I May Not Get There With You: “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” as Epic Discourse
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This essay forwards epic form as a way to better understand King’s last speech, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.” It demonstrates the way King uses epic frames to resonate with American and Christian epic narratives and to constitute the civil rights struggle as a new epic, and himself as an epic hero. King uses the epic frame to persuade and to encourage his audience, and to frame his controversial decisions within a wider context. This functions to encourage his audience to persevere and to conceptualize the movement on a grand scale.

At the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site in Atlanta, Georgia, his last speech, known as “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” plays as part of a video about his assassination and funeral. In the context of the site’s displays about Dr. King’s life and activism, the words of the speech are strikingly poignant. Reading the speech through the lens of history can tempt us to view it as simply eerily prophetic, inspirational, and comforting without examining it too closely; however, beyond its significance in King’s own life (and death), this powerful speech from an important speaker can serve as a useful text for analysis. While many have demonstrated the artful use of narrative and argument within the 43-minute speech, insight may still be gained. Through the constitutive form of Epic, King made an argument about the nature of the civil rights struggle and his role within it.

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Historical Context

On April 3, 1968, King was not planning to speak at all. He had been in and out of Memphis several times in the preceding weeks offering leadership and inspiration to the striking sanitation workers and the African American community striving for social justice in Memphis. King had been involved in a number of discussions with other civil rights leaders regarding his strict policy of nonviolence. At some moments, his statements in private suggested that he was no longer certain that nonviolence would accomplish their goals (Branch, 2006). The atmosphere in Memphis was violent. As Osborne (1989, p. 152) mentioned, King had tried to lead a march with these sanitation workers previously, and it “had been a tactical disaster,” poorly organized and devolving into chaos and “petty violence.” The stormy weather of April 3rd was appropriate in a way, almost symbolic of the mounting criticism of King’s leadership and the brewing violence within the civil rights movement. Osborne suggested that this speech “may be savored now as his last triumphant response” (p. 152) to these concerns. These discussions and uncertainty about the efficacy of nonviolent protest made King’s statements against violence all the more poignant. Members of the civil rights movement were becoming increasingly frustrated with the slow response to nonviolent tactics, and agitators were promoting violence as the only method to get results. Although private statements seemed to indicate King wavering in his stance against violence, his public message remained consistent, and his tone toward those who would turn to violence was as critical as that toward those who would turn to other-worldly religiosity.

This immediate turmoil indicated the larger struggles facing the civil rights movement at the time, and King in particular. Other leaders of the black community were advocating for different tactics—separatism and violence among them—to respond to the ongoing problems of racism and injustice; King’s vision of equality, harmony, and nonviolence was looking increasingly idealistic as change continued to be slow and difficult. Stokley Carmichael and other Black Power leaders in particular were criticizing nonviolence and King’s ability to lead (Branch, 2006, p. 690). There was also controversy surrounding King’s recent trajectory, as he moved away from civil issues like voting rights and school desegregation and toward economic issues. The protest presently involving King concerned the unfair economic treatment of the sanitation workers, and it used economic means (in particular a boycott), a tactical shift by King that some, especially those in privilege, did not fully support. Previous controversial opinions about the Vietnam War added to King’s need to maintain his credibility (Antzczak, 1993).

Perhaps because of this atmosphere of uncertainty and danger, but also because of the actual storm brewing outside, the crowd was thin, with far fewer present than had seen King speak in the same hall mere weeks before. King was concerned that “the sharp drop-off would invite belittling stories of a downward trend for him, along with the riot and a new federal injunction” (Branch, 2006, p. 755). He sent Ralph Abernathy to speak to a gathering crowd, hoping to stay in his hotel room. Shortly after his arrival, Abernathy quickly realized that the few thousand who had gathered
would be very disappointed if they did not hear King himself. Abernathy convinced King to come and to deliver the speech after all, noting in particular that “this was a core crowd of sanitation workers who had braved a night of hellfire to hear him, and they would feel cut off from a lifeline if he let them down” (Branch, p. 756). Branch pointed out that these sanitation workers were poor, uneducated, and not inclined toward protest. King’s speech thus had to engage these people in particular; they needed to be encouraged to continue doing what they were doing in spite of the violence they faced and the little apparent progress they had made. He told them particular actions they needed to take locally and reminded them, through epic narrative, of the nature of their struggle: long-lasting, community defining, and morally important.

**Critical Perspectives**

In the final speech of his life, usually called “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” after its famous conclusion, King used religious discourse to frame his battle as an epic narrative, in addition to using language that couched his struggle in the terms of religious or moral proposition. The importance and function of the narrative in this speech is difficult to ignore and has been the focus of most critical work on the topic (Osborne, 1989; Rosteck, 1992). Critics argue that King used his narrative to invest the present experience with religious meaning. Some (Miller, 1992, 1993) pointed to the ways King drew on key narratives from Western tradition and Black religious culture. Still others focused on the importance of African styles, including call and response, to the rhetorical force of the speech (Harrison & Harrison, 1992). Although I agree with these assertions, I also understand King’s use of narrative as part of his broader purpose: to constitute himself and his audience as part of a new epic narrative, on a level with great Biblical and American epics. This epic form was constituted through the specific narratives and even the structure used by King. For example, Lynch (1995) discussed the way King’s speech functions as chiasm, a storytelling form common in oral traditions that uses repetition in a pattern moving out from the center. In chiastic form, the first incident and the last incident parallel each other, as do the second and the penultimate, and so forth. Usually a single incident is set in the center of the chiasm, which emphasizes its importance. The form itself links the speech to Biblical tradition and the tradition of African American preaching. Lynch pointed out the way the chiasm focuses on King’s identity as anointed prophet. Chaiastic form helped King to construct an epic; calling on ancient oral traditions as well as prophetic traditions from his own cultural heritage, it constituted King as the epic hero with special access to the divine.

What Lynch and other scholars ignored, however, is the way King used narrative to constitute roles for himself and his audience. This is where an understanding of epic can further illuminate the speech. The forms of epic imply specific narrative elements, both in terms of plot and characters, that reframe the civil rights movement at a crucial time and thus respond to rhetorical challenges presented by King’s context.
Viewing King’s speech as an invocation of epic narrative helps us to understand how it effectively addressed his immediate context as well as larger challenges he faced throughout his career as a leader, activist, and rhetor. His invocation of epic narrative resonated with both his immediate audience of African American activists and with the larger audience of Americans of many races; it not only placed King within a tradition but also provided a logic for his radical ideals. It offered an identity for him and for his audience that invited support for King and his views and suggested the audience be patient, self-sacrificing, and hopeful about the current situation in the civil rights movement. The way epic narrative functioned in King’s rhetoric may be instructive for today’s politicians and activists, who often speak of religion in terms of proposition rather than narrative. Biblical narrative, by its very nature, can construct a constitutive plot that leads to progressive change.

Epic Discourse

Epic constitutes a genre of the kind described by Campbell and Jamieson (1978) with a “constellation” of elements. Form functions, as Burke (1966) suggested, to create and to satisfy an appetite. The appetite created by epic is easy to encounter because it is so common, especially in oral forms. Bakhtin (1981) noted that “the proximity of [epic’s] language to popular spoken language” (p. 25) is a key characteristic. Biblical epic, especially, is tied up in the Christian homiletic tradition; it is spoken in sermons and other forms of proclamation. Using narrative genres in discourse also creates a framework for the audience to understand the situation and the role of the speaker and of audience members themselves and to bring the story toward resolution. The epic genre helps to contextualize a situation and to create expectations for what will happen in the future. In this way, narrative genre is constitutive, in Charland’s (1987) sense. The shape of the narrative presupposes an ending and action for the characters—that is, the audience who has been constituted as part of the narrative by the discourse. This does not prevent a resistant reading but does offer the audience a framework to view their current situation that limits their choices of subsequent action, if they agree to view the situation in terms of the given narrative. The use of genre, in this case the epic genre, creates roles for the audience and the speaker that are already culturally defined.

Four features of epic narrative aided King in meeting the challenges of his rhetorical situation. First, epic tales take place over long amounts of time. The stories last for decades, even centuries. Sometimes the hero is treated unjustly; sometimes it seems like there is no hope for success, but the audience knows this is only one step in a long journey. Patience and perseverance are necessary for characters in an epic. Second, epic features divine participation. Divine intervention is the hope when there is no apparent way out, and the eventual victory for the noble hero. In Biblical epic and most American epics this God is the Judeo-Christian God; in classical epic it is Greek deities. The third feature of epic aiding King is the complex character of the epic hero; the hero is someone who has come close to death, and who has a special relationship with the divine, important features for King’s situation. Finally, epic is a
community-defining story. Although it focuses on the epic hero, the entire people is involved in the battle, and the values and ideals of the people are defined in their understanding of the hero, his character and his values.

As epic covers long periods of time, and often that time includes injustice and defeat. Frye (1957) explained Biblical epic as “the total cyclical *mythos* in which disaster is followed by restoration, humiliation by prosperity and which we find in epitome in the stories of Job and the prodigal son” (p. 330). This shape is repeated in smaller tales within the Bible as well as the larger book, as Frye pointed out. Epic contains both tragedy and comedy: some episodes end well for the hero, and others leave him near despair. But most epics, and Biblical epic especially, feature the basic movement that Frye articulated: despair followed by hope, disaster followed by salvation.

Often this final restoration happens because of divine intervention and providence. Christ’s resurrection, of course, is an obvious example, but not the only one. Odysseus receives help from sympathetic deities, particularly Athena; Luke Skywalker relies on the Force and the mystical guidance of Obi-Wan Kenobi and Yoda for wisdom. It is easy to see why epic is so appealing across the ages. The stories portray triumph in spite of hardship, offer hope in the face of trials and suggest that, after enough time, a supernatural force will rescue all of us in the way these epic heroes and their people were rescued. Perhaps some will be lost in the fight, but the sense that human struggles serve a greater good is an important element within epic.

Two epic characteristics are intertwined: a *hero* who represents his *community*. For example, the Old Testament features classic epic heroes like Moses and Joshua, but it is also the story of God taking care of the chosen people, the Israelites. As the leaders, kings, and prophets change, the plot remains constant: it is the story of God relating to Israel, about God’s identity and Israel’s identity through conflict, sacrifice, and victory. Epics are an important part of national identity (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 13). They are constituted from national history, and in large part define national values. John Winthrop’s “City on a Hill” speech, for example, demonstrates the way classic American epics parallel or cite Biblical epic, as he invokes the Sermon on the Mount as well as the narrative of the Israelites.

A final characteristic of epic, although not a narrative feature, is also important in King’s use of the genre. Epic precludes other ways of viewing events, people, and roles because of its monological nature. The tone and language of epic—situated in the past and part of the official narrative of the community—make it seem immutable. Epic narratives, by their very nature, exclude other views of events. As Bakhtin (1981) put it, “this idealization of the past in high genres has something of an official air. All external expressions of the dominant force and the truth (the expression of everything conclusive) were formulated and in the valorized-hierarchical category of the past” (p. 20). Epic narratives, when accepted, become authoritative views of events, characters, and values, to the exclusion of all other views. This characteristic makes epics particularly useful to rhetors, because it makes their framework of an event an authoritative one.

Although King draws primarily from Western epics to reach his broader American audience, the presence of the African American tradition was crucial as well. First, the
theme of liberation is very important in African American tradition, and endurance in the face of hardship has been a defining characteristic of the African American community. Theologian James Cone (1975) explained, “The whole of black expression, Christian and non-Christian, preacher and poet, deals with the theme of liberation and the transcendence that happens in struggle” (p. 29). This theme often appears in the interpretation of Western narratives and language, sometimes creating an insider meaning for the African American community that is distinct from the denoted meaning for those in power (Coleman, 2000). As part of King’s tradition, therefore, this redirecting of Western narratives was not original to him, but he found new ways to employ it and new meanings and significances within it.

Secondly, the characteristics of African heroes influence King’s presentation of the narrative. Levine (1977) argued that American slave folk heroes “continued the African patterns of manipulating the strong and reversing as far as possible the normal structure of power and prestige” (p. 400). He also pointed to patterns of exaggeration of one’s own importance as a characteristic of the African folk hero, a characteristic that is often relevant in Western epic as well.

As a significant source of epic narratives available to King, the civil religious tradition provided important forms, evidence, and even examples for his rhetoric. In addition to understanding the narrative sources for invention, the broader cultural assumptions at work in civil religion are important to understand the rhetorical work done in King’s last speech.

Civil Religion

Civil religious discourse appears throughout both religious and political discourse in the United States. The myth of America as God’s chosen people or as specially favored comes up again and again, beginning with John Winthrop in the American colonies. It continues to be a prominent part of American identity. As Hart (1977) noted:

we as a nation have fashioned our national anthems, insisted that our presidents take their oaths of office on the Bible, established Capitol prayer rooms, proclaimed national days of prayer, brandished federal banners in our churches and talked, talked, talked . . . of God’s special love for America, of America’s unique responsibility to God, of a New Israel and a Chosen People, of rededicating ourselves to the principles of basic, Christian Americanism, and so on. (p. 12)

Judeo-Christian morality in American discourse often appeals to Judeo-Christian examples, comparing America to Israel or the early church. Beasley (2004) pointed out how Christian discourse, such as the statement in Galatians that “in Christ there is no Jew or Greek” (Gal 3:28) translates conveniently into American discourse about a unified identity. “This Christian logic might help the American people see themselves not just as God’s favorite children but also as uniquely bound together through a new identity marked by a new feeling state” (Beasley, p. 52). Civil religious discourse is not always used to build unity, however. Bellah (1975) argued that comparisons of Americans to the pilgrim Israelites helped justify the extermination of Native Americans, among other evils.
Hart (1977) contended that civil religion is not an activist form of rhetoric and does not easily lend itself to activism because it represents a contract between religion and government; therefore “we find no truly prophetic God in America’s civil-religious pantheon. No God of Abraham opined during our bicentennial celebrations. Rather, God becomes what Andrew Greeley calls ‘senior partner’ to American interests” (p. 81). Martin Luther King, Jr. was a “curious case” because he seems to turn civil religion toward activism. Hart offered both the “unsatisfying” solution that King was an exception and the suggestion that King was not counter to the tradition because he was so entrenched in it. I find both his explanations unsatisfying, as do others (Lee, 2005). In addition, King is not the only figure in American history to invoke religion and patriotism toward progressive change. For example, abolitionists, pacifists, and feminists all invoked religious and national values in their battles for change.

As one case study for how civil religion is employed toward change, my contention is that King turned the civil religious discourse to his own ends. He drew on a rich African American tradition that understands the Biblical narrative as a narrative of the oppressed (Cone, 1975; Coleman, 2000). King’s narrative recast God’s people to be constituted primarily of African Americans (although he did not exclude white Americans). Instead of seeing America as God’s people battling enemies, King constructed the United States as headed toward harmony and peace in a kind of New Jerusalem. Like other religious activists in the past (and, indeed, like the Hebrew prophets themselves), King used the prophetic language of the Bible to point out the hypocrisy in American civic piety (Howard-Pitney, 1990).

Before King, there already existed in American rhetoric an epic framework, based on Biblical narrative; King recast the narrative of civil religion to frame the civil rights movement and turned the epic battle within the narrative into a battle for justice rather than a battle for superiority. King made subtle changes to familiar epic tales and created a nonviolent epic whose victory is peace, not domination.

“I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” as Epic Discourse

Within King’s structural narrative of Moses and the Israelites, he invoked a number of other narratives that weave together the epic narratives King’s audience held dear: a civil rights epic comparing epics and heroes in the Christian and American tradition. These stories grew together to constitute a new epic community, and King as a new zepic hero. The epic of civil religion grew to include, and even to be defined by, the civil rights movement. This new epic constituted specific roles and identities for both King and his audience that work to address the rhetorical challenges facing King.

King’s Narrative Framework

King’s speech was framed by the epic narrative of the Exodus, with civil rights advocates as children of Israel and King as Moses. He constructed his narrative through
vivid language and allusions, especially in the introduction and conclusion. Early in the speech King set his time and life in the context of great moments of history.

And you know, if I were standing at the beginning of time, with the possibility of general and panoramic view of the whole human history up to now, and the Almighty said to me, “Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?”—I would take my mental flight by Egypt through, or rather across the Red Sea, through the wilderness on toward the Promised Land. And in spite of its magnificent, I wouldn’t stop there. I would move on by Greece, and take my mind to Mount Olympus, And I would see Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, Euripides and Aristophanes assembled around the Parthenon as they discussed the great and eternal issues of reality. (King, 1968, para. 3)

King invoked the tale of the end of Moses’ life, standing on a mountain and viewing the Promised Land. He already asserted his own importance by putting himself in a hypothetical conversation with God. He then bolstered that importance by beginning a string of allusions to important times and people throughout history;

But I wouldn’t stop there. I would go on, even to the great heyday of the Roman Empire. And I would see developments around there, through various emperors and leaders. But I wouldn’t stop there. I would even come up to the day of the Renaissance, and get a quick picture of all that the Renaissance did for the cultural and esthetic life of man. But I wouldn’t stop there. I would even go by the way that the man for whom I’m named had his habitat. And I would watch Martin Luther as he tacked his ninety-five theses on the door at the church in Wittenberg.

But I wouldn’t stop there. I would come on up even to 1863, and watch a vacillating president by the name of Abraham Lincoln finally come to the conclusion that he had to sign the Emancipation Proclamation. But I wouldn’t stop there. 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. (para. 4–8)

Even at this early point in his speech he invoked both religious (Moses and Martin Luther) and American (Lincoln and Roosevelt) myths. He placed his own life among those of these heroes, and his own era among these critical periods. By invoking all these epic time periods and epic heroes immediately in his speech, and explicitly placing his own period above them as more important, King framed the current struggle as epic, on par with, or even above those other events. This current time is important, he asserted, because of these struggles, just as the civil war, protestant reformation, and European renaissance were important. “I would turn to the Almighty, and say, ‘If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the 20th century, I will be happy,’” because “something is happening in our world.” By making these comparisons explicitly and early, he primed his audience to understand the rest of his speech drawing on their experience of the epic tales from the eras that King cites.

The Moses narrative continued throughout the speech. King returned to identifying himself with Moses by saying “whenever the slaves get together, something happens in Pharaoh’s court, and he cannot hold the slaves in slavery.” Directly after this Biblical allusion he talked about the specific struggles and particular battles in the contemporary world. When he said “Bull Connor would tell them to send the dogs
forth and they did come” he was casting Bull Connor directly as hard-hearted Pharaoh, the civil rights community as Israel, and himself as Moses. This gave King divine approval, epic importance, and reminded the audience of the end of the Exodus story—the Israelites escaped from slavery and made it to the Promised Land.

The parallel between the African American experience in the Americas and that of the Israelites in Egypt, of course, resonates throughout the history of the African American discourse from the time of slavery onward as well, so it was not new to civil rights discourse by any means. Raboteau (1994) explained the way the Exodus story “gave meaning and purpose to lives threatened by senseless and demeaning brutality” (p. 13). Just like the Israelites’ 40 years in the desert, the American slaves suffered and continued to suffer racial oppression. The narrative of the Exodus was important to them as slaves, and it continued to resonate with the community’s experience. King echoed a “very old and evocative tradition” (1994, p. 15). Glaude (2000) expressed the importance of the story to African American history: “The endless repetition of the story in black life established the narrative as paradigmatic in the developing black political culture of the North” (p. 45). The centrality of the Exodus story across Black politics allowed the allusions to constitute an epic parallel to Biblical and historical American epic narratives. It also constituted the America of the future as the Promised Land that King described, perhaps, in his “I Have a Dream” speech. The Promised Land is the reality the community hopes for, not the reality already here; the community must first be freed from injustice through their own perseverance, and through the heroism of the epic hero.

King reiterated this connection to Biblical epic and Biblical heroes by alluding more directly to the story of Moses’s death in the conclusion of his speech: “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. And I’m happy, tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.” The final line resonates both with the story of Moses (who, the Biblical narrative tells us, was allowed to behold the glory of the Lord on Mount Sinai in Exodus 33) but also is a quotation from the Battle Hymn of the Republic—a patriotic hymn composed during the Civil War. Invoking one of the primary hymns of American civil religion not only fit within the King-as-Moses metaphor but also helped King’s move to redirect American civil religion toward his cause for civil rights and to remind Americans of a previous community-defining battle on behalf of African American freedom. King-as-Moses was not only the hero of a Biblical epic but an American one as well; an epic in which all Americans could participate. Inside this narrative, King told other, smaller stories that functioned as evidence of his heroic ethos, and the epic nature of the civil rights struggle.

**Narratives within the Epic Narrative**

King’s tales of his own life functioned as evidence of his identity as the epic hero, and to draw specific parallels between his historical moment and the great epics of the
past he invoked. The anecdote of King’s near-death experience constituted a multiracial community as the hearers of this epic. Not only was King, the epic hero, a representative of the values and ideals of the Black community but also of the white community. He demonstrated this by retelling the story of his near death from stabbing (“It came out in the *New York Times* the next day that if I had merely sneezed, I would have died”) and the letter from the “white girl” who wrote him “to say that I’m so happy you didn’t sneeze.” This girl became representative of the white community, constructing white Americans also as part of the community in which this epic narrative was rooted. As a member of the community constituted by the narrative, her hope is for the success of the epic hero. Her respect and admiration for King help both to support his position as epic hero and to constitute the multiracial community within the epic. He intentionally chose stories important to mainstream America, to invite them to participate in the epic, and to become a people that hold the values he stood for as the epic hero.

In a similar way, immediately after that story, King highlighted events from his life to reify his role as epic hero, and to point to all the epic glory of the recent past.

Because if I had sneezed, I wouldn’t have been around here in 1960, when students all over the South started sitting-in at lunch counters. And I knew that as they were sitting in, they were really standing up for the best in the American dream. And taking the whole nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the Founding Fathers in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. If I had sneezed, I wouldn’t have been around in 1962, when Negroes in Albany, Georgia, decided to straighten their backs up. And whenever men and women straighten their backs up, they are going somewhere, because a man can’t ride your back unless it is bent. 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 later that year, in August, to try to tell America about a dream that I had had. If I had sneezed, I wouldn’t have been down in Selma, Alabama, been in Memphis to see the community rally around those brothers and sisters who are suffering. (para. 43–49)

These events, important moments in King’s life and in the history of the civil rights movement, worked to create an epic tale because King was recounting, like Odysseus (Homer, 1997), the defining moments of the community and the great deeds of the epic hero. These specific moments in King’s life allowed him to make the parallels between his moment and historic epics more clear, and to constitute, with specificity, the epic tale his audience was living. Just as in a sermon a pastor repeats the stories of God’s faithfulness to God’s people, here King repeated the stories of God’s faithfulness to the civil rights movement. Through his retelling of the epic, he asserted that this story was an epic that bears repeating.

*The Power of Allusions: The Good Samaritan*

The specific allusions that King chose to employ worked both to constitute the details of his situation and to invoke the connections the audience had with the stories. In a
speech rife with allusions, Biblical stories were primary for King in constituting a clear situation of good versus evil, and in constructing his audience as the people of Israel. Civil religious discourse already invoked Biblical stories; by reassigning those parallels into his historical moment, King both appropriated the civil religious tradition and extended it to include himself and his audience.

The Good Samaritan narrative was not as deep a structural element in King’s speech as the Exodus narrative but was still important because of its themes. He reminded his audience of the surprising hero of the story—the Samaritan. Significantly, the lower class Samaritan, himself a victim of ethnic oppression and segregation, was the hero, just as the African Americans in King’s audience were being asked to emulate him through the statement “That’s the question before you tonight.” The Good Samaritan story and the life of Christ offer nonviolent heroes; this was crucial for King in constituting himself and his audience in an epic battle that would not involve their committing acts of violence. King asked his audience to emulate the nonviolent hero. It was important, then, that he invoke Christ and his ideals, because epic heroes are conventionally violent: Beowulf kills monsters, J. R. R. Tolkien’s Aragorn fights in horrific battles, and King David goes to war against the Philistines.

In addition to a general call for nonviolence, the appeal to the Good Samaritan narrative framed King’s nonviolent life and, later, his death, as part of his heroic identity. King followed this discussion with stories of his own life—his near-death experiences, his accomplishments, and his vision for the future. By putting his own life in the context of the Good Samaritan story (a parable told by Jesus, another humble figure who sacrificed his own safety for others), King defended his decision to de-emphasize his own safety in the name of doing God’s will and furthering the civil rights movement.

Constituting Identities: King and his Audience

Creation of an epic narrative enabled King to overcome many of the rhetorical problems he was faced with. Epic battles last a long time, they involve casualties, and often progress is slow. Constituting the civil rights movement as this kind of epic enabled King to ask his audience to have patience with a battle that is important or essential to the community’s survival but will last a long time. Viewing the situation through this framework helped him to reinterpret much of the impatience and frustration that was happening within the civil rights movement; instead of signifying that new tactics were needed, this frustration was recast as an implicit argument for continued nonviolent efforts and patience. At the same time, patience and hope were also invited as the characters in the epic looked forward to divine participation. In epic narrative, God intervenes on behalf of the hero (who has a special relationship with God) and God’s people. This is especially the case in Biblical epic, on which King relied heavily. Because of this aspect of epic, too, King’s narrative argued enthymematically for continued patience and hope.
The epic narrative allowed King to reconstruct his own ethos as well, as his reputation at the time of the speech had come under fire. Within King’s epic, he was the epic hero, and he demonstrated this by offering the personal narrative of his near-death experience (which was evidence of his dangerous heroic life) and by invoking the prophetic voice (which also functioned to demonstrate his special relationship with the divine). King also suggested his special relationship with the divine when he put himself in a hypothetical conversation with God. Though he was speaking hypothetically when he said “if I were standing at the beginning of time, with the possibility of general and panoramic view of the whole human history up to now, and the Almighty said to me, ‘Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?’” he offered, very early in his speech, an image of himself in immediate conference with God. This continued as he compared himself with Moses throughout the speech and was cemented when he finally said “[God has] allowed me to go to the mountaintop,” making a direct (if metaphorical) claim to special consultation with the divine. All of these elements constructed King’s ethos as an epic hero.

But even more important to King than uniting Americans under his new epic at this historical moment was reinvigorating the activist community to view the issue from this perspective. The epic timescale, as already mentioned, helped do this. The African American activist community was understandably impatient with the amount of time it was taking them to accomplish their goals, and epic narrative suggested an explanation. Constituting African American activists as a united community was another important function of the epic. As the civil rights movement became continually fractured, and younger leaders like Stokely Carmichael suggested new forms of agitation, King’s epic narrative asked everyone in the activist community to see their common goals and to view their sacrifices as necessary parts of the epic narrative. He was very careful to steer the narrative toward nonviolence, both in his explicit dismissals of violent modes and in his invocation of the Good Samaritan story. King’s epic differed from many other epic tales in making the epic battle a nonviolent one. King’s call for a New Jerusalem, with its vision of peace and togetherness, was at once radical and deeply entrenched in the American tradition, and the epic form allowed him to point to the tradition even while he promoted his radicalism.

**Conclusion**

Martin Luther King’s use of epic narrative in his “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech helped him navigate the complex rhetorical challenges presented by his context. Through his use of the narrative he created an ethos for himself as an epic hero and constituted in both his immediate audience and in broader audiences a sense of epic community. Through the epic narrative, he gave his audience a sense of grand scale, purpose, and hope. The epic narrative implicitly invited his audience to believe in the values represented by King’s character and to persevere in their efforts toward their greater goals. Epic worked as its own warrant, as itouched King’s radical ideals of nonviolence within one of the oldest literary forms, and within allusions to the great epics of religion and history, which already had the allegiance of these
communities. These forms were consistent with strategies used by King elsewhere to convince skeptics and inspire those who agree with him. This speech was a particularly good example of King’s use of allusion and both religious and political traditions to support his calls for justice and nonviolence.

Epic framework proved an elegant strategy to engage the discourses of patriotism and religion that are entwined in American culture and to redirect them toward progressive ends. Contemporary rhetors seem less likely to invoke this epic frame in their discourse, opting instead for more sound-bite driven oratory and a style based more on propositions than on narrative. However, contemporary examples invoke this strategy in ways that energize constituencies in many of the ways King’s rhetoric did. For example, in Barack Obama’s March 2007 speech in Selma, Alabama, he invoked the Promised Land metaphor and the narrative of Moses, but extended it and constituted the present time as “the Joshua generation.” In much the same way as King, Obama invoked an epic with both historic and religious resonance to call an audience to greater commitment. The longevity of epic continues to make it a uniquely helpful form of narrative, as contemporary Americans expect instant results in everything from their meals to wars overseas. Epic oratory requires rhetors to draw on the religious and patriotic narratives that define American identity for both African Americans and white Americans, and the creativity and ability to redirect those narratives toward contemporary goals. This can be stirring and effective today, just as it was in King’s time.

The epic is also a useful construction for critics when examining other Western oratory and media. Rhetoricians frequently draw on Kenneth Burke’s concept of comic and tragic frames to understand how media, speakers, and activists frame events as a coherent narrative. Perhaps in addition to these generic frames, we should reconsider epic as a useful frame of acceptance. King’s use of epic genre conventions constituted identities for himself and his audience and suggested consequential actions. Given King’s epic’s roots in Western literature and American civil religious discourse, other rhetors in American history are likely to have drawn on these conventions as well, and it would benefit critics to consider other texts through this framework. Including epic as a potential frame for rhetorical criticism makes available an additional tool to understand the narratives within culture more precisely. Since narrative is such an important way of defining individual and community identity, a return to examining narrative framing of current events and issues may be fruitful for contemporary rhetorical critics.

Lastly, though King’s rhetoric is continuously studied, given the aesthetic beauty of his language and the importance of his work, the well has not dried up. While issues of justice remain salient, we can continue to learn from someone who was successful in bringing those issues to the fore and energizing people toward change. Especially with the recurring strength of religious ideology in American political speech, it helps to look to King’s example as one invoking religious epics toward social change. Although the issues of justice may be changed, and the political atmosphere might be new, King’s strategies stand up as an example of artful, timely rhetoric from which more may be learned.
Notes

[1] A notable exception here is Wenzel (1989) who used a propositional method of analyzing King’s arguments to deal with the rhetorical exigencies of the moment and downplayed the narrative.

[2] In the narrative history of Israel, Moses died before reaching the Promised Land; it was his successor Joshua who led the Hebrew people into the Promised Land.

References


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