**Letter From Birmingham Jail Themes**

**Race**

It seems obvious to say that *“Letter from Birmingham Jail”* concerns itself with race, but its treatment of segregation is indeed multi-faceted and fascinating. While Dr. King stipulates as fact that all races are equal, he only occasionally draws attention to the separation between races. Instead, what he preaches is connection between all humans, regardless of race. He often avoids mentioning the particular plight of the “Negro,” instead framing his arguments around a push for universal justice. Nevertheless, the difference between races underlines the entire piece, and it would be folly to forget that. The work is written not to inspire a black audience, but to convince and chide a white audience. And at its core, it is a declaration of the power of the black man, whom Dr. King writes endured and survived slavery, and who will one day be recognized as the true heroes of the age.

**Justice/Injustice**

Though the *“Letter from Birmingham Jail”* is implicitly concerned with justice throughout, Dr. King also addresses the question directly at several points. In effect, he posits that justice upholds the dignity of the human spirit, while injustice works against it. By discussing this concept in general, philosophical terms, he establishes criteria by which to equivocally attack both segregation and silence in the face of it. In terms of this latter attack, he ultimately suggests that the man who sees injustice and does nothing to stop it is acting unjustly as well. Following this idea, he argues that laws must be imbued with a moral sense in order to be just; in other words, law and morality cannot be seen as separate pursuits or areas. It is significant that Dr. King frames his argument in terms of these universal values – rather than the simple political question of the day – since it makes the argument both more timeless and more unimpeachable.

**Extremism/Moderation**

The context of the “Letter” is the protests that the SCLC was holding in Birmingham, which prompted the clergymen to pontificate on the dangers of extremism. Dr. King expands this context to suggest that the general consensus – that moderation is preferable to extremism – is false. Moderation, he argues, allows injustice to flourish while otherwise good people can comfort themselves with the belief that patience will solve society’s ills. The only way to truly enact change and help mankind transcend its limitations is to not only act with but also embrace extremism. Though he takes great pains to frame his movement as “creative” (rather than destructive) extremism, Dr. King firmly contends that one must be willing to actively pursue change lest he otherwise be accused of cowardice in the face of injustice. Despite its measured restraint, the “Letter” is an argument for taking action, and against hiding behind platitudes of moderation.

**Organized Religion**

Dr. King does not limit his argument to abstract virtues of morality, but in fact addresses directly the responsibilities of organized religion, especially in the case of the Christian church. As a Christian minister himself, Dr. King is overall respectful of and optimistic about the potential of the church. And yet he directly chides the clergymen for allowing their organizations to compromise the true mission of the Christian spirit. Contrasting them with the early Christians – who risked persecution and death in order to remake the world and engender justice – he argues that the contemporary church (especially in the South) risks becoming irrelevant as it seeks to protect the status quo rather than challenge people to transcend their weaknesses. His argument grows quite pessimistic, and he warns that the church will one day be judged quite harshly if it does not act for justice. Considering his earlier attack on groups – which he insists are less moral than individuals – the implicit argument seems to be that the church has chosen to support a group mentality of injustice rather than forcing individuals to confront their failures and change.

**Civil Disobedience**

For many, Dr. King’s discussion and defense of civil disobedience is one of the letter’s most enduring attributes. Ultimately, he presents a model of civil disobedience closely aligned to both Thoreau’s and Gandhi’s. First in his philosophy is the idea that the individual has not only a right but also a responsibility to challenge unjust laws. Using his definition of an unjust law (one that degrades human dignity), Dr. King explains how the SCLC has responsibly acted to exhibit the shortcomings of segregation. And yet he gives equal attention to the “civil” part of the equation, insisting both that one ought to break unjust laws both non-violently and “lovingly”. He must be willing to serve his penalty for his transgression, and thereby show love and respect for the law overall. In the end, Dr. King’s treatise on civil disobedience conforms to his ultimate hope: that individual action can inspire and change people in pursuit of a world free of hatred.

**Universal humanity**

The restraint that Dr. King shows throughout the “Letter” – using as many appeals to logos as he does to pathos; refraining from drawing distinctions between races; justifying his extremism in philosophical terms – is not only an effective tool for convincing his audience. It is also a reflection of his optimistic belief that all men are connected. Early on, he states this explicitly, arguing, “whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly”. His variety of tactics and allusions only validates his belief that all men are connected to one another, and by extension, are responsible for one another. In decrying the pernicious influence that groups have on individuals, he suggests that harmony might come if we accept our place not in limited groups – southerners vs. northerners, black vs. white – but instead in the community of universal humanity and “brotherhood”.

**Individual action**

One could arguably break Dr. King’s argument down to a call for individual action. At one point in the “Letter,” he argues that “time itself is neutral” (178). It in itself changes nothing, but instead relies on individuals to take action in order to define the world. The entire work is suffused with an understanding of history that requires men and women both great and small to make their marks, since time itself solves nothing. His discussion of history repeats this concept – he is able to see the pernicious history of slavery as evidence of the black man’s inner resolve, showing that he can interpret the past however he wants. Likewise, he looks towards a future that will consider the black man the true hero of the 1960’s, because they have taken action for justice. The flipside of this celebratory tone is the warning to those who only show ‘patience’ and moderation, since they will be forgotten. Only those strong enough to force change will truly matter in the long run.