



Abraham Lincoln



Martin Luther King, Jr.



Eli Siegel

Two poems by Eli Siegel about Martin Luther King and America

By Alice Bernstein

Soon we will observe the federal holiday honoring Dr. Martin Luther King for his courageous opposition to racism, poverty, war, and economic injustice. As I think of his meaning, after having been in Memphis last April 4 for the 50th observance of his tragic death, I want more than ever for people to know of two poems by Eli Siegel, the great American poet and founder of the philosophy Aesthetic Realism.

With enormous respect for Martin Luther King, Mr. Siegel expresses a hope of humanity.

1. *Something Else Should Die* A Poem with Rhymes By Eli Siegel

In April 1865
Abraham Lincoln died.
In April 1968
Martin Luther King died.
Their purpose was to have
us say, some day:
Injustice died.

The stark facts with their power and meaning, stated so simply and carefully, make for large emotion. Two men of different races, living in different centuries, are shown to be akin, united in opposition to injustice. And the music of this poem has us feel both men are alive, warm, near.

Abraham Lincoln, as Dr. King himself recognized, wanted the murderous injustice of slavery to end. He considered the Emancipation Proclamation, written in his own handwriting, “the central act of my administration and the great event of the 19th century.”

King is loved for his bravery, sincerity, and enormous energy in fighting for the social and economic rights of people of all races. He spoke out early and steadily against America’s war in Vietnam, saying:

“Burning human beings with napalm,
...filling our nation’s homes with orphans and widows...cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice and love. A

nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.”

He led the Poor People’s Campaign to end poverty, and was speaking in behalf of the livelihood and dignity of striking sanitation workers in Memphis when he was killed. In 1968, just hours after Martin Luther King’s assassination became known, Mr. Siegel, in an Aesthetic Realism class, read “Something Else Should Die.” I had the immense privilege of being in that class, and I will always remember Mr. Siegel’s emotion as he read it and spoke of King’s large meaning.

Mr. Siegel’s love for justice and his passion against injustice is the most beautiful thing I know in this world. He explained that *contempt*, “the addition to self through the lessening of something else,” is the source of racism and *all* injustice: from the brutality of slavery, to the everyday forms of sarcasm, indifference to another’s pain, and lying.

What would it mean for injustice to die? I think it would mean every person—world leaders and private citizens—honestly answering this question Mr. Siegel asked, “What does a person deserve by being a person?” Martin Luther King, Abraham Lincoln, and John Brown—who is in the next poem—answered it in a way history sees as true, beautiful, immortal.

John Brown felt slavery was inhuman and had to end; he was executed for forming an army to liberate every slave. Aesthetic Realism teaches that when we see the feelings of others as being as real as our own, we won’t want to be unjust to them; in fact, we’ll see justice to them as taking care of ourselves.

In the international periodical *The Right of Aesthetic Realism to Be Known*, Ellen Reiss, the Aesthetic Realism Chairman of

Education, explains what poetry, and every art, does:

“In all real poetry, justice to the outside world is the same as the writer’s being himself or herself—richly, freely, thoroughly. That is what humanity needs desperately to see, because people don’t feel they’ll be themselves, care for themselves, by being just to something else.”

Mr. Siegel was just in his life and in his poetry, which William Carlos Williams described as causing “great pleasure to the beholder, a deeper taking of the breath, a feeling of cleanliness which is the sign of the truly new” (*Something to Say*, *New Directions*).

2. *They Look at Us* By Eli Siegel

Martin Luther King
Is with John Brown.
Look up: you’ll see them both
Looking down—
Deep and so wide
At us.

This is deep, musical justice to men whom American history should always cherish, because they felt others deserved fairness from the world and from them. I love the way heaven and earth, high and low, depth and width, then and now, near and far are lovingly, effortlessly made one in this poem.

On April 4, 2018, I spoke with many people visiting Memphis and the National Civil Rights Museum, who came to honor the history of men and women in the struggle for equality, and the legacy of Dr. King for people living today. I’ve interviewed unsung pioneers on video for “The Force of Ethics in Civil Rights” Oral History Project of the not-for-profit Alliance of Ethics & Art. They include people who marched with Dr. King during the 1968 Sanitation Workers Strike, some of whom witnessed his tragic death.

“Injustice will die,” Mr. Siegel wrote, “only when an individual no longer can feel that individuality is more served by injustice than by justice; by ugliness rather than non-ugliness.”

Mr. Siegel gave humanity the means of seeing justice as real in every aspect of life. It is urgent that people study Aesthetic Realism so that the justice that King, Lincoln, Brown and so many others died for is a reality at last.

The poems by Eli Siegel appear in his second volume of poetry, *Hail, American Development* (Definition Press). To learn more, visit AestheticRealism.org, and to learn about “The Force of Ethics in Civil Rights”—Oral History Project, go to Allianceofethicsandart.org.