

LESSON PLAN

Senator Robert F. Kennedy Speaks on Martin Luther King Jr. Analyzing Speeches Given on April 4 and 5, 1968 after the Death of Dr. King



Gregory Thornton Collection / The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza

Grade

9th – 12th

Time

Two 90-minute class periods

Brief Synopsis

This lesson allows students to analyze, compare, and contrast Senator Robert Kennedy's speeches after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

1. Senator Robert F. Kennedy, "Statement on Assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.," Indianapolis, April 4, 1968
2. Senator Robert F. Kennedy, "Remarks at the Cleveland City Club," April 5, 1968

Historic Context

On April 3, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke in Memphis to a capacity crowd at the Mason Temple Church. He gave his final speech, the now-famous “Mountaintop” speech, in which he tells the audience, preparing to participate in protests that were to begin the next day, that “he may not get there with them.” Some feel it was foreshadowing his death – on April 4, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee at the Lorraine Motel.

Senator Robert F. Kennedy was campaigning in Indiana for the Democratic Nomination for President of the United States at that time, and he gave two speeches within 24 hours in response to Dr. King’s assassination: one was spontaneous and unscripted, and the other was prepared and scripted.

Essential Questions

1. How do the two speeches by Senator Robert F. Kennedy differ in impact, structure, and persuasive technique?
2. Which one of these two speeches would most inspire you to act? Explain.
3. What action could you have taken in 1968? What actions can you take today?

Learning Objectives

The student will be able to:

- Compare and contrast the main points of each speech given by Senator Robert F. Kennedy.
- Identify and analyze rhetorical devices that are evident in each of the speeches given by Senator Kennedy.
- Identify and explain the allusions and quotes used by Senator Kennedy in both speeches.
- Compare and contrast the effectiveness of the two speeches based on the persuasive techniques.

Standards

See [Appendix A](#) for Texas ELA & Social Studies Standards and Common Core.

Vocabulary Words

Rhetorical | the art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing

Allusions | an expression designed to call something to mind without mentioning it explicitly

Aeschylus | Greek poet and dramatist.

Compassion | sympathetic pity and concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others.

Definitions are derivatives of dictionary.com

Extension Opportunity

Analyze Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Mountaintop” speech from April 3, 1968. Discuss how Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech created context for Senator Robert F. Kennedy’s 1968 speeches.

Resources Needed

- [Appendix A](#) – TEKS and Common Core Standards
- [Appendix B](#) – Senator Robert F. Kennedy, “Statement on Assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.” and “Remarks at the Cleveland City Club.”
- [Appendix C](#) - Summary & SOAPStone for Robert F. Kennedy’s Speeches.
- [Appendix D](#) – Allusions and Quotes in Robert F. Kennedy’s April 1968 Speeches.
- [Appendix E](#) – Other Translations of Aeschylus Quote.

For Educator Reference / Further Study

Robert F. Kennedy, “Statement on the Death of Reverend Martin Luther King, Rally in Indianapolis, Indiana” (April 4, 1968)

Robert F. Kennedy, “Remarks at the Cleveland City Club” (April 5, 1968).”

Instructional Plan:

1. Have students listen to the speeches; then pass out copies of Senator Robert Kennedy’s speeches ([Appendix B](#)) and have the students simultaneously read and listen to the speeches:
 - a. April 4, 1968 | [youtube.com/watch?v=A2kWla8wSC0&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A2kWla8wSC0&feature=youtu.be) (5 minutes)
 - b. April 5, 1968 | americanrhetoric.com/speeches/rfklevelandcityclub.htm (10 minutes)
2. Have students annotate the important ideas throughout the speeches individually and then compare notes in small groups (two, three, four): Chunk the speeches to make analysis more manageable for the students.
 - a. Summarize the main points of both speeches.
 - b. Complete a SOAPStone for each speech (Speaker, Occasion, Audience, Purpose, Subject, Tone) ([Appendix C](#))
 - c. Highlight and name rhetorical devices used in each speech.
 - d. Highlight and name persuasive techniques used in each speech.
3. Bring the whole class back together and have groups report on what they discovered. Discuss as a class.
 - What are the similarities/differences in the speeches?
 - What are the key points that are the same in both speeches?
 - What is Senator Kennedy asking the audience to do or not do?
 - If you were in the audience at either speech, what would you be inspired to do?
 - What are you inspired to do today?
 - Which speech is more inspirational? Which is more persuasive?
4. Allusions and Quotations
 - a. After identifying two allusions and two definitions as a class, have students work independently in small groups to discover the allusions and meaning of the quotes. (Use [Appendix D](#) and [E](#).)
5. Instructions for Student Created Speeches
 - Have students choose a topic they are passionate about, a rhetorical device, and a persuasive technique.
 - Have the students give an extemporaneous speech using the topic, rhetorical device, and persuasive technique.
 - Then, write a speech using all three. Have them analyze which were they more comfortable with and which was more persuasive.
 - Have the students use the same process above (activities 1–4) to analyze Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s final speech, “I’ve been to the mountaintop,” given on April 3, 1968.

Appendix A

Chapter 113. Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Social Studies (TEKS)

§113.41. United States History Studies Since 1877

- (c) (2) (D)
- (c) (9) (C) (D)
- (c) (28) (A)
- (c) (29) (A) (B) (C) (D) (E) (F) (G) (H)

§110.57. Public Speaking, I, II, III

- (2) (E) (F)

§110.36. English Language Arts and Reading, English I

- (5) (A) (B) (C) (D) (E) (F) (G) (H) (I) (J)

§110.37. English Language Arts and Reading, English II

- (8) (A) (B) (C) (D) (E) (F) (G)

§110.38. English Language Arts and Reading, English III

- (8) (A) (B) (C) (D) (E) (F) (G)

§110.39. English Language Arts and Reading, English IV

- (8) (A) (B) (C) (D) (E) (F) (G)

Common Core Standards:

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards:

- Key Ideas and Details
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.2
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.4
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.5

English Language Arts Standards: History/Social Studies:

- Key Ideas and Details
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2

Craft and Structure:

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.5
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.5

Appendix B

Senator Robert F. Kennedy, “Statement on Assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.,” Indianapolis, April 4, 1968

The following text is taken from a news release version of Robert F. Kennedy’s statement.

[1] I have bad news for you, for all of our fellow citizens, and people who love peace all over the world, and that is that Martin Luther King was shot and killed tonight.

[2] Martin Luther King dedicated his life to love and to justice for his fellow human beings, and he died because of that effort.

[3] In this difficult day, in this difficult time for the United States, it is perhaps well to ask what kind of a nation we are and what direction we want to move in. For those of you who are black--considering the evidence there evidently is that there were white people who were responsible--you can be filled with bitterness, with hatred, and a desire for revenge. We can move in that direction as a country, in great polarization--black people amongst black, white people amongst white, filled with hatred toward one another.

[4] Or we can make an effort, as Martin Luther King did, to understand and to comprehend, and to replace that violence, that stain of bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understand with compassion and love.

[5] For those of you who are black and are tempted to be filled with hatred and distrust at the injustice of such an act, against all white people, I can only say that I feel in my own heart the same kind of feeling. I had a member of my family killed, but he was killed by a white man. But we have to make an effort in the United States, we have to make an effort to understand, to go beyond these rather difficult times.

[6] My favorite poet was Aeschylus. He wrote: “In our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.”

[7] What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence or lawlessness; but love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or they be black.

[8] So I shall ask you tonight to return home, to say a prayer for the family of Martin Luther King, that’s true, but more importantly to say a prayer for our own country, which all of us love--a prayer for understanding and that compassion of which I spoke.

[9] We can do well in this country. We will have difficult times; we’ve had difficult times in the past; we will have difficult times in the future. It is not the end of violence; it is not the end of lawlessness; it is not the end of disorder.

[10] But the vast majority of white people and the vast majority of black people in this country want to live together, want to improve the quality of our life, and want justice for all human beings who abide in our land.

[11] Let us dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago: to tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of this world.

[12] Let us dedicate ourselves to that, and say a prayer for our country and for our people.

Senator Robert F. Kennedy, "Remarks at the Cleveland City Club," April 5, 1968

[1] Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, I speak to you under different circumstances than I had intended to just twenty-four hours ago. For this is a time of shame and a time of sorrow. It is not a day for politics. I have saved this one opportunity—my only event of today—to speak briefly to you about the mindless menace of violence in America which again stains our land and every one of our lives.

[2] It's not the concern of any one race. The victims of the violence are black and white, rich and poor, young and old, famous and unknown. They are, most important of all, human beings whom other human beings loved and needed. No one—no matter where he lives or what he does—can be certain whom next will suffer from some senseless act of bloodshed. And yet it goes on and on and on in this country of ours.

[3] Why? What has violence ever accomplished? What has it ever created? No martyr's cause has ever been stilled by an assassin's bullet. No wrongs have ever been righted by riots and civil disorders. A sniper is only a coward, not a hero; and an uncontrolled or uncontrollable mob is only the voice of madness, not the voice of the people.

[4] Whenever any American's life is taken by another American unnecessarily—whether it is done in the name of the law or in defiance of the law, by one man or by a gang, in cold blood or in passion, in an attack of violence or in response to violence—whenever we tear at the fabric of our lives which another man has painfully and clumsily woven for himself and his children—whenever we do this, then the whole nation is degraded. "Among free men," said Abraham Lincoln, "there can be no successful appeal from the ballot to the bullet; and those who take such appeal are sure to lose their case and pay the cost."

[5] Yet we seemingly tolerate a rising level of violence that ignores our common humanity and our claims to civilization alike. We calmly accept newspaper reports of civilian slaughter in far off lands. We glorify killing on movie and television screens and we call it entertainment. We make it easier for men of all shades of sanity to acquire weapons and ammunition that they desire.

[6] Too often we honor swagger and bluster and the wielders of force. Too often we excuse those who are willing to build their own lives on the shattered dreams of other human beings. Some Americans who preach nonviolence abroad fail to practice it here at home. Some who accuse others of rioting, and inciting riots, have by their own conduct invited them. Some look for scapegoats; others look for conspiracies. But this much is clear: violence breeds violence; repression breeds retaliation; and only a cleansing of our whole society can remove this sickness from our souls.

[7] For there is another kind of violence, slower but just as deadly, destructive as the shot or the bomb in the night. This is the violence of institutions—indifference, inaction, and decay. This is the violence that afflicts the poor, that poisons relations between men because their skin has different colors. This is a slow destruction of a child by hunger, and schools without books, and homes without heat in the winter. This is the breaking of a man's spirit by denying him the chance to stand as a father and as a man amongst other men.

[8] And this too afflicts us all. For when you teach a man to hate and to fear his brother, when you teach that he is a lesser man because of his color or his beliefs or the policies that he pursues, when you teach that those who differ from you threaten your freedom or your job or your home or your family, then you also learn to confront others not as fellow citizens but as enemies—to be met not with cooperation but with conquest, to be subjugated and to be mastered.

[9] We learn, at the last, to look at our brothers as alien, alien men with whom we share a city, but not a community, men bound to us in common dwelling, but not in a common effort. We learn to share only a common fear—only a common desire to retreat from each other—only a common impulse to meet disagreement with force.

[10] For all this there are no final answers for those of us who are American citizens. Yet we know what we must do, and that is to achieve true justice among all of our fellow citizens. The question is not what programs we should seek to enact. The question is whether we can find in our own midst and in our own hearts that leadership of humane purpose that will recognize the terrible truths of our existence.

[11] We must admit the vanity of our false distinctions, the false distinctions among men, and learn to find our own advancement in search for the advancement of all. We must admit to ourselves that our children's future cannot be built on the misfortune of another's. We must recognize that this short life can neither be ennobled or enriched by hatred or by revenge. Appendix B Page 2 of 3 Lesson Plan | RFK Speaks on MLK: Analyzing Speeches Given on April 4 and 5, 1968

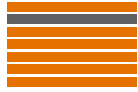
[12] Our lives on this planet are too short, the work to be done is too great to let this spirit flourish any longer in this land of ours. Of course, we cannot banish it with a program, nor with a resolution.

[13] But we can perhaps remember—if only for a time—that those who live with us are our brothers, that they share with us the same short moment of life, that they seek—as do we—nothing but the chance to live out their lives in purpose and in happiness, winning what satisfaction and fulfillment that they can.

[14] Surely this bond of common fate, surely this bond of common goals can begin to teach us something. Surely, we can learn, at the least, to look around at those of us, of our fellow man, and surely we can begin to work a little harder to bind up the wounds among us and to become in our hearts brothers and countrymen once again.

[15] Tennyson wrote in *Ulysses*: that which we are, we are; one equal temper of heroic hearts, made weak by time and fate, but strong in will; to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

[16] Thank you very much.



Appendix C

Senator Robert F. Kennedy: April 4, 1968 Speech

Summary:

Speaker:

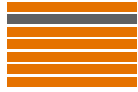
Occasion:

Audience:

Purpose:

Subject:

Tone:



Senator Robert F. Kennedy: April 5, 1968 Speech

Summary:

Speaker:

Occasion:

Audience:

Purpose:

Subject:

Tone:

Appendix D

Allusions and Quotes in Robert F. Kennedy's April 1968 speeches

This can be used as a discussion guide for the educator.

Allusion: an implied or indirect reference, especially in literature

Political Rally, Indianapolis speech, April 4, 1968:

Paragraph 5: "I had a member of my family killed, but he was killed by a white man."

- To what is Senator Kennedy alluding?
- He had never publicly spoken about this event in his life before this. Why is he doing so now? Is it effective?

Paragraph 6: "My favorite poet Aeschylus . . . wrote: In our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."

- Who was Aeschylus?
- What does this quote mean?
- How is Senator Kennedy using this quote in his speech?
- What if he had quoted another translation of this passage? [See other translations here: [Appendix E – Aeschylus translations](#)]
- What do the ideas in this quote evoke in you personally (from any of the translations)?

Paragraph 11: "Let us dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago: to tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of this world."

- Who wrote this quote and what work is it from? [Educators: It's not from a Greek author! It's from the introduction to Edith Hamilton's *The Greek Way*.]
- What is the context of the quote in its original source?
- What does it mean when Senator Kennedy says it in this speech?
- How do the meanings differ in the different contexts?
- How do you personally respond or connect to the ideas in this quote?

Cleveland City Club, Cleveland speech, April 5, 1968:

Paragraph 4: "Among free men," said Abraham Lincoln, "there can be no successful appeal from the ballot to the bullet; and those who take such appeal are sure to lose their case and pay the cost."

- What is the source of this Abraham Lincoln quote?
Teachers: abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/conkling.htm
- What is the context of the quote?
- How is the quote used in the context of Senator Kennedy's speech?
- How do you personally respond or connect to the ideas in this quote?

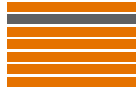
Paragraph 6: "Some Americans who preach nonviolence abroad fail to practice it here at home. Some who accuse others of rioting, and inciting riots, have by their own conduct invited them. Some look for scapegoats; others look for conspiracies. But this much is clear: violence breeds violence; repression breeds retaliation; and only a cleansing of our whole society can remove this sickness from our souls."

- What are the events and who are the people Senator Kennedy could be alluding to in 1968? Look online for newspapers from 1967-68 for these allusions.

- How do you respond to the ideas that Senator Kennedy speaks about here? Appendix D Page 1 of 2
Lesson Plan | RFK Speaks on MLK: Analyzing Speeches Given on April 4 and 5, 1968

Paragraph 15: “Tennyson wrote in *Ulysses*: that which we are, we are; one equal temper of heroic hearts, made weak by time and fate, but strong in will; to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”

- Who was Tennyson?
- What was *Ulysses*?
- What other historic/literary character does *Ulysses* allude to?
- What is the context of the quote in the original text?
- How is it similar/different than the context of the quote used by Senator Kennedy?
- How do you connect with the ideas in this quote? Do you agree/disagree with them?



Student Handout with Discussion Questions

Allusions and Quotes in Robert F. Kennedy's April 1968 speeches

This can be used as a student handout to structure open discussion.

Allusion: an implied or indirect reference, especially in literature

Political Rally, Indianapolis speech, April 4, 1968

Paragraph 5: "I had a member of my family killed, but he was killed by a white man."

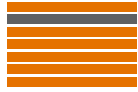
To what is Senator Kennedy alluding?

He had never publicly spoken about this event in his life before this. Why is he doing so now? Is it effective?

Paragraph 6: "My favorite poet Aeschylus ... wrote: In our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."

Who was Aeschylus?

What does this quote mean?



How is Senator Kennedy using this quote in his speech?

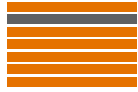
What if he had quoted another translation of this passage? [See other translations here: Appendix E – Aeschylus translations]

What do the ideas in this quote evoke in you personally (from any of the translations)?

Paragraph 11: “Let us dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago: to tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of this world.”

Who wrote this quote and what work is it from? [Educators: It’s not from a Greek author! It’s from the introduction to Edith Hamilton’s *The Greek Way*.]

What is the context of the quote in its original source?

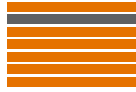


THE SIXTH FLOOR MUSEUM
AT DEALEY PLAZA

What does it mean when Senator Kennedy says it in this speech?

How do the meanings differ in the different contexts?

How do you personally respond or connect to the ideas in this quote?



Cleveland City Club, Cleveland speech, April 5, 1968:

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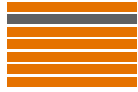
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What are the events and who are the people Senator Kennedy could be alluding to in 1968? Look online for newspapers from 1967-68 for these allusions.



THE SIXTH FLOOR MUSEUM
AT DEALEY PLAZA

How do you respond to the ideas that Senator Kennedy speaks about here? Appendix D Page 1 of 2 Lesson Plan | RFK Speaks on MLK: Analyzing Speeches Given on April 4 and 5, 1968

Paragraph 15: “Tennyson wrote in *Ulysses*: that which we are, we are; one equal temper of heroic hearts, made weak by time and fate, but strong in will; to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”

Who was Tennyson?

What was *Ulysses*?

What other historic/literary character does *Ulysses* allude to?

What is the context of the quote in the original text?

How is it similar/different than the context of the quote used by Senator Kennedy?

How do you connect with the ideas in this quote? Do you agree/disagree with them?

Appendix E

Other Translations of Aeschylus Quote from Senator Kennedy's Speech in Indianapolis, April 4, 1968

Robert F. Kennedy quoted these lines from the play *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus in his speech announcing the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968.

Robert F. Kennedy's version:

Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget
falls drop by drop upon the heart
until, in our own despair, against our will,
comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.

The quote from the version Kennedy knew actually reads:

God, whose law it is
that he who learns must suffer.
And even in our sleep, pain that cannot forget
falls drop by drop upon the heart,
and in our own despite, against our will,
comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God.

Edith Hamilton, *The Greek Way* (1930), pp. 61 and 194

Other translations of the same section of *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus:

***The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, volume 13. Robert Browning. London. Smith, Elder, and Co. 1889.:**

Zeus, who leads onward mortals to be wise,
Appoints that suffering masterfully teach.
In sleep, before the heart of each,
A woe-remembering travail sheds in dew
Discretion, -- ay, and melts the unwilling too
By what, perchance, may be a graciousness
Of gods, enforced no less, --
As they, commanders of the crew,
Assume the awful seat.

***Aeschylus, with an English translation by Herbert Weir Smyth, Ph. D. in two volumes. Agamemnon.*
Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann, Ltd. 1926.:**

Zeus, who sets mortals on the path to understanding, Zeus, who has established as a fixed law that “wisdom comes by suffering.” But even as trouble, bringing memory of pain, drips over the mind in sleep, [180] so wisdom comes to men, whether they want it or not. Harsh, it seems to me, is the grace of gods enthroned upon their awful seats.

Robert Fagles, *The Oresteia* (1975):

Zeus has led us on to know,
the Helmsman lays it down as law
that we must suffer, suffer into truth.
We cannot sleep, and drop by drop at the heart
the pain of pain remembered comes again,
and we resist, but ripeness comes as well.
From the gods enthroned on the awesome rowing-bench
there comes a violent love.

Ian Johnston (2002):

Zeus, who guided mortals to be wise,
has established his fixed law—
wisdom comes through suffering.
Trouble, with its memories of pain,
drips in our hearts as we try to sleep,
so men against their will
learn to practice moderation.
Favours come to us from gods
seated on their solemn thrones—
such grace is harsh and violent.

- Variant translations of ‘comes through suffering’:
- By suffering comes wisdom.
- The reward of suffering is experience.
- Wisdom comes alone through suffering.

Translation by Sarah Ruden in *The Greek Plays: Sixteen Plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides*, Ed. Lefkowitz, Mary and James Romm, 2016: Modern Library, New York.:

Strophe 3

Zeus puts us on the road
to mindfulness, Zeus decrees
we learn by suffering.

In the heart is no sleep; there drips instead pain that remembers wounds. And to unwilling
minds circumspections comes.

But this is the gods’ favor, I suppose,
claiming by violence the place of awe, the helmsman’s bench.