love. King’s mother also taught him about segregation the best she could, but King had to experience it firsthand to understand the concept. He had a white friend who decided to end the friendship when they entered separate schools for African-Americans and whites (Autobiography, 7). As he got older, King became aware of the lack of civil rights for African-Americans after he witnessed the injustices whites committed towards blacks in America. When King attended Morehouse College from 1944-1948, he felt responsible to amend the society African-Americans lived in (Autobiography, 44).
After he attended Morehouse College in Atlanta, King enrolled in the Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania. At the Crozer Seminary, King began to ponder a way to eradicate social inequality throughout the country as well as the world (Autobiography, 17). After he graduated from the Seminary, King entered Boston University’s School of Theology, where he became a Baptist minister after receiving his doctorate in 1955 (Nojeim 179). Throughout his education, King realized ministers were the citizens who people turned to for hope when any type of catastrophe occurred (Ling 12). When he graduated from Boston University, King desired to obtain civil rights for African-Americans and other minorities, and he wanted to accomplish the task peacefully. King’s major inspiration regarding how to deal with racism was Mahatma Gandhi, who practiced civil disobedience in India when it was under British rule. King decided to emulate Gandhi as a “model for the type of leader whose principles matched his practices” (Frank and McPhail 214). King wanted to follow a leader whose values matched his actions. Gandhi valued equal rights for all and used the civil disobedience method. Gandhi’s values and methods resonated with King, because Gandhi was successful in India when the British maintained control, and King believed peaceful actions and the cause for civil rights would abolish unequal segregation in America as well.

Scholars have analyzed King’s rhetoric, his ideas for promoting nonviolence in protests, and his position in the Civil Rights Movement (Carson, “Charismatic Leadership,” 448). For example, according to Carson, due to King’s charisma in his speeches, he was viewed as the most prominent orator in the movement (“Charismatic Leadership,” 450). King’s preacher background helped him use that charisma to make his speeches in the movement worthwhile.
Prior Studies of the Rhetorical Characteristics of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Rhetorical scholars conducted numerous studies on King. They have analyzed many of his speeches, including “I Have a Dream” and “Beyond Vietnam.” In the following paragraphs, I will highlight some of the rhetorical characteristics King incorporated in his speeches during the course of the Civil Rights Movement.

Use of Metaphor

Metaphor was one rhetorical tool King used to inspire hope for African-Americans in the Civil Rights Movement. Metaphor, as Aristotle theorized, is a “comparison in which there are pre-existing similarities between the two things being compared” (qtd. in Mensah 158). Metaphor locates similarities between two unrelated objects and creates a comparison. In Mensah’s study, in King’s speeches, metaphor illustrated how segregation controlled African-Americans, spread hope for African-Americans, and urged them to pursue racial equality peacefully (163-164). African-Americans desired to beat the racial discriminatory challenges they faced, another reason King used religious metaphors. I reference an example from King’s Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech in 1964 to demonstrate: “I am mindful that debilitating and grinding poverty afflicts my people and chains them to the lowest rung of the economic ladder” (King, “Nobel Peace Prize Speech”). King’s rhetorical phrase in this speech is a metaphor because it compares poverty to chains that hold African-Americans back from reaching their full, equal, economic potential. The concept of the ladder represented how far away African-Americans were from the economic prosperity some white Americans enjoyed. King used the religious metaphors to reiterate his definitions of slavery versus freedom.

The metaphor, “dream” is what King is most famous for today. King used the term “dream” as a metaphor to represent freedom. In Lucaites and Condit’s study, freedom was the
“dream” King referred to in his “I Have a Dream” speech, one of his many orations where his rhetoric “prevented black and white Americans from giving up the ‘dream’ of equality” (20). His goal for his audience was to recognize that freedom was also the “dream” they tried to achieve. King’s metaphoric, religious rhetoric motivated his audience to keep fighting for their civil freedoms.

**Use of Civil Religious Language**

According to Miller, King incorporated quotes from literature and inspirational songs to fight for freedom (“Landscape,” 169). When he discussed how freedom is valuable to every human being, he engaged in a civil religious discourse, which is a type of language that includes the “worship” of values such as freedom, democracy, and family. According to Keely, in speeches, “civil religious discourse appears throughout both religious and political discourse in the United States” (285). African-American citizens coveted freedom, so King used civil religious rhetoric to discuss freedom in his speeches.

King combined the main idea of the Exodus story with African-American politics and civil rights activism to allude to freedom and “The Promised Land” (Keely 288). In turn, King connected the “Promised Land” and the People of Israel to the African-American sanitation workers gaining civil rights reform in Memphis. When he connected the Biblical Exodus story with the historical situation during the Civil Rights Movement, “King both appropriated the civil religious tradition and extended it to include himself and his audience” (290). Here, King established a common ground with the audience to display how he stood beside them in the civil rights struggle. King assumed the role of a leader in the Civil Rights Movement and legitimized the cause of civil rights due to his background as a preacher.
Use of Mythic and Religious Language

Along with civil religious rhetoric, King also used mythic and religious language in his speeches to legitimize his authority as leader. To understand mythic and religious language, we must start with the concept of myths. I will begin with the purpose of myth and discuss how King connected it with religious rhetoric. According to Daughton and Hart, myths are “Master stories describing exceptional people doing exceptional things and serving as moral guides to proper action” (236). As a civil rights leader with a preacher background, King made many religious allusions to Biblical and mythical stories to provide moral compasses for his audiences on how to solve racial discrimination. He knew religion was significant to building unity in the face of segregation. In Selby’s study, the Exodus from Egypt was a recurring religious theme in King’s rhetoric, because he knew the story was commonplace in African-American tradition (43). King’s use of mythical religious rhetoric assisted him in achieving respect and attention from his audience.

King made mythic and religious allusions to relate to the struggles African-Americans went through during the Civil Rights Movement. King used the messages from famous religious proverbs throughout the Civil Rights Movement to inspire hope for his African-American audience that they would gain civil rights eventually. According to Frank and McPhail, “religious rhetoric inspired and infused the struggle for civil rights…” (210). King constructed his speeches to both fit in with his nonviolent philosophy and to relate to both religion and moral laws. An example of mythic and religious rhetoric is from King’s “Letter From Birmingham Jail.” King underlined the religious allusion of Paul to magnify himself as responsible for leading the journey towards African-American civil rights, “just as Paul left his village of Tarsus and 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 hometown” (Clark 41). King convinced his audience to follow his direction because he made a familiar religious connection with significance to their lives.

To explore King’s use of mythic and religious language, I examined Owens’ study. Owens researched the rhetoric of “I Have a Dream” in relation to the Emancipation Proclamation through mythic structure, which studies the speaker as a hero returning to his or her community from a journey, delivering knowledge and advice to his or her audience (3, 4). In this scenario, King placed himself as the leader of the Civil Rights Movement and envisioned a positive future for African-Americans. According to Owens, “King identified his personal journey and that of his constituents with the historic conception of African-Americans as a people destined to move from freedom to bondage to freedom again in the matter of ancient Israelites” (Owens 5). To achieve this dream, King took himself and his audience on the mythical religious journey through time. King made this comparison to illustrate how African-Americans have been through worse and they could overcome the obstacle of segregation through peaceful protest and speech. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech provided hope for African-Americans in the Civil Rights Movement, just as the Emancipation Proclamation provided hope for black slaves in the Civil War (Carson et al. 90).

**Appeal to Emotions**

As far back as the ancient Romans, speakers had to appeal to their audience’s emotions and persuade them to move towards the rhetor’s desired path (Bostdorff and Ferris 431). King’s rhetoric appealed to his audience’s emotions everywhere he spoke. King used his personality as a rhetorical device (Hon 176). Hon described how King could reshape the image of the Civil Rights Movement through his style of rhetorical communication and the attention he gained as a
leader in the SCLC (176). In his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” for instance, King conveyed the message to his audience to develop a sense of courage, when he wrote how civil rights had to be demanded from a persecutor, because the oppressor would not grant civil rights willingly (Bosmaijan 41). King’s statement demanded courage from his supporters, because protesting for an issue such as civil rights openly was dangerous; however, King’s rhetoric inspired many of his followers to continue to pursue civil rights at any cost. He knew the cause for civil rights was important, so King needed to convey emotion in his letter to inspire his audiences.

In King’s letter, he used a negative term familiar to civil rights activists as well as African-Americans: “wait” (King, “Letter From Birmingham Jail”). After reading this, the reader anticipated intense emotion. After writing the word “wait,” King expounded on the idea that African-Americans were always told to “wait” for civil rights regardless of how much suffering they had been through:

when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim…when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six year old daughter why she can’t go to the public amusement park…and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky…developing an unconscious bitterness towards white people…when your first name becomes ‘nigger,’ your middle name becomes ‘boy,’…then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait (King, “Letter”).

The emotion here is palpable because the reader feels sympathetic as well as frustrated. King expressed sympathy due to reading about African-Americans who witnessed whites assault and murder some of their family members. King also conveyed sympathy due to the innocent little
girl who is learning about the segregated society, and how she had to grow up with it her whole life. In general, whenever one's family member is harmed physically and emotionally, especially when a child is involved, the document appeals to many sad emotions. The letter also provoked frustration when it stated when one experienced what African-Americans went through from the end of slavery to when King sent the letter in 1963, he or she understood the difficulty of waiting for civil rights reform. From the emotional context of the letter, King stated African-Americans had to act immediately, and he pushed his method of nonviolent, direct action to appeal to audience emotions.

King’s encouraging and emotional rhetoric also appealed to audience’s emotions through common sources of inspiration, such as songs similar to “My Country ‘Tis of Thee” and past speeches, such as King’s “Unfulfilled Hopes” sermon. Carson’s study shows how King took phrases from songs and famous speeches to unify his audience and stress the American Dream (Carson et al. 144). All of the speeches King used to model his “I Have a Dream” speech had to contain some knowledge common to the audience. King used motivational rhetoric to invoke pride in the audience at a time when they needed the self-confidence to pursue civil rights.

The “Mountaintop” Speech

The “Mountaintop” speech is a prime example of motivational rhetoric during the Civil Rights Movement. In the following sections, I will discuss the background context of the “Mountaintop” speech, prior analyses of the “Mountaintop” speech, and the messages the speech conveyed.

Background Context

On February 1st, 1968, two sanitation workers in Memphis, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, were crushed in a substandard garbage truck. The compactor mechanism malfunctioned
during a horrible rainstorm (Branch, *Canaan*, 684). One could imagine how horrible it was to pull their bodies from the shoddy truck. Unlike Rosa Parks, credited as one of the main contributors to spark the Civil Rights Movement; or Medgar Evers who became a civil rights martyr, Cole and Walker were ignored and soon forgotten due to the birth of Lisa Marie Presley, Elvis Presley’s daughter. The media disregarded the deaths of the two sanitation workers, with the exception of the local African-American newspaper, who called the sanitation company a “fortress of discrimination” (Branch, *Canaan*, 685). The city of Memphis did not grant death benefits or workers’ compensation to the families of Walker and Cole. African-American sanitation workers in Memphis already made lower wages than the white sanitation workers. Because of the economic as well as civil rights issue at hand, King came to Memphis to “show support for the predominately African-American sanitation workers and their leaders” (Lynch 13).

The purpose for King’s desire to support the Memphis sanitation workers, according to Lynch, was to “revitalize his movement at a time of crisis through the reaffirmation of his leadership” (12). King came to Memphis because the city contained both issues he desired to help solve: civil rights and economic injustice towards African-Americans. He understood Memphis was so chaotic due to the deaths of the two sanitation workers and lack of benefits for African-Americans. King viewed Memphis as the perfect opportunity to re-establish himself as the most prominent leader in the Civil Rights Movement as well as convince the sanitation workers they must use his nonviolent approach if they wanted to achieve economic and civil rights reform.

The sanitation plant workers went on strike to achieve improved work reforms, such as fair pay and equal treatment in the workplace. As a result, they created the tense atmosphere in
Memphis. At these protests, King delivered religious sermons to build motivation among the audience. He also gave the protest purpose: “Now our struggle is for genuine equality, which means economic equality…We are tired of being at the bottom…we are tired…Power is the ability to effect change…I want you to stick it out so that you will be able to make Mayor Loeb and others say ‘Yes’ even when they want to say ‘No’.” (King qtd. in Branch, *Canaan*, 719).

King not only described why there were protests in Memphis, but also advocated the marchers remain strong. Here, King may have contended if the demonstrators stayed strong in the strike, they would gain power, which would bring the mayor of Memphis, Henry Loeb, as well as the head of the sanitation company to agree to the workers’ terms of better working conditions.

Many nonviolent protests took place in Memphis and the press covered little to nothing regarding peaceful demonstration. On March 28th, 1968, a demonstration held in Memphis appeared to be heading in a successful direction for King. People held up signs to honor the two dead sanitation workers, including “I AM A MAN,” “WE ARE TOGETHER,” and “MACE WON’T STOP THE TRUTH” (Branch, *Canaan*, 731). The protest appeared to remain united and peaceful regardless of opposing force, until a group of young African-Americans arrived at the demonstration, and waved signs of “DAMN LOEB/BLACK POWER IS HERE and LOEB EAT SHIT” (*Canaan* 731). These signs contradicted King’s method of peaceful protest.

Eventually, protestors became aggressive and began to break windows: “for the first time in the movement, a peaceful civil rights march in that city had erupted in violence and looting by some in the frustrated and fragmented African-American community” (Lynch 13). As soon as police witnessed this, they began to respond with beatings and administered tear gas. King had to be evacuated; meanwhile, nine police officers suffered injuries, 280 African-Americans were arrested and 60 were injured, as well as one death (733). The media then covered Memphis and
displayed King’s leadership and civil disobedience method negatively. According to Garrow, the *New York Times* marked the first Memphis march as a disastrous setback to King (*Protest at Selma*, 615).

While the press portrayed King and his nonviolence method as negative and ineffective, The Poor People’s Campaign was approaching in Washington, DC to rally against poverty on April 22nd. Due to the violence on March 28th, some believed the rally could lead to further violence: “Nationally, some feared that the upcoming Poor People’s Campaign in Washington would result in violence because King had lost control of the movement” (Beifuss 252; Lynch 13). King knew he had to rebound from the bad publicity towards his cause and regain control of The Civil Rights Movement. To erase any hint of violence and boost morale for the sanitation workers’ strike, King and other members of the SCLC worked with the city of Memphis to schedule a second march on April 8th (Lynch 13). Not only were the strikers discouraged, King felt deflated as well. Regardless of how he felt, King wanted to make sure the sanitation workers recognized that there was still a struggle for civil rights reform.

Prior to delivering his final speech at the Mason Temple, King felt under the weather and exhausted from all the travel, so he did not prepare to speak. He also feared riots as well as further demoralization due to the small crowd of sanitation workers. King initially sent Ralph Abernathy to speak in King’s place; however, Abernathy sensed the disappointment from the crowd at not witnessing King, and he called King at his hotel room. Abernathy told King about all the microphones, cameras, reporters, and especially a main crowd of sanitation workers who went through so much just to see King speak (Branch, *Canaan*, 756). Not only did King address the sanitation workers as the active audience; he answered his white audiences as well as critics of his leadership and peaceful method in the larger Civil Rights Movement. When King realized
he would address the audience of the comprehensive Civil Rights Movement, King went up to the Mason Temple to deliver what would be his final speech, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.”

Prior Analyses of the Rhetoric of the “Mountaintop” Speech.

According to Miller, King united an entire nation in the “Mountaintop” speech, including millions of whites, which was unimaginable in this controversial era of The Civil Rights Movement (“Landscape,” 172). There were television cameras and radio broadcasts from various news networks, so most African-Americans and whites all over the country could view or listen to the speech. According to Frank and McPhail, King avoided speaking about any retaliatory action other than walking away and forming a nonviolent resistance (212). In the “Mountaintop” speech, King encouraged patience from his audience members for civil rights reform and the inclusion of African-Americans in American society; however, as I previously discussed in persuasive challenges with Chicago, persuading frustrated followers to be peaceful and patient is difficult for any orator. The audience in Memphis was demoralized due to the frustration with “the slow response to nonviolent tactics, and agitators were promoting violence as the only method to get results” (Keely 281).

According to Lynch, while a few studies further analyze the “Mountaintop” transcript for the rhetorical form and skill King used, people think of his final speech as a “prophecy of his own death” (13). I will synthesize the key research that focuses on the rhetorical characteristics of the oration, especially as they pertain to how he as well as others in the audience viewed his leadership and his peaceful approach. These characteristics of the “Mountaintop” speech include its use of narrative, particularly the Exodus story, as well as the Good Samaritan story and Amos.

Narrative. Scholars such as Keely emphasized how King’s rhetoric presented challenges to the audience via his use of narrative in his “Mountaintop” speech (282). Lynch stated, along
with Keely, how King used the narrative element in the “Mountaintop” speech to bring the audience back to the original purpose of the Civil Rights Movement (Keely 282; Lynch 14). When an orator engages in a narrative discourse, he or she delivers the speech in a story structure. Basic story structure includes a setting, characters, initiating events, and a resolution. In his “Mountaintop” speech, King reminded the sanitation workers of his nonviolent approach to the Civil Rights Movement when he constructed the narrative elements of the speech to set up where his audience members were in the movement and the goal for which they had to strive.

Some of the most significant narrative elements King used, according to Keely, were stories of the Bible, African-American folklore, as well as moral heroism in the face of oppression. King used narrative in the “Mountaintop” address to clarify to his audience, both black and white, that African-Americans held the position of inequality in American society and how to win civil rights in Memphis. He also brought in other events throughout history to display how the oppressed overcame their tormentors, such as the narrative of the Exodus and other Biblical narratives.

**Biblical Narratives.** King’s experience with religion helped him play the role of the African-American preacher who spoke to his congregation (Calloway-Thomas and Lucaites 7). King’s autobiography confirmed how he believed it was his divine duty to accomplish the daunting task of achieving racial equality in the Civil Rights Movement (*Autobiography*, 18). King’s use of rhetoric also kept the Civil Rights Movement protests peaceful. Overall, past researchers have identified three Biblical narratives which King used for this purpose: the Exodus narrative, the Good Samaritan, and the righteous characteristic of Amos.

Rosteck examined the “Mountaintop” speech through the Exodus narrative. Since the audiences King spoke to were familiar with the Exodus narrative, they could identify with it and
remember the story themselves. According to Rosteck, the audience made a connection between the slaves in Egypt and their situation in Memphis, which further clarified the cause for the sanitation workers and helped them begin to believe they could earn victory in Memphis (29). This example of research is prevalent among several studies of “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.” (Keely; Lynch; Rosteck; Selby)

One of Selby’s studies devoted an entire book to the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt as a rhetorical tool King used in his final speech. His book, Martin Luther King and the Rhetoric of Freedom: The Exodus Narrative in America’s Struggle for Civil Rights, provided a deeper analysis of the Exodus narrative because—as Frank and McPhail note—most scholars have overlooked the magnitude of the story in the African-American struggle for civil rights (216). Selby claimed King magnified the Exodus narrative in his final speech; “King exploited this rich, pre-existing body of social knowledge, the Exodus story, but then adapted it in a way that addressed a complex set of competing rhetorical demands” (Selby 69). Selby’s assertion suggested King used the Exodus narrative to cite the oppressive event in Egypt and compare it to the economic injustice in Memphis and how to succeed there. King then placed himself as the main character in the Exodus narrative, Moses.

When King delivered his “Mountaintop” speech, he managed to create a persona of Moses. King managed to put himself in the shadow of a prophet and took the audience on a journey through history when he used his charismatic speaking skills as the vehicle to accomplish his goal. Throughout the Civil Rights Movement, King took the initiative to become the head leader of the African-American cause for civil rights. He cemented that legacy in the last lines of the “Mountaintop” speech. Keely examined the final lines of the speech in her study, as well. King concluded: “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…Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord” (King, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop”). In her study, Keely argued how the final lines of the speech connected King with Moses when Moses went up to Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments and witnessed God come down to him. King placed himself in Moses’ religious position for his audience as a means to entice them to follow him further, because Moses had been to the mountaintop before, and King desired to take his audience there with him to gain civil rights (Keely 288). When King depicted himself as Moses, he also reinforced his religious leadership to his audience.

At Memphis, King’s speech also used other Biblical stories to relate to his audience via religious language and storytelling, so he could reinforce his role as a religious leader and convince African Americans to follow his leadership of working for civil rights peacefully (Lynch 13). King knew how to combine academic and spiritual language, which made the biggest impact on the members of the audience (Dyson 141). King retold the Good Samaritan story in his “Mountaintop” speech. In the story, thieves robbed a Jew of all of his possessions and left him in a dangerous path between Jerusalem and Jericho. While the Jew struggled, a priest and a Levite passed and did not stop to help the Jew in need. While holy and righteous, they appeared selfish with the question “If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?” (qtd. in King, “I See The Promised Land” 285). Another man, the Samaritan, came by and stopped to help the Jew, providing care and tending to him. King stated how the Samaritan had rephrased the question: “If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?” (King, “I See the Promised Land” 285). The message of the Good Samaritan story, according to Jesus, is
that one who is compassionate and willing to sacrifice him- or herself for the safety of others is a great person, “and one must love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18; Mark 12:31).

The Samaritan, according to Keely, was a victim to segregation and oppression based on his ethnicity, and he was the nonviolent hero of the Jew who had been robbed (Keely 290). King pleaded with the audience to relate to the struggle and sacrifice of the Samaritan, follow the message of the Good Samaritan, and refrain from committing violent acts in their strike to avoid a repeat of the first Memphis march on March 28th. When King used the Samaritan story, he was “able to illustrate the importance of sacrifice to the quest for equality… Samaritans were looked down on by Jews. If a Samaritan could risk his life for a Jew, then African-Americans and whites can sacrifice to bring about the Promised Land” (Owens 9). King preached to the audience that even though the Samaritan and Jew did not associate with each other, one still helped the other and they both got through Jericho Road. Owens argued that King compared the Samaritan story to the strike in Memphis during the Civil Rights Movement when King stated how African-Americans and whites could be together when they reach the Promised Land of equality, yet they would still have to sacrifice and struggle to achieve their goal (Owens 11).

King mentioned another Biblical character in his “Mountaintop” speech, the prophet Amos, who preached in the northern kingdom of Israel when King Jeroboam II ruled the area. Amos preached about social justice and the disadvantaged in Israel, similar to King worried about the sanitation workers and equal rights. At the time of King’s “Mountaintop” speech in Memphis, Amos’s teaching still held relevance to the segregationist situation throughout the Civil Rights Movement. He spoke against an increased discrepancy between the wealthy and the poor. Amos also preached about how justice overrides ritual (Amos 5:21-6:6). In Memphis, the sanitation workers were lower class citizens who received little to no support from the sanitation
companies and the city of Memphis. Not only did their white “superiors” neglect the sanitation workers, but also their African-American peers who may have been better off economically may have overlooked them as well. King possibly delivered the “Mountaintop” speech not only to address the wealthy authorities of Memphis, but also to other African-Americans in Memphis to join the sanitation workers’ strike for economic freedoms to boost their morale as well as provide support (Osborn, “Critic as Participant,” 158). While segregation and racism towards African-Americans were commonplace during the Civil Rights Movement, King identified himself with Amos when he preached to his audience of sanitation workers that justice permeates American society with righteousness. He also used Amos to reiterate how direct action was of utmost importance to each sanitation worker and it was up to them to use nonviolent tactics in their strike, which would make their push for economic and civil rights justice successful (Metz 12).

As King articulated his 43-minute “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech, the frustrating atmosphere surrounding the sanitation strike in Memphis turned hopeful for the audience. The messages of the “Mountaintop” speech appeared to be the answer to all of the claims of the opposition King faced. He practiced the speech repeatedly in the time he had available, and, when the time came, provided his audience with stories of hope which taught lessons. He voiced the ideas both African-Americans and whites in the movement in the 1960s desperately wanted to hear (Dyson 143). After researching prior characteristics of the “Mountaintop” speech, I determined how King connected himself with the Good Samaritan and the Prophet Amos to help his audience identify with their values and follow their religious teachings of compassion and righteousness to convey the illustrious message of the “Mountaintop” speech.
Conclusion

In this chapter, I have introduced the assumptions of Burkean Dramatism as well as its branch of cluster criticism and the outline of “God” and “Devil” terms. I have also covered a thorough chronology of the African-American Civil Rights Movement, along with the issues activists sought to solve and the persuasive challenges of the movement. Finally, in this extensive literature review, I studied the biography of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., his characteristics of his rhetoric overall, and the rhetorical characteristics of his final speech, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.” In Chapter III, I will explain the rhetorical method I analyze the “Mountaintop” speech with, cluster agon analysis. I will also justify my method, outline how I will examine the artifact, as well as list and describe the specific methodological steps to cluster criticism.
CHAPTER III: METHOD

Cluster criticism is a method derived from Kenneth Burke’s dramatistic theory. I will use cluster criticism to analyze Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech. In general, King attempted to unify his audience with his use of “God” and “Devil” terms. Through identification of the terms King used as “God” or “Devil”, I can determine how King represented the ultimate ideal message and the ultimate evil message. Cluster criticism puts the focus on vocabulary choices King used to motivate his audience and legitimate himself as well as his nonviolence method to keep pushing the Civil Rights Movement forward in Memphis peacefully. In this chapter, I will justify the method, explain the artifact, and describe the methodological steps of cluster criticism.

Justification of Method

Kenneth Burke provided scholars with many useful tools to conduct rhetorical criticism. One tool of cluster criticism is the analysis of how the language of the speech persuades the audience to take the orator’s side; therefore, for my particular study of King’s “Mountaintop” speech, the method of cluster criticism is useful. Through analyzing how rhetors apply “God” and “Devil” terms, critics who apply cluster criticism can reveal associations among concepts, beliefs, attitudes, and values which those terms represent. Cluster criticism allows me to uncover the terminological motives that are offered from the speaker to the audience, as well as how meaning is shaped around specific terms. For example: Burke noted Heaven and Hell are two terms that create the ultimate ground powerfully. Speakers use “God” and “Devil” terms to form themselves into leaders, someone who their audience can listen to comfortably (Burke, Language as Symbolic Action, 20).
Speakers provide the audience with motives for action. Cluster agon analysis is a rhetorical method one applies to examine an orator’s motives. Critics who use cluster analysis have written that the speaker describes the situation in a way where the audience only sees one logical path to follow. Overington further explained this, stating critics who apply cluster analysis focus on how speakers explain the actions they want their audience to take due to the situation (141). Burke quoted Hitler’s example of motive in “A Rhetoric of Hitler’s Battle,” “I have more right to speak than anyone else” (qtd. in Daughton and Hart 273). Hitler’s motive was to let people know that his view was the only one to follow. He eliminated any other direction other than the one he wanted the audience to accept. Hitler placed himself before anyone else, and his audience had no choice but to listen to him.

Daughton and Hart explained how “God” and “Devil” terms magnify the drama of situation. “God” terms are defined as the ultimate ideal vocabulary term to persuade the audience to take the speaker’s course of action. “Devil” terms are defined as the ultimate evil vocabulary term to dissuade the audience from opposing the orator. Daughton and Hart stated the terms amplify the drama through discourse. This illustrates how cluster analysis is a branch of Burke’s dramatistic criticism, which Burke used as a tool to analyze human relationships with human motives through dramatic life (259-261). Cluster criticism is valuable in analysis because it focuses on language, which leads to a close analysis of the text. Scholars who apply cluster agon have the ability to not only focus on individual terms that are used, but how they were used and how they were paired with other terms to construct a clear message for the audience. Cluster Agon analysis also reveals the motives as to why the speaker clusters the symbolic terms together to form a message the audience can follow along with, whether positive or negative.
Artifact

The artifact analyzed in this study is Martin Luther King, Jr.’s final speech, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.” The Papers Project at The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University provided the transcript for analysis. I listened to the speech not only to find terms used frequently, but also to note the tone and inflection of the terms. I listened to the recording of the “Mountaintop” speech provided by the Encyclopedia of King from The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University. I analyzed the transcript of the speech to examine the rhetorical language King used (King, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” Audio Recording; King, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” Transcript).

Specific Methodological Steps

According to Foss, there are several steps one must take to conduct a cluster analysis. When one analyzes a message using cluster criticism specifically, one must “identify key terms in the artifact, chart the terms that cluster around key terms, and make an explanation for the artifact” (66). In analyzing discourse, Foss suggested a critic should list around five or six of the most significant terms the orator stated. The level of importance is based on the frequency with which the word occurs and how the level of intensity can affect the term (66). Foss provided the example of the term dream in King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, due to how often and how mightily King portrayed dream in the speech. King used dream to appeal to listeners and their emotions, which is what King also did in his “Mountaintop” speech with we as a key term for unification.

The intensity factor, frequency, and a term’s association are all ways to discover a pattern or an explanation for the artifact (Foss 68). The frequency provides a pattern due to the recurrence of the term. As for intensity, the more intense the words are in the message, the higher
the emphasis is on the discourse (68). If a speaker had two key terms in one of his or her sentences, the audience will remember the significance more. In King’s “Mountaintop” speech, I will chart or cluster the terms based on the intensity of the term used, as well as how frequently the term occurred in the speech. This will highlight the extensive vocabulary King used to formulate a clear message of peaceful protest to his audience.

The focus on the vocabulary terms and how they cluster together within the “Mountaintop” speech influenced the research question and prompted the explanation for the clustered terms in the speech. As I looked at the transcript, I examined the number of times King mentioned key terms in the speech, the significance with which he treated them, and the terms associated with the Devil and God terms. An audio recording of the speech also allowed me to focus on the emphasis King put on those key terms. In my cluster agon analysis, in Chapter IV, I will attempt to ascertainment how Martin Luther King, Jr. used “God” and “Devil” terms in his “Mountaintop” speech to legitimize his leadership and encourage his audience in Memphis and beyond to advocate the Civil Rights Movement peacefully.
CHAPTER IV:

CLUSTER ANALYSIS OF KING’S “MOUNTAINTOP” SPEECH

On the rainy Wednesday night of April 3rd, 1968, a hesitant King addressed a demoralized and frustrated, yet passionate audience made up of sanitation workers on strike at the Mason Temple, a church in Memphis, Tennessee (Downing 275). According to Osborn, in Memphis, the atmosphere included “meanness of fearful people and…the overall sense of looming explosiveness that often accompany profound social change” (“The Last Mountaintop,” 148). King felt nervous and uncomfortable speaking because of emotional exhaustion, as well as the risk for a potential riot; due to the leftover hostility from the first protest in Memphis, which erupted in violence on March 28th several days prior. He also felt anxious due to the constant threat of storms, including tornado warnings. King asked Ralph Abernathy, King’s partner and friend throughout the Civil Rights Movement, to speak to the crowd for him. After some time, Abernathy called King and convinced him to speak to the audience, “I really think you should come down… The people want to hear you, not me” (Oates 484). The sanitation workers arrived at the Mason Temple to hear King speak, and Abernathy recognized this as well. Reluctantly, King got dressed and made his way towards the Mason Temple. When he arrived, the crowd became energized and gave King an enthusiastic applause. Abernathy then began to introduce King. After Abernathy’s introduction, King thanked Abernathy and delivered his final oration calling for peaceful methods to gain economic and civil rights for African-Americans (Branch, Canaan, 756).

King’s possible purpose for the “Mountaintop” speech was to call for economic unity, boycotts, and nonviolent protest, while challenging the United States to live up to its values of freedom, democracy, and equality for all American citizens regardless. He also intended to
position himself as the main leader the sanitation workers should follow, as well as convince all
civil rights activists his nonviolent approach was the best strategy for their situation in Memphis.
King attempted to accomplish these goals of his speech through the use of “God” and “Devil”
terms. These terms, also known as ultimate terms, helped King create a pattern of messages he
used in an effort to persuade the tense audience in Memphis to answer his calls for peaceful
activism as well as negotiate with the heads of the sanitation company. The use of ultimate terms
depicted King as a leader and his nonviolent approach as the most legitimate method of the Civil
Rights Movement. Depending on what King desired for the audience or what he wanted to avoid
in his speech, he clustered the specific terms in patterns as “God” or “Devil” terms. Throughout
the “Mountaintop” address, King used the terms to build positive as well as negative images of
how King wanted the audience members to protest for their civil rights. In this chapter, I will
analyze the “God” and “Devil” terms King used in the “Mountaintop” speech, as well as the
terms that clustered around each. I will label the “God” and “Devil” terms in italics that associate
as a pattern leading up to the identification of the Ultimate Terms. Overall, through the rhetorical
method of dramatistic cluster criticism, I will analyze how King used “God” and “Devil” terms
to motivate his audience and legitimize his leadership as well as his civil disobedient approach in
Memphis and beyond in his final speech.

“Devil” Terms

As I mentioned previously, “Devil” terms are key words charted with more negative
connotations (Foss 67), such as failure, ignorance, and disappointment. These are the ideas
speakers want their audiences to move away from, so the rhetors evoke fear of reaching those
conditions. In his “Mountaintop” speech, King used “Devil” terms to outline what violent
courses of action he wanted the sanitation workers’ strike to avoid, because his goal was to
obtain civil rights for African-Americans through methods of nonviolence. The “Devil” terms
King used embodied the ultimate evil of the violent tactics he wanted his audience to avoid (67),
which displayed what could have gone wrong, highlighted a painful past, and drew out the
opposition. The “Devil” terms I examined King’s speech included they, slaves/slavery, and
sneezed/sneeze. It is important to discuss the context in which each term was used, how King
treated these words as “Devil” terms, how often he used the term, as well as the meaning that his
usage appeared to convey.

They

In Memphis, during the “Mountaintop” speech, King referred to white authorities and the
heads of the sanitation company as they. King incorporated they a total of 32 times (King,
“Mountaintop”). While in some parts, he portrayed they in a positive light, I will examine how
they represented the “Devil” term of enemy opposition. King labeled the opposition as they for
the audience members to identify the opponent, whether it was the policemen, the politicians, or
the sanitation workers’ bosses. King also depicted the press as they. King pointed out the press
because they were the opposition in the sense that the press only covered the violence and
window breaking related to the protests in Memphis, actions that went against King’s peaceful
objective in the “Mountaintop” speech. Throughout this section of the analysis, I will associate
the “Devil” term they to function as a rhetorical opponent against King during his delivery of his
“Mountaintop” speech.

King first used they in the “Mountaintop” speech as an oppositional “Devil” term when
he acknowledged the problems the sanitation workers faced, “…let us keep the issues where they
are. The issue is injustice. The issue is the refusal of Memphis to be fair and honest in its
dealings with its public servants, who happen to be sanitation workers” (King, “Mountaintop”).
Here, issues represent the opposition to King because the issues, “they,” are issues of the movement. King tried to combat the economic injustice placed upon the sanitation workers in his speech, so he stated the sanitation workers should focus on solving those issues. If the sanitation workers and other audience members lost their attention in the Civil Rights Movement, they would lose focus on the strike’s objective; gaining civil and economic rights as well as negotiations with the authorities of the sanitation companies and the city of Memphis. King helped the audience recognize the real targets of the strike, which created a starting point for the audience to resolve the economic and civil rights issues. To beat an opponent, one has to know who or what the opponent is. King associated they with injustice and refusal to be fair or honest, which formed the opponent for the sanitation workers.

As I mentioned prior, the bosses of the sanitation companies in the city of Memphis as well as the city government officials, mainly Mayor Henry Loeb, set the economic injustice and anti-civil rights policies. The mayor took the side of the heads of the sanitation companies when he declared the sanitation workers’ strike illegal and demanded they return to their jobs: “A strike of public employees is illegal. We are a nation governed by laws and as Mayor I have given my oath to uphold the law” (Loeb, “Mayor Loeb Letter to Strikers”). Loeb refused to negotiate with the strikers. King’s knowledge of the letter prompted him to label the major companies, such as Coca-Cola, and the administration of Memphis, namely Mayor Loeb, as they. King used the “Devil” term they in this small yet vital section of the “Mountaintop” speech a total of three times (“Mountaintop”). King attempted to ignite a boycott against the major companies as well as the Mayor Loeb. He wanted to exert economic pressure on them to force negotiations, if not economic change in the workplace.
As King listed his reasons as to why citizens of Memphis should boycott the stores, King increased his volume to emphasize the importance of the economic boycott to the strike. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) chose specific companies to boycott due to their discriminatory hiring policies towards African-Americans. According to King, if the boycott succeeded, then the heads of the sanitation companies could negotiate with the strikers and support their rights, make the demonstration larger, and force Mayor Loeb to negotiate with the strikers as well (“Mountaintop”). They, in this situation, were initially the heads of the sanitation companies as well as other major corporations and factories who perpetuated the economic injustices, such as the unfair hiring policies; “We are choosing these companies because they haven’t been fair in their hiring policies; and we are choosing them because they can begin the process of saying they are going to support the needs and rights of these men who are on strike. And then they can move on town—downtown and tell Mayor Loeb what is right” (King, “Mountaintop,” my emphasis). On the last sentence, King articulated the term they strongly possibly to place his critics of nonviolence in the place of the corporations and authorities in Memphis to represent they. King isolated Loeb in the “Mountaintop” speech because Loeb was the mayor of the city who held the most power, so King sought to bring change from the highest of authority.

Another one of the audience’s opponents, as well as King’s, was the press. Based on the extensive media coverage of the violence that took place in Memphis prior to King’s “Mountaintop” address, King knew the press was neither on the sanitation workers’ side, nor King’s. The press, they, portrayed the sanitation workers’ strike negatively with many violent images and content, even though they covered little of the protests prior to the violence. King then clustered together the message of how the strikers needed to continue to pursue civil rights.
From there, he further built up his point of the speech saying of the press: “They very seldom got around to mentioning the fact that…sanitation workers are on strike, and that Memphis is not being fair to them… They didn’t get around to that” (King, “Mountaintop” my emphasis). From the recording, I noticed how the audience began to cheer after King’s direct statement (“Mountaintop” Papers Project Recording). The sanitation workers applauded King because they agreed with his assertion as to how the press opposed the sanitation workers and their strike.

**Slaves/Slavery**

When people are stripped of their civil rights, one can argue they are in an oppressive system such as *slavery*, another “Devil” term of King’s rhetoric. I analyzed *Slaves/Slavery* as a “Devil” term to emphasize oppression because it was something the *slaves* wanted to be freed from. The term connected with economic injustice that the sanitation workers wanted to break free from. Granted the sanitation workers in Memphis were not actual slaves, they **still** did not have the rights white Americans had at the time of the Civil Rights Movement. King was aware of this and challenged the United States to “be true to what you said on paper” (“Mountaintop”). In the “Mountaintop” speech, King used the term *slaves/slavery* a total of seven times in a span of three sentences. He mentioned the term *slaves/slavery* the most where he discussed the Exodus because he wanted to provide a familiar example of slavery with which the African-American audience could recognize and identify quickly. King also **recited** the Exodus story because, according to Selby, it “represented a patterned form of social knowledge that was deeply ingrained with African-American culture…” (29). King had his African-American audience identify with the Israelite slaves who left Egypt, and he used the Exodus story as a motive to help them overcome the oppression of their race in the United States.
According to Selby, throughout African-American culture, “the Exodus was among the most pervasive themes in African-American history, providing a remarkably malleable interpretive frame through which blacks made sense of a variety of different events and experiences” (49). King narrated the story of the Exodus because it was an example that provided perspective to African-Americans. According to Miller, “African-Americans composed songs, preached sermons, and wrote tracts about the Exodus because no other story proved more sublimely expressive of the theme of deliverance” (Voice of Deliverance, 19). Miller stated the Exodus narrative was popular to African-Americans because it resonated with how they struggled throughout various points of history, such as pre-Civil War. Based on this research, I argue that King aspired to motivate and unite his audience through the Exodus story.

King also explained to his audience how slavery continued in Egypt and how Pharaoh kept the slaves “fighting amongst themselves” (“Mountaintop”). King pointed to how the slaves stopped fighting with each other and became united to overcome their struggles of slavery. Here, King used slavery as a “Devil” term to convey to the audience members they should not be divided on how to solve the civil rights issue, and they needed to unite under one method; King’s nonviolent approach. Pharaoh could not maintain control of the slaves when the slaves united and worked together for freedom. Likewise, King stated how unity was the sanitation workers’ key to obtaining economic and civil rights justice (“Mountaintop”). King made the connection between slavery in Egypt and civil rights oppression in Memphis because he tried to provide hope to his audience that they could succeed similarly to the how the slaves succeeded in Egypt. King emphasized unity through the Exodus story among the sanitation workers, “but whenever the slaves get together, something happens in Pharaoh's court, and he cannot hold the slaves in slavery. When the slaves get together, that's the beginning of getting out of slavery”
(“Mountaintop” Recording, my emphasis). His call to action was direct and stern, which prompted a cheer from his audience. King treated slavery as a “Devil” term and as a situation to solve. He also pointed out how slavery would only be solved if the audience avoided division and strife among each other and united behind the cause to end economic injustice as well as the oppressive system the workers struck against in Memphis.

**Sneeze/Sneezed**

King used the “Devil” term sneeze/sneezed in the later stages of the “Mountaintop” speech. King first mentioned the term sneeze/sneezed when he began to narrate his stabbing at a book signing in New York City in 1958. He was more dramatic in this part of the speech, discussing how close the knife blade was to the main artery near his heart, on the edge of the aorta. King further elaborated, “once that’s punctured, you’re drowned in your own blood—that’s the end of you…if I had merely sneezed, I would have died” (“Mountaintop,” my emphasis). This quote from the “Mountaintop” speech displayed how King connected sneezed with various forms of death. He connected it literally when he described the exact location of the knife in relation to his heart and how close he came to death if he sneezed. Also, he hinted towards the death of nonviolence, since King was the most public advocate for the method during the Civil Rights Movement. If King had sneezed, it would have been highly unlikely that another activist of King’s magnitude who could preach peaceful protest as persuasively as King. As a result, violent retaliation could have become the main approach in the movement, thus ending the Civil Rights Movement altogether; therefore, King integrated sneeze/sneezed “Devil” term that represented not just King’s death, but also the death of his leadership, the death of his civil disobedience method, and the hope of civil rights for African-Americans.
King painted a picture of his near-death experience for the audience to describe how close he had come to dying. If King had merely sneezed, the blade would have penetrated his heart, causing immediate death. King then mentioned some of the letters he received from citizens wishing him to get well, such letters from leaders of high authority, including the president and vice president. The letter he remembered the most was a letter from a ninth-grade student at White Plains High School in New York. The girl wrote: “While it should not matter, I would like to mention that I’m a white girl. I read in the paper of your misfortune, and of your suffering. And I read that if you had sneezed, you would have died. And I am simply writing you to say that I’m so happy that you didn’t sneeze” (King, “Mountaintop”).

While the term sneezed was only used in one area of the speech, sneezed was incorporated frequently to keep the flow of each sentence. When King listed each civil rights event that occurred, he started each sentence with, “If I had sneezed, I wouldn’t have…” (King, “Mountaintop”). King began every sentence with this line to cluster together the message that if King had sneezed, he would have died. The civil rights events that happened from the time of his stabbing to the “Mountaintop” speech would not have happened:

If I had sneezed, I wouldn’t have been around here in 1961, when we decided to take a ride for freedom and ended segregation in inter-state travel. If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been around here in 1962, when Negroes in Albany, Georgia, decided to straighten their backs up…because a man can't ride your back unless it is bent. If I had sneezed -- If I had sneezed I wouldn't have been here in 1963, when the black people of Birmingham, Alabama, aroused the conscience of this nation, and brought into being the Civil Rights Bill. If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have had a chance…to tell America about a dream that I had had. If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been down in Selma, Alabama, to see the great
Movement there. If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been in Memphis to see a community rally around those brothers and sisters who are suffering. I’m so happy that I didn’t sneeze. (King, “Mountaintop” Recording, my emphasis).

Not only would King have died if he had sneezed, but also, King preached how his audience followed King throughout the Civil Rights Movement, and if he had sneezed, all the progress made in the movement would not have occurred. As he listed all the civil rights events that he would not have been around for if he sneezed, such as Birmingham, Selma, and Memphis, he provided the motive for the sanitation workers to continue on King’s path of peaceful protest. If King and his nonviolent leadership had died, the Civil Rights Movement would not have had the successes it had achieved; it, too, would have died.

Sneeze was treated as an interruption of progress in the Civil Rights Movement. In the audio recording, one can hear King put more emphasis on the term sneezed each time he used it to create an image of the stabbing and to pierce it into the audience’s memory (King, “Mountaintop,” Recording). King explained if he would have died from the sneeze, the main advocate for peace in the Civil Rights Movement would have died and some of the events that helped bring civil rights for African-Americans may not have taken place. King did not want the audience to stop fighting for civil rights; he did not want them to sneeze. King chose a term to emphasize that is a quick, bodily function and made it powerful. One sneezes without thought; however, King realized he could die if he had sneezed. Sneeze is a “Devil” term because a sneeze comes unexpectedly, without thought. In King’s stabbing, sneeze represented death, and when King held in the sneeze, he avoided death. Sneeze also portrayed thoughtlessness. Since a sneeze is a quick action without, I apply it to violence in the Civil Rights Movement. The woman who stabbed King did not have the right state of mind, so I argue King made an example out of
her in the “Mountaintop” speech. Some protestors responded quickly to civil rights violence with more violent retaliation, and when King held in his sneeze, he gave thought to pursue the dream for African-American civil rights. This represented how the sanitation workers should stop and think before they sneezed, or used violence. King avoided death and civil rights failure when he did not sneeze. He attempted to point out to the frustrated sanitation workers if they sneezed and ventured in the opposite direction of King, which was violence, any development towards civil rights reform would have halted.

**Overall “Devil” Terms**

King treated they, slaves/slavery, and sneeze as “Devil” terms. He depicted these terms as an evil because they all connected around injustice. Overall, injustice is implied through all of the “Devil” terms I identified in the “Mountaintop” speech. Not only was the absence of civil rights equivalent to segregation and inequality, but also oppression. Segregation, illegal injunctions, and crime against African-Americans all represented injustice. As I incorporated the “Devil” terms from King’s “Mountaintop” address into my study, I found the “Devil” terms they, slaves/slavery, and sneeze/sneezed represented forms of injustice. The term injustice is common in all of the “Devil” terms I analyzed in King’s speech because general injustice towards African-Americans was the main problem against the sanitation workers’ plight as well as the entirety of the Civil Rights Movement. King set up injustice as the enemy of his general audience. When he applied the term they in various sections of the speech, King not only provided the specific injustices committed against African-Americans, but also identified who perpetrated the unjust acts explicitly. He stated the issue as well as whom the audience’s opponents were. Slaves/slavery is an injustice on its own, so King did not have to cluster many terms associated with slaves/slavery or injustice to display the connection. Sneezes/sneezed,
unlike the previous two “Devil” terms, was a term that required deeper analysis on my part as well as deeper thought from King as he gave his speech. I stated how sneeze/sneezed represented the potential death of King’s nonviolence efforts. He applied the term sneeze/sneezed to convey that violence overall was an injustice both African-Americans and whites committed against each other. He used sneeze/sneezed as a “Devil” term to display how the audience should avoid violence at all costs no matter how frustrated they became with the pace of progress.

“God” Terms

While “Devil” terms represent the ideal evil the rhetor wants his or her audience to move away from or fight against, “God” terms are what the orator desires from the audience members or wants them to uphold (Foss 67). As I mentioned previously when I first defined ultimate terms, “God” terms are usually related to terms associated with positivity, such as discipline, obedience, determination, and integrity. These are positive attributes in most contexts. In the “Mountaintop” speech, King used the terms Memphis, now, and we to portray the directions he wanted the sanitation workers’ strike to strive towards, such as peace, civil rights, and the economic justice they deserved from their company as well as the city of Memphis. I will examine these terms as “God” terms. These “God” terms King employed in his “Mountaintop” speech exemplified the ultimate ideal path King desired his audience of sanitation workers and also Civil Rights Movement members to follow. I will analyze these terms in the same way I examined the “Devil” terms previously: how King used each word as a “God” term, how often he used each term, and the meaning his use of the “God” terms suggested.

Memphis

The sanitation workers’ rally took place in Memphis, Tennessee. King gave his “Mountaintop” speech at the Mason Temple. He delivered his speech to evoke a sense of pride in
the sanitation workers, because *Memphis* was the workers’ home. King repeated the term *Memphis* throughout the speech to tell the sanitation workers their city was the focal point of the Civil Rights Movement at that moment. The first time King articulated *Memphis* in the speech, it came in a puzzling statement: “Something is happening in *Memphis*; something is happening in our world” (King, “Mountaintop,” my emphasis). He appeared to ask the audience to think outside of *Memphis* and to think about what happened across the globe: massive civil rights uprisings similar to what ensued in *Memphis*. King declared: “The masses of people are rising up. And wherever they are assembled today, whether they are in Johannesburg, South Africa; Nairobi, Kenya; Accra, Ghana; New York City; Atlanta, Georgia; Jackson, Mississippi; or *Memphis*, Tennessee – the cry is always the same: ‘We want to be free’” (“Mountaintop,” my emphasis). As King listed each city in his speech, his volume ascended as he verbalized “*Memphis*, Tennessee,” which the audience greeted with loud applause. When he increased his volume on *Memphis*, King reminded the sanitation workers they were not alone (“Mountaintop,” Recording). King set *Memphis* apart from the world while at the same time, included the city in the global movement of protest for civil rights.

All over the world around during the Cold War and the decolonization of Africa, citizens of various countries—some more oppressed than others—rose up against their tyrannical governments. According to Gaines, “the emergence of new African and Asan nations from European colonial rule during the 1950’s and 1960’s, revealed a wider spectrum of political consciousness and debate among black activists” (57). How minorities in new countries formed a resistance sparked debate because African-American activists in the late sixties deliberated between methods, whether to come together under violence or nonviolence. For King, *Memphis* was an important “God” term here because the sanitation workers needed a point to unite. To be
united, the sanitation workers had to feel included in American society and become empowered. When King connected Memphis with the rest of the world, he created these feelings of empowerment and pride when he portrayed Memphis as part of a larger movement toward freedom around the world. This also raised questions about the direction the movement could have taken.

Another instance in the speech where King isolated and regrouped Memphis came after At the Mason Temple, King acknowledged many preachers in attendance and those across the country who supported economic and civil freedoms for African-Americans. He elaborated how it was acceptable to discuss the perfect aspects of life; however, King conveyed how God wanted the audience to understand urgent poverty problems that existed in Memphis and beyond were imperative to solve (King, “Mountaintop”). King desired for the audience to share his sentiment towards the economically disadvantaged in the neighborhood and he wanted a collective effort to help the poor. He then alluded to the “new Jerusalem” as the paradise he deemed appropriate to focus on, and then declared when they fix economic injustice and poverty, “God’s preacher must talk about the new New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do” (King, “Mountaintop,” my emphasis). King repeated the term “new” to emphasize that ministers around the country talked about how far the country has come from segregationist values to civil rights. King may have suggested here that if the American government granted civil rights officially, the United States could be comparable to the harmonious “new Jerusalem” He listed several American cities before Memphis to show the audience members they would be included in the “new” and equal America because of their efforts.
King also accentuated the term *Memphis* to display to the sanitation workers that *Memphis* would be an improved city if they stood together and went forward with a peaceful demonstration. He also *verbalized* *Memphis* to distinguish the city and then connect it with the rest of the world, which encouraged feelings of empowerment and pride when King portrayed how special Memphis *was*. *Memphis* was an important “God” term here because the sanitation workers needed a place to begin to unite. To be united, the sanitation workers had to *be* proud to belong in American society and become empowered.

King integrated *Memphis* as a “God” term to represent feelings of pride and happiness. When King *discussed* his feelings about how God placed him in *Memphis*, the audience applauded: “Now, I'm just happy that God has allowed me to live in this period to see what is unfolding. And I'm happy that He's allowed me to be in *Memphis*” (King, “Mountaintop”). King associated *Memphis* with happiness and with God because of how he depicted himself. In the speech, according to King, God placed him in *Memphis* because it was the place where the Civil Rights Movement teetered, and God needed King to spearhead the effort towards freedom (“Mountaintop”). King may have also hoped to envoke pride in the audience because he was arguably the main leader in the Civil Rights Movement. When he *declared* that he was happy to be in *Memphis*, it possibly invoked *satisfaction* in the sanitation workers. Since the *employees* felt demoralized prior to King’s speech, to hear him say he was pleased to be in Memphis potentially made them proud to be African-American citizens of their city. The city of *Memphis* is a “God” term *I analyzed* because King’s language may have created a sense of *pride* and *urgency* at that moment during his “Mountaintop” speech as well as the Civil Rights Movement.

When King acknowledged *Memphis* in the quote above, he also used the term to represent how he felt about being in *Memphis*. 
When King said he felt proud and happy to be in Memphis, he also recognized how Memphis resembled a community united in both good times and bad. As King concluded what he would not have witnessed if he had sneezed, he stated “wouldn’t have been in Memphis to see a community rally around those brothers and sisters who are suffering” (King, “Mountaintop”). King associated key terms around the “God” term Memphis to portray the city of Memphis as united to fight civil rights’ obstacles. He used the term “community” to encompass all citizens of Memphis, regardless of race or ethnicity. Other terms King verbalized to depict Memphis as a family included “brothers and sisters who are suffering.” In families, brothers and sisters as well as mothers and fathers fight and suffer, yet they come together in the worst of crisis situations when they are threatened. King used Memphis as a “God” term for family because he wanted to provide a further incentive for the sanitation workers to “rally” not just for civil rights, but also for their own families because they had to support them economically. “Rally” was the term King delivered with the most intensity to inspire the audience to unite for Memphis (King, “Mountaintop,” Recording). King implored the audience of sanitation workers, as well as the community of Memphis, other African-Americans and civil rights activists, to “rally” at that moment, because they could not afford to wait any longer to achieve the cause of African-American civil rights; they had to unite now.

Now

In the “Mountaintop” speech, King used another “God” term: now. According to the transcript, King delivered the term now a total of 29 times throughout the speech (King, “Mountaintop”). He expressed now as the literal definition of where the audience was at the time and described the current stage of the Civil Rights Movement. He also applied now to define how the sanitation workers needed to solve their issues with their company as well as in the city
of Memphis, and to transition to other objectives King wanted them to accomplish. I do not need to discuss the literal meaning of the term now because it speaks for itself and means at the present time. He also used now conversationally throughout the speech, without any real vigor as opposed to the “God” term Memphis (King, “Mountaintop”).

Of greater interest, though, is how King used now as a “God” term to represent an urgent transition that connected the past and present, and created a sense of crisis that demanded an immediate decision to take the right action. King connected the past and present when he recounted various events in the Civil Rights Movement, such as the Birmingham protests, and used them as a model as to how King wanted the sanitation workers to approach their situation. He also used now to keep the sanitation workers moving with a storyline. Reflecting on the past in Birmingham, King explained that civil rights protesters would sometimes “get in jail…[however] there was a power there which Bull Connor couldn't adjust to… and we won our struggle in Birmingham. Now we've got to go on in Memphis just like that. I call upon you to be with us when we go out Monday…(King, “Mountaintop”). In these lines, King created a reminiscent atmosphere for the audience to remember the success the Civil Rights Movement achieved in Birmingham. After King cited victory in Birmingham, the audience cheered (“Mountaintop,” Recording). Then, when he decreed; “Now we've got to go on in Memphis just like that,” he used now as an urgent transition into the topic of what was to come in the Civil Rights Movement. He stated the location, Memphis, and then connected it with the success in Birmingham. He applied now as a “God” term because he wanted the sanitation workers to model Birmingham’s advantageous tactics to be successful in their strike in Memphis. King illustrated that the protestors in Birmingham still overcame “Bull” Connor and jail; however, while Birmingham became violent, he stated the strike in Memphis had the potential to be
peaceful. He intended to instill confidence in the audience members that they could demonstrate peacefully for the cause of their economic and civil rights in Memphis.

*Now* also served as transition when changing the subject, such as after he finished telling the sanitation workers how to succeed in Memphis and after demanding they come to the second Memphis march: “*Now, about these injunctions…*” (King, “Mountaintop”). He used *now* in this situation to change subjects so the audience followed along easier, similar to starting a new chapter in a book. King transitioned from calling to march to discussing the injunctions that prevented the sanitation workers from gaining equal status to their white peers. Another part where King integrated *now* in the speech as a “God” term occurred when he moved to his conclusion: “*Now, let me say as I move to my conclusion that we've got to give ourselves to this struggle until the end*” (King, “Mountaintop”). *Now* is a “God” term because King stated his ideal desire for the sanitation workers in Memphis. He aspired for his audience to dedicate themselves to the strike as well as the entirety of the Civil Rights Movement at that moment of the “Mountaintop” speech.

Throughout King’s “Mountaintop” speech, King reflected on various actions African-Americans took during the Civil Rights Movement metaphorically. He potentially incorporated *now* as a “God” term to get the audience members to realize that they were a force in Memphis, the United States, the world, and in God’s eyes: “I can remember when Negroes were just going around...scratching where they didn't itch, and laughing when they were not tickled. But that day is all over. We mean business now, and we are determined to gain our rightful place in God's world” (King, “Mountaintop”). King clustered these illustrations to display that the sanitation workers did not make serious changes and were not prepared to fight for their place in the world, up until *now*. When he declared: “We mean business *now*, and we are determined to gain our
rightful place in God's world,” King called upon the audience to rise above their inferior position in society and claim equal civil rights (“Mountaintop”).

More importantly, King also used now as a “God” term to create a sense of urgency for his audience—now—the sanitation workers needed to march peacefully that Monday, the second march in Memphis (King, “Mountaintop”). In his “Mountaintop” speech, King painted a rhetorical picture of the economic injustice issue as well as the lack of civil rights as a crisis to gain power and eliminate the gray areas of decision. He took the audience to a critical point in the speech where the crisis could improve or become worse. The word crisis refers to “the turning point of a disease for better or worse…the vitally important or decisive stage in the progress of anything...a decision” (Oxford English Dictionary qtd. in Bostdorff 5). Bostdorff also stated how orators often “attach the term crisis to issues for which they have ready solutions” (6). In Memphis, King had an ideal solution to solve the crisis of the absence of civil rights for the sanitation workers. He made sure he had an immediate solution to turn the crisis in a positive direction and attempted to persuade the audience through his application of the “God” term now to make a prompt decision on how they should approach civil rights success.

King used now to force his audience to make a clear choice, and they appeared to follow King’s command with their applause: “Men, for years now, have been talking about war and peace. But now, no longer can they just talk about it. It is no longer a choice between violence and nonviolence in this world; it's nonviolence or nonexistence. That is where we are today” (King, “Mountaintop” Recording). King associated the second now as a “God” term because it represented the urgency of action King wanted his audience to take. King offered two choices for his audience, “nonviolence or nonexistence.” King contrasted the two choices: one side included King’s association of the terms violence and nonexistence; and he used nonviolence as the other
side. Here, King portrayed a point of setting for where the movement was: at a crossroads between violence and nonviolence. He compared violence to nonexistence, meaning if the audience members chose to attack their opponents with violence, not only would they have ended their own lives as well as others, but also all civil rights progress they fought for in the movement would have been meaningless and erased. King wanted the audience to choose nonviolence, since direct action was King’s desired method throughout the Civil Rights Movement. King placed now as a “God” term because he gave the sanitation workers one option he wanted them to follow: nonviolence, because if even some of the audience members chose nonexistence, they would not have succeeded in the strike and some would have been killed. King did not want the sanitation workers to make the choice the next day or even after the march; he wanted them to choose nonviolence now and emerge victorious in their strike. To succeed with peaceful protest, according to King: “Now let us maintain unity… The issue is the refusal of Memphis to be fair and honest in its dealings with its public servants, who happen to be sanitation workers. Now, we've got to keep attention on that” (King, “Mountaintop”). King clustered both problem and solution together in these phrases. He pointed out the issue that the sanitation workers needed to pay attention to, “the refusal of Memphis to be fair and honest,” and instructed them on how to solve it now through what King wanted them to do in their current situation; unite during the civil rights struggle.

The “God” term now in King’s final speech connected to the struggle for civil rights in the way that it commanded the audience to gain the “fierce urgency of now”—a phrase from his “I Have a Dream” speech (King, “I Have A Dream”)—to demand civil rights immediately; not in a few days, or years, but now. King argued how civil rights were parallel to basic human needs and were essential to survival. King applied the “God” term now to let the audience of sanitation
workers as well as other listeners know it had been a long Civil Rights Movement and while progress had been made, improvements were still necessary. King emphasized now because he did not want his audience, or himself, to wait any longer before African-Americans achieved civil rights. He wanted civil rights for African-Americans now. King also used the term as a revolutionary call, because he knew the protestors had to confront the white administration and opposition immediately. He understood the protestors had to take an unpopular course of action from the authorities’ point of view. Overall, King used now to help smoothen the transition of each specific topic so the speech could flow better to the audience. It also served as a common transition to help the audience identify where King will go next. Now was a term King used to connect the past, present, and future because King referred to past events to show what the audience has to do now and later. Most importantly, King applied now as a “God” term to rise up for change. If the protestors in Memphis desired change in society, they had to join together now to demand for civil rights reform.

**We**

In most of his speeches and sermons throughout the Civil Rights Movement, King used the key term we. In his “Mountaintop” speech, he expressed the term we abundantly, which I will analyze as a “God” term. King incorporated we in the speech 111 times and associated other terms with we to create various messages for the audience to absorb (King, “Mountaintop”). While King used we numerous times in the speech, there were various instances where the term we was applied as a means of correct pronoun usage. I will not examine the term in that situation. In my analysis, I will examine the sentences clustered around we to represent unity, perseverance, empowerment, instruction, choice, and dangerous unselfishness.
Unity. In the Memphis section above, I discussed how citizens in many cities around the world protested for civil rights and how King connected these efforts with Memphis. Freedom was the common goal King wanted the sanitation workers to achieve, “…the cry is always the same: *We* want to be free” (King, “Mountaintop”). This quote represented all the minorities being marginalized and restricted of equal rights around the world. In the recording, King delivered the line: “*We* want to be free” as a demand (“Mountaintop” my emphasis). He did not plead, beg or ask; rather he demanded freedom because he felt the sanitation workers as well as African-Americans deserved to have the same comprehensive civil rights and justice as whites did. King used “we want” to display how he shared the audience’s desire to be free. In terms of how King represented unity with the “God” term we, King wanted the audience to remain united not only among themselves but also with citizens around the world who also fought for civil rights and economic freedoms. Later in the speech, while making the comparison to how the Israelites united to overcome slavery, King stated explicitly how the audience members should obtain their rights when he commanded them to remain unified (“Mountaintop”). In the difficult time of racial discrimination in the workplace, King desired the sanitation workers to uphold unity to earn economic equality. When he integrated we into the section of the speech, his terminology identified him with the audience, meaning he guided them and he would continue to direct them through the Civil Rights Movement in Memphis.

Although King positioned himself beside the sanitation workers as a guide, he set himself apart with arguably the most famous quotes of the “Mountaintop” speech. He let the audience know the rest of the Civil Rights Movement and their strike would not be easy, but he put them at ease when he proclaimed with content, “but it really doesn’t matter with me now, because I’ve been to the mountaintop,” a loud applause from the audience followed after (King,
“Mountaintop,” Recording). King went from the collective group with the term *we* when he warned of the tough times that awaited because he wanted them to be aware of the dangers they faced; to individual with “I’ve” to ease them because King had been through difficult times as well and he had reached the pinnacle of victory, the “mountaintop.” While he did set himself apart here, he then rejoined the audience immediately. During this section of the speech, he appeared to speak loudest because he knew the audience members were going to be louder in this section of the speech than any other because he signaled the end of the speech, “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!” (“Mountaintop” Recording, my emphasis). He was also loudest at this part to amplify his voice over the applauding audience of sanitation workers. King placed himself in the position of the prophet, Moses. Since King stated he had been to the “Mountaintop,” and as long as the sanitation workers followed King’s guidance, they would achieve freedom and arrive at the “Mountaintop” of equality as well. This is an important point here because King assured his audience he *saw* the Promised Land and that civil rights will be achieved, just as freedom was achieved for the ancient Hebrews.

While economic equality and civil rights were the goals King and the sanitation workers (and other members of the Civil Rights Movement) sought to achieve, they also knew a possibility of failure existed. King stated if the sanitation workers continued to pursue civil rights further, they had to work their hardest and commit themselves to the cause completely. He demanded the audience outside the Mason Temple listening to the speech to march with the sanitation workers: “*We’ve* got to see it through. And when *we* have our march, you need to be there…Be concerned about your brother…*we* go up together, or *we* go down together” (King, “Mountaintop,” Recording, my emphasis). Here, King asked the listener who were on the fence
of whether to follow King’s direction or not, “you,” to join him in the quest for comprehensive civil rights. King used we as a “God” term because he wanted the sanitation workers as well as African-Americans in Memphis to stand together and move forward with their strike, regardless of missing work or school or whether they succeeded or failed. He did not offer the immediate audience nor the audience listening in a choice on whether to march or not when he branded the march a necessity. Throughout the “Mountaintop” speech, King used we because he wanted the audience to unite for the cause of civil rights and the sanitation workers to persevere through the struggle of segregation and unfair working conditions.

Towards the end of the speech, after he reviewed what would not have occurred in the Civil Rights Movement if he had sneezed with the knife so close to his main heart artery, King reflected upon an earlier moment. The setting of the moment took place the morning prior to the “Mountaintop” speech when King flew from Atlanta to Memphis. King spoke with a thankful and appreciative tone for the pilot, who justified why the flight was delayed and apologized to the passengers. The pilot explained to the passengers on board that King was on the plane, and since he was such an important as well as controversial figure, all items including personal baggage had to be searched in case someone tried to assassinate King or cause the plane to crash, “and to be sure that nothing would be wrong with the plane, we had to check out everything carefully. And we’ve had the plane protected and guarded all night” (Pilot qtd. in King, “Mountaintop,” Recording, my emphasis). In this rhetorical situation of the plane, the term we represented white Americans who began to understand that African-Americans deserved equal rights. Specifically, in King’s context, we portrayed the airport staff who controlled the flight. In the “Mountaintop” oration, we was a “God” term that represented progress. King integrated the example of the cautious pilot to convey to the audience that because of their continuous efforts
for civil rights, people outside of the activist movement had begun to support the civil rights cause. This displayed how African-Americans and whites could work together as citizens of the United States, as well as signified the end of segregation. King sent the message to the sanitation workers that if they continued to take direct action and persevere over the many obstacles they faced, more citizens outside of the movement would absorb the understanding of comprehensive civil rights and spread the message across the country.

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**Perseverance.** Civil rights activists faced many obstacles in their quest for equality. In Memphis, King addressed a discouraged crowd of sanitation workers as well as others who appeared agitated because King’s peaceful approach did not seem to gain results. King used the ultimate term we as a “God” term to help his mainly African-American audience to persevere over obstacles such as racial discrimination in the workplace and social segregation. King displayed how we must persevere when he explained why he was glad to live during the Civil Rights Movement, “we have been forced to a point where we are going to have to grapple with the problems that men have been trying to grapple with through history, but the demands didn’t force them to do it. Survival demands that we grapple with them” (King, “Mountaintop” my emphasis). King exaggerated how the sanitation workers were in an uncompromising position where “we have to grapple” because he knew the sanitation workers had to struggle to ensure a successful strike. He then explained further, with more emphasis on “Survival,” to clarify that in order to win the battle with the heads of the sanitation companies and the city of Memphis, we have to keep moving forward, or “grapple,” which was the objective King wanted the strike to accomplish (“Mountaintop,” my emphasis).

To move past the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement, African-Americans had to move past weapons of white segregationists, both figurative and literal. Several literal weapons...
involved throughout many demonstrations in the movement included dogs, mace, and fire hoses. In Birmingham, these weapons were all present. As I noted in Chapter II, Eugene “Bull” Connor, the chief of police of Birmingham, showed no mercy upon the civil rights protestors. He ordered his men to beat the demonstrators, administer the fire hoses, and release the police dogs to attempt to force the protestors to retreat (Hon 181). While the weapons they faced were daunting, King commended his audience for their resilience, especially those who listened in to the “Mountaintop” who participated in the Birmingham protests; “And ‘Bull’ Connor would tell them to send the dogs forth, and they did come; but we just went before the dogs singing, ‘Ain’t gonna let nobody turn me around’ ” (King, “Mountaintop”). King associated the “God” term we with his call for the audience to persevere through segregationist obstacles that laid ahead of the sanitation workers in Memphis.

In his recollection of Birmingham, King also cited how activists were transported to jail in giant wagons, and he clustered the term “jail” around we as a weapon to persevere through together. Although “we were stacked in there like sardines in a can…we would just go in the paddy wagon singing ‘We Shall Overcome’…” (“Mountaintop,” my emphasis). First, King described how the white segregationists’ weapon of “jail” presented an obstacle to protesters. Then, King referenced the song “We Shall Overcome” because it was debatably the adopted slogan of the entire Civil Rights Movement. When one overcomes, he or she perseveres through an obstacle. He alluded to “We Shall Overcome” because even though hopes for civil rights looked dim due to the difficulties the sanitation workers faced, King conveyed that the workers would get past them and obtain civil rights.

Another weapon used against African-Americans during different events in the Civil Rights Movement was the fire hose. In civil rights protests, police turned on the hoses and hit
protestors at a force of up to 400 pounds per square inch (NFPA). Oates provided imagery as to how much harm this amount of force could cause to a protestor. The sound of the hose sounded comparable to a gun shot, and it knocked down both children and adults. The hose could propel the protestors against walls, tear their clothes apart, and break their skin causing blood to flow from their bodies. The fire hose even lead to death to some protestors as well (Oates 234). “Bull” Connor and the Birmingham police department used the fire hose as a weapon of force to attempt to prevent the demonstration for civil rights, but according to King, the protestors prevailed.

In the “Mountaintop” speech, King attempted to entice the audience to embrace the memory of water as a source of life. He justified that we knew water in numerous ways. King clustered we with “water,” “sprinkled,” and “immersed,” and mentioned that, “there was a certain kind of fire that no water could put out. And we went before the fire hoses; we had known water. If we were Baptist or some other denominations, we had been immersed. If we were Methodist…we had been sprinkled, but we knew water. That couldn't stop us” (King, “Mountaintop” my emphasis). He pieced together these terms with the “God” term we because King wanted to display to the audience that water was an element African-Americans grew up with their whole lives, so it did not hinder them because, in a sense, they were immune to water as a weapon. African-Americans had used water as a source of spirit in their various church denominations, and King clarified in the recording that fire hoses they experienced in Birmingham would not halt their progress due to their determined spirit, showing the power and pride in his voice (“Mountaintop,” Recording).

Since I discussed the literal weapons that were obstacles to overcome for activists, the figurative weapons used against African-Americans included the unconstitutional, racist laws known as “Jim Crow” laws, which prevented African-Americans from integration into American
society (Sandoval-Strauz 93). Specifically in Memphis, authorities placed economic injunctions upon the sanitation workers, such as; no fair pay, no compensation (especially for the deaths of Cole and Walker), and no formation of unions. King informed the audience that they should not allow any weapons, including the illegal injunctions, hoses, mace, and police dogs to hold them back, and they must push on against injustice (King, “Mountaintop”). In the recording, King delivered each line of the speech with more vigor every time he listed a weapon. He he spoke the word “injunction,” acrimoniously and the audience responded with enthusiasm (“Mountaintop,” Recording). King exhibited bitterness toward the term “injunction” because it represented the restriction of rights to himself and the African-American race throughout his entire life. He hated the word so much it appeared to cause him pain as he verbalized the term. Along with the sanitation workers, King expressed his frustration as well, but he realized he had to display composure and convince the audience to persevere past the injunctions. He applied we as a “God” term because King wanted the audience of frustrated sanitation workers to carry on with the Civil Rights Movement through Memphis and not allow any weapons, literal or figurative, to thwart their pursuit any longer.

After King stated nothing could get in their way, he put the sanitation workers and other members of his audience on a pedestal, and praised them for who they were as well as how they handled obstacles peacefully and professionally. “We are masters in our nonviolent movement in disarming police forces; they don’t know what to do” (“Mountaintop”). When King called himself and the sanitation workers “masters” of victory against the police, he clustered the term around we to display how far we had come since the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. King’s words seemed to acknowledge everyone who had worked so hard up to April 3rd, 1968, and hoped to demonstrate how their perseverance was not in vain. He painted a picture of reward
for their determination and attempted to convince the sanitation workers to work harder to gain progress to obtain more civil rights. King encouraged the sanitation workers to believe they could accomplish the arduous task of protesting against the majority; therefore entrusting them with the confidence and collective power to help them move through their struggle.

**Empowerment.** When one is empowered, he or she has strong and positive feelings about him or herself as well as a sense that one can overcome anything. Over the course of King’s “Mountaintop” oration, he empowered, or drove confidence into the audience. The sanitation workers felt dispirited from the negative publicity of the strike as well as the first march in Memphis, which strayed from King’s nonviolent approach. King knew that to guarantee a successful second Memphis march and victorious strike with negotiations from the city, he had to encourage the audience to keep moving forward no matter the outcome. As King delivered his “Mountaintop” speech, he tried to empower the audience on an economic, global, spiritual, and personal level.

One way King accumulated terms around the “God” term we empowered the audience economically as well as globally. He discussed the boycott and the value of boycotts to the direct action method. According to Darby and Rowley, in the later stages of the movement, King focused on how to defeat poverty and the economic injustices placed on African-Americans (43). King then labeled we, meaning the African-American race as well as the sanitation workers specifically, as poor when compared to the white economy in the United States. While that may have been the case, King claimed members of the comprehensive African-American race were more sound than the whole world aside from a few countries financially, such as Germany, Russia, Great Britain, and the United States (King, “Mountaintop”). He provided statistics to prove his point and stressed the income amount to show how much economic power African-
Americans had globally; “We have an annual income of more than thirty billion dollars a year, which is more than all of the exports of the United States, and more than the national budget of Canada…That’s power right there, if we know how to pool it” (“Mountaintop,” my emphasis).

King told his audience that they were a global economic power, and he employed we as a “God” term to force the audience to leave the United States mentally and put the $30 billion they possessed as a race into a global perspective. If African-American listeners of the speech gained the worldwide viewpoint King offered, they could have felt empowered and possibly better about their economic situation and ability to exert significant power in a boycott.

King also empowered his African-American audience in Memphis as well as across the country spiritually. Religion is a cornerstone in rhetoric when a speaker attempts to persuade an audience, because religion is commonplace in traditions and cultures. King understood the value of religion to his congregants, so he employed religion when he called the sanitation workers and the rest of the crowd the children of God.

King phrased the first half of the “children of God” quote in a clarifying tone; “We aren’t engaged in any negative protest and in any negative arguments with anybody” (King, “Mountaintop,” my emphasis). King made sure to elucidate how the sanitation workers’ protest was not negative towards anyone because he understood that opponents to the movement listened in as well, and he wanted to clarify that no one would protest towards them in an aggressive manner. Here, King used we as a “God” term to protect the sanitation workers and the audience who agreed with King from any harm or negative publicity. The second half of the quote explained what we were “determined” to accomplish as “men” and “people,” and he exclaimed with intensity; “We are saying that we are determined to be men. We are determined to be people. We are saying -- We are saying that we are God's children. And that we are God's
children, *we* don't have to live like *we* are forced to live” (King, “Mountaintop” my emphasis). He put the emphasis on “*we* are God’s children” to communicate to the audience members that they had a piece of the highest, spiritual source inside of them, and the sanitation workers deserve the best treatment possible in all aspects of their lives as much as anyone. King clustered “determined,” “men,” “people,” “forced,” and “God’s children” with *we* to empower the audience, as well as state how the sanitation workers were the most important people to ensure the future of not only the Civil Rights Movement, but also for the solidification of the African-American race in United States society.

As speakers empower their listeners, they let the audience know how important they are to persuade them to follow the speakers’ direction or message. King delivered his “Mountaintop” speech to sanitation workers in Memphis who felt alone in segregationist America. King sought to make the sanitation workers feel that they were an integral part of the American population and deemed them a necessity to the cause for civil rights. King pleaded; “*We* need all of you,” to exemplify how every individual in favor of gaining civil rights had to participate in the second Memphis march because the demonstration would be vital to ensure a prosperous sanitation workers’ strike (King, “Mountaintop,” my emphasis). King used *we* as a “God” term to band everyone together to put forth their most valiant effort. When one fights for a cause individually, it is not as successful as when everyone protests for the same cause together, which may have been one of the many messages King attempted to convey to his audience in his “Mountaintop” speech.

**Instruction.** So far, in my analysis of King’s final oration, I have described what King wanted from the Memphis sanitation workers and beyond in the Civil Rights Movement when he incorporated *we* as a “God” term. I have not yet defined how King desired his audience to put the
protests into action when he used the term *we*. King used *we* as a step-by-step guide for the sanitation workers to direct how he wanted them to act during the Memphis strike and second march. To beat the sanitation company authorities and the city of Memphis’ corrupt injunctions, King explained how the sanitation workers and other African-Americans in Memphis needed to march and, when they did, the demonstrators had to convince others to “sacrifice” for the morality of civil rights; “Now we’re going to march again, and we’ve got to march again, in order to put the issue where it is supposed to be” (King, “Mountaintop” *my emphasis*). King accentuated *we* to possibly display the vitality of the march in the sanitation employees’ strike as well as the Civil Rights Movement. King associated *we* with terms of the passage to try to convey that *we* need to do “which is right” and carry out the protest correctly.

In the “Mountaintop” speech, King attempted to answer God’s question, that King formulated himself, of “which age would you like to live in?” (“Mountaintop”). He also tried to provide relief when he quoted Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s inaugural speech to reassure the sanitation workers they would soon overcome the economic injustice placed upon them, “I would even come up to the early thirties, and see a man grappling with the problems of the bankruptcy of his nation. And come with an eloquent cry that ‘we have nothing to fear but fear itself’” (King, “Mountaintop”). This quote from the “Mountaintop” speech took place at the beginning where King addressed the audience and provided them with an overall time period of history dating back to the the Exodus of Egypt to the Great Depression when Franklin D. Roosevelt took over the Presidency. The statement at the end of the quote, “*we* have nothing to fear but fear itself” (Roosevelt, “Inaugural Address” 11) provided historical instruction to the sanitation workers to strive for civil and economic justice without worry, because he referenced other predicaments others overcame in past history. He categorized the terms “nothing” and
“fear” around *we* as a “God” term to relax the sanitation workers, because King portrayed that as long as they followed King’s advice and direction, they would triumph in the Civil Rights Movement. FDR’s statement was an example of familiar phrase King used to solidify the cause for civil rights.

King also highlighted how to hold a peaceful demonstration exercising his civil disobedience approach. First, he discussed directions to avoid and then the ideal path he desired for his audience to take. King did not advocate for dissent, nor did he support weapons such as “bricks and bottles” or “Molotov cocktails,” and he did not advise the audience to use harsh language against their opponents (“Mountaintop”). King clustered these terms with *we* to highlight that *we*, as human beings, should hold a higher standard than violence, and he used *we* as a “God” term to accredit the sanitation workers as a stronger force; “*We* don't have to argue with anybody. *We* don't have to curse and go around acting bad with our words. *We* don't need any bricks and bottles. *We* don't need any Molotov cocktails” (King, “Mountaintop,” *my* emphasis). King then began to address how he wanted the sanitation workers to approach their economic injustice issue with their company; he stated how they had to provide the large companies in Memphis with an ultimatum, which is outlined below:

> God sent us by here, to say to you that you're not treating his children right. And *we've* come by here to ask you to make the first item on your agenda fair treatment, where God's children are concerned. Now, if you are not prepared to do that, *we* do have an agenda that we must follow. And our agenda calls for withdrawing economic support from you. (“Mountaintop”)

In this passage, King told the sanitation workers to let the companies know it was not only their employees striking for themselves, but God had put the sanitation workers in the position
because of the maltreatment suffered in the workplace. The involvement of God in the protest intended to prove to the sanitation companies and the city of Memphis their employees were serious, and if the sanitation workers could not convince their opponents to treat them fairly, then God would. Religion was a big influence in southern cities such as Memphis, so the use of God in the speech could have enticed the authorities to listen to the sanitation workers and possibly negotiate. If the companies did not listen, then the sanitation workers would carry on with their scheduled demonstration and halt any economic interaction. King articulated we as a “God” term to direct the audience toward the necessary means of action on their collective civil rights “agenda.” King placed himself in the religious position of the prophet, Moses, when he delivered his statement about “not treating his children right” and stated God sent the message to King to convey to not just the audience, but to the sanitation companies, to the city of Memphis, and to all of the United States as well.

Choice. Prior to King’s “Mountaintop” deliverance, there were two general methods of protest in the Civil Rights Movement: nonviolent direct action/civil disobedience or aggressive retaliation. As I have mentioned throughout this study, King’s main approach during the Civil Rights Movement was peaceful protest; however, it was not popular in everyone’s minds. Many disagreed with King’s strategy and supported Malcolm X’s self-defense theory, later Black Power’s tactics of self-defense and, if necessary, violent retribution against whites. Black Power developed as a result of impatience of slow progress with King’s method of nonviolence (Brockriede and Scott 33; Joseph 1008). In 1968, supporters of both sides remained divided, as displayed from the first Memphis march. The demonstration became violent from teenage supporters of Black Power several days prior to the “Mountaintop” speech at the Mason Temple. When King addressed sanitation workers, he knew some may have not agreed with his methods
due to deflation of the nonviolent effort or remained neutral to which approach to support. King attempted to persuade the audience to choose his nonviolent tactics to obtain civil rights. He utilized the term we as a “God” term to represent how the sanitation workers had to make a choice to follow in King’s nonviolent direction and take the same initiative to go forth with their strike. He also used we to eliminate any other choice aside from his method.

The first part in the “Mountaintop” speech where King provided the sanitation workers with a choice was when he delivered the ultimatum of “nonviolence” or “nonexistence.” I analyzed this example when I examined the “God” term now previously. It is necessary for me to study this example again because King associated the terms “violence,” “nonviolence,” and “nonexistence” around we to exemplify that the audience was in a position where the listeners had to make a clear choice of whether to follow King’s method of nonviolence and succeed or side with violence and possibly die; “That is where we are today” (King, “Mountaintop”). Here, King concluded his thought of where the audience stood in the Civil Rights Movement. King hoped when he provided the two options, which included two opposite terms, he would sway the audience towards the “nonviolence” option. He used we as a “God” term to place the sanitation workers in a position to make an immediate choice, and he made the position a rhetorical situation with the one obvious answer he desired them to choose.

Another instance where King alluded to we in the “Mountaintop” address to depict choice was when he discussed how to execute the economic resistance efficiently. King called for the audience members to “follow what we are doing” when he demanded they take their money from the predominantly white banks in Memphis and deposit it in Tri-State bank (King, “Mountaintop”). Here, a listener can infer is one of the African-American institution King desired to support. The audience responded with applause because of the collectivity of choosing
to invest in an largely African-American institution such as Tri-State Bank (King, “Mountaintop,” Recording). King clustered together terms around we that explained the process of the massive withdrawal from businesses, as well as offered the following statement as an option: “Now these are some practical things that we can do. We begin the process of building a greater economic base. And at the same time, we are putting pressure where it really hurts. I ask you to follow through here” (“Mountaintop”). The terms King clustered together may have created that message of how the sanitation workers could impact the economy directly so the companies would have no choice but to negotiate. He placed the term “can” as a word in relation to the “God” term we, which portrayed that the audience had a choice of whether to participate and take action or not.

As I read and listened to the “Mountaintop” speech further, King associated the key term “opportunity” around we to help the reader understand how the “God” term we characterized choice. The passage I examined came after his sermonized message of the Good Samaritan. King implored the audience to “rise up with a greater readiness…stand with a greater determination…to make America what it ought to be. We have an opportunity to make America a better nation” (King, “Mountaintop,” my emphasis). King challenged the audience of sanitation workers as well as other African-Americans across the country to improve America and move it past racism and segregation. King used we as a “God term” to represent choice when he gave the entire African-American race the power and control to choose his nonviolent path and advance towards a victorious strike, as well as success to obtain civil rights.

**Dangerous Unselfishness.** If the sanitation workers chose to approach their lack of civil rights and the administration of Memphis with violence, King would have viewed their decision as a selfish one. King intended for his audience to work hard together to make the sanitation
strike successful. He wanted activists and the sanitation workers to strive for civil rights peacefully not to fulfill their personal agenda, but to assist the entire African-American race. King called for the sanitation workers to be unselfish. He insisted, “we’ve got to give ourselves to this struggle until the end…We’ve got to see it through. And when we have our march, you need to be there…either we go up together, or we go down together. Let us develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness” (King, “Mountaintop,” my emphasis). King associated “dangerous unselfishness” and “give ourselves to this struggle until the end” with we as a “God” term to show that if we look after one another until we accomplish the difficult task of civil rights justice, we will win the struggle and improve as human beings.

While King called upon the audience to be unselfish, he also recognized the demonstration was risky. He emphasized the term “dangerous” to highlight how this march would not be simple and the sanitation workers had to make sacrifices to be unselfish, yet it was for a necessary and beneficial cause (“Mountaintop,” Recording). Soon after King urged the audience to be selfless, he provided an example of selfishness and “dangerous unselfishness.” He referenced the Good Samaritan story. King first discussed the possible excuses the priest and the Levite made when they did not stop to help the stranded man in need; “At times we say they were busy going to a church meeting…and they had to get on down to Jerusalem so they wouldn’t be late for their meeting,” and “One who was engaged in religious ceremonials was not to touch a human body twenty-four hours before the ceremony,” as well as King’s imagination; “It's possible that those men were afraid” (King, “Mountaintop”). King then solidified the selfishness, when he restated the Levite’s question “If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?” (“Mountaintop”). King portrayed the priest and Levite as selfish, especially since the priest was supposed to be a righteous individual ordained by God himself.
Once King identified the selfishness of the priest and Levite, he distinguished the Good Samaritan as the unselfish individual, even though Jews and Samaritans stayed separated in Israel. Samaritans and Jews avoided venturing to the opposite territory based on their past teachings, let alone even converse with each other. Jews did not even consider Samaritans as a people of Israel and viewed them as a lower class individual (Owens 9; Powell 26). King first described the setting on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho; “It's a winding, meandering road…You start out in Jerusalem, which is about…1200 feet above sea level. And by the time you get down to Jericho…you're about 2200 feet below sea level. That's a dangerous road. In the days of Jesus it came to be known as the ‘Bloody Pass’” (King, “Mountaintop”). He detailed the scene of Jericho Road to show how dangerously unselfish and risky it was for the Good Samaritan to help the man in need. Not only did the Good Samaritan risk confrontation with the man due to different races, but also he put himself in danger on the road to help the man. The man was a Jew who was robbed and nearly beaten to death, so the Samaritan placed the man on the Samaritan’s camel on the way to a shelter (Luke: 10:30-36). King led the audience to identify with the Good Samaritan to help them understand his own main point indirectly, “either we go up together, or we go down together. Let us develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness” (“Mountaintop”). The main message of the Good Samaritan story was that one must “love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18; Mark 12:31). The Samaritan showed compassion when he helped the man in need regardless of race or how dangerous the passage between Jerusalem and Jericho was, because he put aside racial differences and help the struggling Jew.

The struggling sanitation workers did not have the sufficient support of other African-Americans in the Memphis community possibly because of their lower socioeconomic status, so he associated we as a “God” term to connect the Good Samaritan story to the sanitation workers’
strike in Memphis. The Samaritan helped the man as a human being because he loved him similar to how he loved himself, meaning the Samaritan thought about what course of action he would take if he was in the Jew’s position on the Jericho pass. With the “God” term we, King tried to display that the sanitation workers fought for the same cause as other African-Americans in the movement, regardless of socioeconomic status. He wanted other members of the audience to assist the sanitation workers in their strike because their cause for equal workers’ rights fit with the overall cause of civil rights. King tried to portray to the comprehensive audience in the Civil Rights Movement that we as human beings need to be unselfish and willing to risk approval from “superiors” as well as ourselves to help the sanitation workers in their strike because it was the morally correct path.

If the reader ventures back to the whole quote I outlined when I analyzed the “God” term now, where King moved towards his conclusion of the speech, I will explain why the first half of the quote is necessary for further analysis, “...as I move to my conclusion that we’ve got to give ourselves to this struggle until the end...We’ve got to see it through. And when we have our march, you need to be there...” (King, “Mountaintop”). I put this focus on the term “I”. While King did use we to identify himself with the audience as well as the audience with King, at points in the “Mountaintop” speech he also set himself higher than the audience. King depicted himself as the leader of the Civil Rights Movement even when he used we and “I” to isolate himself as the one the sanitation workers should follow. King called for the audience to dedicate all their energy to the cause of civil rights and participate in that Monday’s march at any cost (“Mountaintop”). Ironically, King appeared to be selfish here, similar to the priest and Levite, because when he made the demand for the audience to be at the march, he disregarded all other prior obligatory duties audience members may have had. King may have suggested that the cause
of civil rights superceded other values of individual participants. King subverted this notion
because he knew the issue of African-American civil rights was a common goal amongst the
sanitation workers and his indirect audience around America. However, King associated “I” with
we to display that although King and the audience were in the civil rights struggle together
theoretically, King set himself as a higher authority in the “Mountaintop” speech.

**Overall “God” Terms**

King applied *Memphis, now, and we* as “God” terms. He utilized these terms to attempt to
convey the message that the sanitation workers should unify to strike against the sanitation
companies of Memphis and gain civil rights together. While unification was not an exact term in
the “Mountaintop” speech, the audience members could piece together through the use of chosen
“God” terms how King wanted the sanitation workers and others in the Civil Rights Movement
to unite. When I employed the “God” terms from King’s “Mountaintop” oration, I argued that
the terms *Memphis, now, and we* epitomized King’s desire for nonviolent unification of the
sanitation workers in Memphis. The “God” terms I analyzed also embodied the unification of the
African-American race in the United States, under the cause of civil and economic rights, as well
as a connection to the global efforts for equality. Unification is a common idea among the “God”
terms I examined because it was the rhetorical path King wanted his audience members in
Memphis to follow as they pursued civil rights peacefully. He used the term *Memphis* to invoke
pride in the sanitation workers so they could gain the necessary confidence to continue with
nonviolence in their strike against the heads of the sanitation companies and the administration
of Memphis. King stressed *now* to command a comprehensive, fierce urgency of action because
he wanted the sanitation workers to keep moving together. He also wanted all African-
Americans to be integrated into all aspects of the United States society after being segregated for
many years. Finally, King applied we as a “God” term to identify with the audience and promise them that he would be there to help them overcome multiple obstacles, gain civil rights, and “get to the Promised Land” (King, “Mountaintop”). Unification was King’s ultimate goal for the Memphis sanitation workers. Unification was also the ideal concept King expressed through his use of the “God” terms Memphis, now, and we.

“God” and “Devil” Terms Together

Through his use of “God” and “Devil” terms in his final speech, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” King created a message to try to encourage the sanitation workers and other African Americans to obtain civil rights peacefully in Memphis and throughout the country. First, I studied King’s use of the “Devil” terms they, slaves/slavery, and sneeze/sneezed. After I analyzed the “Devil” terms, I began to study how King utilized the “God” terms Memphis, now, and we. I examined how each term’s treatment as a “God” or “Devil term and how each clustered around other terms to convey the specific message King desired the sanitation workers to receive.

When a rhetor such as King uses “God” and “Devil” terms, he paints a good side to the issue and a bad side, with no room for neutrality. “God” and “Devil” terms work together by highlighting the ultimate ideal a rhetor wants the audience to follow and the ultimate evil he/she wants the audience to avoid. In this short quote on the Good Samaritan story, King outlined the “God” term we and the “Devil” term they, “…we use our imagination a great deal to try to determine why the priest and the Levite didn't stop. At times we say they were busy going to a church meeting, an ecclesiastical gathering, and they had to get on down to Jerusalem so they wouldn't be late for their meeting” (King, “Mountaintop”). King used we to identify the audience as the empathetic side who give ones who have wronged the benefit of the doubt. King possibly
wanted to acknowledge that although their oppressors showed no mercy when they enforced segregation, he still wanted his audience of sanitation workers to love and forgive their enemy regardless of wrongdoing. After the first sentence I quoted, he incorporated the “Devil” term they to highlight the excuses made in the priest and Levite’s defense did not help the man in need on Jericho Road. King used they to portray the Priest and Levite as idle, an action associated with being neutral, and tried to dissuade the audience from neutrality in the Civil Rights Movement as well. King connected both “God” and “Devil” terms to divide right from wrong. While we understand and forgive the priest and the Levite’s motives for not stopping to help the man in need, we still do not condone their actions as moral ones. King wanted the sanitation workers to march towards economic and civil freedoms. While the “God” and “Devil” terms create separation, they also eliminate rhetorical division and help the speaker funnel the audience towards his or her desired course of action. The potential impact of King’s message was that the audience of sanitation workers were identified as the moral example and the ones in power as the examples of evil, whether intentional or not.

**Conclusion**

On April 3rd, 1968, Memphis sanitation workers demonstrated for civil as well as economic rights from their company and their city administration. Martin Luther King, Jr. recognized the sanitation workers were prepared to venture towards extreme lengths, which could have included aggressive tactics due to feelings of frustration and demoralization to achieve their goals in past events of the movement. King delivered what would be his final speech, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” to encourage the sanitation workers to practice his nonviolent approach while advocating for civil rights, **as well as to legitimize his leadership to the audience in Memphis and beyond in the Civil Rights Movement**. King accomplished this task
through “God” and “Devil” terms, key terms that serve to provide an audience with motives for action. A Burkean tool of rhetorical criticism, cluster-agon analysis helps uncover speakers’ dramatic motive behind their discourse to persuade their audience to follow their desired direction. While King understood his direct audience consisted of the Memphis sanitation workers, he also knew most Americans regardless of color could listen to his “Mountaintop” oration from any location in the country, due to radio and television broadcasts. King took the initiative to speak to the supporters of the sanitation workers and civil rights, as well as the opposing segregationist side. He encouraged the protestors to keep the strike peaceful and reassured the opposition the demonstration would be nonviolent and no one had to fear. The rhetorical criticism method of cluster-agon analysis helped King fulfill the goal of motivating the sanitation workers because through the use of “God” and “Devil” terms, King formulated a pattern of messages to keep the civil rights protests in the movement peaceful and productive as well as reaffirm his leadership and the method of civil disobedience.

In this chapter, I analyzed how King employed “God” and “Devil” terms in various sections of “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” through the rhetorical approach of cluster criticism. To examine his final speech, I had to (1) define and explain “God” and “Devil” terms; (2) choose my respective “God” and “Devil” terms; (3) apply the cluster analysis to each “God” and “Devil” term in the “Mountaintop” speech. Through the use of “God” and “Devil” terms, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. addressed a discouraged crowd of sanitation workers, related the speech to the entire African-American struggle for civil rights, and continued to practice peaceful protest in the Civil Rights Movement.
CHAPTER V:
CONCLUSION

On April 3rd, 1968, at the Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee, the Reverand Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered what would be his final oration, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” to 1300 public sanitation workers on strike for improved working conditions and economic reforms. Specific reforms the sanitation workers went on strike for included higher pay, and workers’ compensation, especially after the deaths of Echol Cole and Robert Walker, two sanitation workers trapped and killed by a faulty garbage compactor in unsuitable weather conditions. Their families received no benefits for their loss.

The first attempted peaceful march King helped lead in Memphis on March 28th turned into violent riots with younger protestors breaking windows, thus igniting a police response of tear gas and beatings, which led to the murder of one sixteen-year-old boy (Risen 17). When King arrived at the Mason Temple to address his audience, he understood that he needed to change the frustrated atmosphere and boost morale to continue to demonstrate peacefully for economic and civil rights justice. In the “Mountaintop” speech, King used “God” and “Devil” terms, or ultimate terms, to convey the message for the sanitation workers to continue a peaceful Civil Rights Movement in Memphis. He also wished to reinforce his leadership and convince his audience members he was the one for them to follow in Memphis.

Through the rhetorical method of cluster criticism, my study analyzed how King employed “God” and “Devil” terms during his “Mountaintop” speech to motivate his audience in Memphis and beyond and legitimize himself as well as his nonviolent approach to obtaining civil rights. In the following chapter, I will provide the major conclusions of my findings on the “Mountaintop” speech through the rhetorical method of cluster agon analysis. I will also explain
the implications of my study, discuss the limitations, and provide recommendations of future research for King’s final oration, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.”

**Major Conclusions**

My study of King’s “Mountaintop” speech has three major conclusions. King depicted the sanitation workers as being of the utmost importance to the Civil Rights Movement when he applied the “God” term *Memphis*. For King, the employment of “God” and “Devil” terms helped him create a pattern of messages intended to encourage and appeal to the sanitation workers as well as other activists and citizens involved in the overall Civil Rights Movement. King also utilized the “God” term *we* and the “Devil” terms *they* and *slavery* to distinguish different sides of the Civil Rights Movement. He used the term *we* for the audience to display that they were not alone in their struggle for civil and workers’ rights, which motivated the sanitation workers because they felt committed to a collective cause. He pitted *we* against *they* and *slavery*, two “Devil” terms identified as obstacles to overcome. When King did this, he separated the ideal side he wanted the audience to move towards from the evil side he tried to dissuade them from joining.

The audience’s location also played an important role in the “Mountaintop” speech. He used *Memphis* as a “God” term to place the sanitation workers at the utmost importance of the movement. If some audience members were discouraged and thought Memphis was another city that would have violent repercussions similar to Birmingham or Selma, King answered those thoughts when he made *Memphis* larger than any event in the movement. His phrasing of the speech left little to no doubt when he provided the strategy of how the sanitation workers would succeed with their strike and avoid failure (King, “Mountaintop,” Recording). This motivated the audience of Memphis as well as others involved in the Civil Rights Movement because he
instilled a sense of hope, inevitability, and empowerment. If the protestors thought they would get beaten up or lose approval from their superiors, they should lose it over the worthwhile cause of civil rights.

My second conclusion states King delivered the “Mountaintop” oration to legitimize his leadership and nonviolent approach, especially through the terms sneeze/sneezed and we. King incorporated sneeze/sneezed as a “Devil” term. A sneeze is an involuntary action without thought. As King recounted the story of his stabbing and how he would have died if he sneezed, he connected his potential death with the end of the peaceful Civil Rights Movement. If the movement sneezed, the activists would have not only abandoned King’s leadership, but also would have made the movement nonexistant. He reinforced his leadership when he painted himself as Moses, then used we as a “God” term to have his audience follow his message of peaceful protest, because he knew the movement needed someone to guide them to victory. He applied sneeze/sneezed and we to point out the successes of the Civil Rights Movement and associated both terms with him as the legitimate and superior leader.

My third major conclusion claims King created a sense of crisis through his rhetoric in the “Mountaintop” speech. In general, when a crisis occurs, urgency to resolve it rises. When King incorporated the “God” term now, he also created a sense of urgency to solve the crisis of the lack of civil and economic freedoms for African-Americans in Memphis and beyond in the United States. He used now in the speech to entice the crowd to make a choice. He made the delivery of the speech the point of decision, whether it was “violence or nonviolence.” (King, “Mountaintop”). He then associated “violence” with “nonexistence.” While he did give them the choice, he still managed to persuade the audience towards the option he wanted to funnel them towards; his desired method of nonviolence.
Implications

My cluster agon study of King’s “Mountaintop” speech contains two vital implications. The first implication of this study is that this examination sheds light on the moral power of King’s general rhetoric, specifically how he eliminated shades of gray and put his audiences in a position to choose between two options. Moreover, he crafted the alternatives to force the audience to choose the direction he wanted them to follow rhetorically. This study is reflective of King’s rhetoric as a whole. King incorporated each term to separate the good message he conveyed as ideal from the evil message he wanted the audience to refrain from accepting. I refer back to the “violence” or “nonviolence” and “nonviolence or nonexistence” example. King managed to use “God” and “Devil” terms to paint the two messages as polar opposites to the audience. The reason this implication calls for further study is that more rhetoricians can further understand Burke’s notion that prior to the oration, there is a rhetorical division in the audience which can be eliminated through speech. One can further argue that to eliminate rhetorical division in an audience, a speaker can incorporate “God” and “Devil” terms to persuade his or her listeners.

The second implication of this study focused on King’s positive nature of his rhetoric. My analysis proved that while King’s rhetoric appeared defensive, he still provided a sense of faith, inevitability, and empowerment to his African-American audience in Memphis and beyond during the “Mountaintop” speech. King discussed how all the successes of the Civil Rights Movement would not have happened if he had sneezed. King’s focus on his personal leadership and his association of his leadership with the Civil Rights Movement’s successes revealed the pressure he felt from critics during the later stages of the movement; therefore, this analysis points
to how social movement leaders today must not only address the issues at hand, but they also must answer questions over their leadership abilities. When speakers are under pressure, they tend to commit actions that are out of their normal character. They need to make up for it with proven accomplishments from their leadership. King was a selfless speaker who focused on the greater good throughout many of his speeches; however, King’s uncharacteristic focus on himself during the “Mountaintop” speech uncovered the extreme outcomes of the pressure he received for his leadership and slow progress for obtaining civil rights for African-Americans.

Limitations

While I have investigated the “Mountaintop” speech deeply, it is very important to understand the limitations of my analysis. First, this study focused on the message of the “Mountaintop” speech itself, rather than how the audience reacted to the speech or how they perceived its message. Second, this study examined King’s message in the context of historical and other rhetorical analyses, but did not have any personal documents of King’s that might shed further light on his intentions. My study did not have any archival documents for any rhetorical strategizing King used in the “Mountaintop” speech. I also have nothing in this study about what happened after King delivered his final oration, aside from his assassination on April 4th, 1968, the day after he gave the speech.

Recommendations for Future Research

My study of King’s “Mountaintop” speech prompts future research in two areas. The first area of recommendation I make for future research is to focus on how social movement leaders can use speeches to deal with both an immediate event and also with long-term questions about their leadership. King had to focus on addressing the issues of the lack of African-Americans’ civil rights, as well as answering his critics and opposition as to why he should be in charge and
why his civil disobedience method was the best option for the Civil Rights Movement. Scholars can examine a number of King’s speeches from the late part of his life with this in mind, especially his “Beyond Vietnam” oration, because a number of citizens who supported the Vietnam War began to question him, in addition to Black Power supporters.

Another recommendation for future research on the “Mountaintop” speech is that scholars can study how King’s final speech was a prophecy for his death and a way to prepare his audience members and activists of civil rights to continue without him. People have recently become aware of how the FBI threatened King. According to Kayyali, sources discovered a document known as an FBI “suicide letter” that threatened King and published it in the New York Times in 2014. The document revealed the FBI and governmental plan to “harass and descredit” King, as well as to break up his marriage and threaten his life (Kayyali). Because of this, scholars argue that King could have hinted at his death in the “Mountaintop” speech, especially with the line, “I may not get there with you” (King, “Mountaintop”). He may have tried to let the audience know something was going to happen to him, but also to prepare his audience to be ready to move on in the Civil Rights Movement without him. Overall, I would recommend future research on dealing with multiple assertions on a speaker’s leadership as well as his or her take on the issue at hand. I would also promote future research on how a speaker potentially uses speeches to foreshadow what will happen next.

Final Thoughts

In Memphis, Tennessee, on April 3rd, 1968, the Civil Rights Movement was in a moment of crisis due to previous events that broke out in riots, including the first attempted Memphis march on March 28th. After the march became violent, Martin Luther King, Jr. lost credibility because even though he tried to preach nonviolence, the march appeared disastrous and
destructive. A good contingent of America then viewed King as ineffective due to the same structure of events in the past, such as the Chicago housing demonstrations of 1966. Through the use of “God” and “Devil” terms in his “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” oration several days after the initial Memphis march, King found a way to relieve the sanitation workers of their frustration and motivate them to strive for civil rights peacefully. He also tried to reaffirm and legitimize his leadership as the head activist of the movement. As I investigated King’s final speech through the Burkean rhetorical method of cluster agon analysis, I attempted to position myself with an audience member’s perspective because I wanted to figure out the possible effects on the listeners, depending on the specific “God” or “Devil” term King employed. This helped me further analyze how King depicted each “God” and “Devil” term so I could interpret the message he tried to convey to everyone he spoke to, including his opposition.

After analyzing King’s “Mountaintop” speech, I realized that while “God” and “Devil” terms in rhetoric create a divide in audience members, it can also unite them at the same time. Many civil rights crises that occur across America and the world today show that while King’s message of nonviolent action and racial equality in the “Mountaintop” speech has continued to be displayed in the past several decades of society, there are still some instances that portray how further progress is necessary and debates on how to achieve the progress occur. One can use this study as a link to promote change and note how speakers can persuade an entire audience through a cluster agon lens through the association of “God” and “Devil” terms.

As I conclude my study, I take a moment to commemorate Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Since I was younger, I enjoyed listening to speakers deliver their speeches and wondered how they could convince such a large audience to follow in the direction they wanted them to go. When Bostdorff assigned me to choose a speaker and a speech in her rhetorical criticism lecture,
I thought about Dr. King immediately, but I chose his “Mountaintop” speech instead of “I Have A Dream” since I had never heard his “Mountaintop” oration before my research. After learning about cluster agon analysis and the use of “God” and “Devil” terms, I felt very emotional while listening to the recording of the “Mountaintop” speech. To this day, King’s rhetoric still evokes emotion. I always had difficulty discovering the true meaning of literature and speech. When I analyzed each particular term, whether “God” or “Devil,” I found myself able to uncover more meaning to examine the speech further. Due to my cluster agon analysis and extensive research on the “Mountaintop” speech, I conclude that King conveyed various messages in the speech to motivate his audience of sanitation workers in Memphis as well as the entire African-American race. He also conveyed rhetorical messages to reinforce his leadership and reaffirm his nonviolent, direct action approach as the main method to obtain equal rights in the Civil Rights Movement. Overall, throughout this examination of King’s “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech, I have learned how speakers, such as King, persuade a large audience to follow their preferred direction, as well as legitimize their leadership when they associate specific “God” and “Devil” terms to create a positive or negative message for the audience to interpret.
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