

“The Great Debaters” Movie Excerpts Speech Analysis



First Harvard Debater:

From 1914 to 1918, for every single minute the world was at war, four men laid down their lives. Just think of it: Two hundred and forty brave young men were hurled into eternity every hour, of every day, of every night, for four long years. Thirty-five thousand hours; eight million, two hundred and eighty-one thousand casualties. Two hundred and forty. Two hundred and forty. Two hundred and forty. Here was a slaughter immeasurably greater than what happened at Amritsar. Can there be anything moral about it? Nothing -- except that it stopped Germany from enslaving all of Europe. Civil disobedience isn't moral because it's nonviolent. Fighting for your country with violence can be deeply moral, demanding the greatest sacrifice of all: life itself. Nonviolence is the mask civil disobedience wears to conceal its true face: anarchy.

You can't decide which laws to obey and which to ignore. If we could, I'd never stop for a red light. My father is one of those men that [sic] stands between us and chaos: a police officer. I remember the day his partner, his best friend, was gunned down in the line of duty. Most vividly of all, I remember the expression on my dad's face. Nothing that erodes the rule of law can be moral, no matter what name we give it.

James Farmer, Jr:

Resolved: *Civil disobedience is a moral weapon in the fight for justice.* But how can disobedience ever be moral? Well I guess that depends on one's definition of the words -- word. In 1919, in India, ten thousand people gathered in Amritsar to protest the tyranny of British rule. General Reginald Dyer trapped them in a courtyard and ordered his troops to fire into the crowd for ten minutes. Three hundred seventy-nine died -- men, women, children, shot down in cold blood. Dyer said he had taught them "a moral lesson." Gandhi and his followers responded not with violence, but with an organized campaign of noncooperation. Government buildings were occupied. Streets were blocked with people who refused to rise, even when beaten by police. Gandhi was arrested. But the British were soon forced to release him. He called it a "moral victory." The definition of *moral*: Dyer's "lesson" or Gandhi's victory. You choose.

In Texas, they lynch negroes. My teammates and I saw a man strung up by his neck -- and set on fire. We drove through a lynch mob, pressed our faces against the floorboard. I looked at my teammates. I saw the fear in their eyes; and worse -- the shame. What was this negro's crime that he should be hung, without trial, in a dark forest filled with fog? Was he a thief? Was he a killer? Or just a negro? Was he a sharecropper? A preacher? Were his children waiting up for him? And who were we to just lie there and do nothing? No matter what he did, the mob was the criminal. But the law did nothing -- just left us wondering why. My opponent says, "Nothing that erodes the rule of law can be moral." But there is no rule of law in the Jim Crow South, not when negroes are denied housing, turned away from schools, hospitals -- and not when we are lynched. Saint Augustine said, "An unjust law is no law at all," which means I have a right, even a duty, to resist -- with violence or civil disobedience. You should pray I choose the latter.

Background: The Great Debaters was inspired by the amazing story of Wiley College's winning debate team of the early 1930's. Set against the back drop of the Jim Crow South, The Great Debaters chronicles the journey of the Wiley College debate team – coached by the passionate professor Melvin B. Tolson. It was Tolson's recognition that the power of knowledge is the greatest advantage one can have.

After reading each excerpt above, answer the following questions in complete sentences.

1. Define: civil disobedience
2. What claim does the Harvard debater make to justify civil authority?
3. What evidence does Harvard debater use to support his claim?
4. What language (words, phrases, images, symbols, etc.) does the Harvard debater use to persuade the audience of the reliability of his argument?
5. How does the Harvard debater's word choice indicate his perspective/view of these events (tone)?
6. What claim does James Farmer, Jr. make about the need for civil disobedience?
7. What evidence does James Farmer, Jr. use to support his claim?
8. What language (words, phrases, images, symbols, etc.) does James Farmer, Jr. use to persuade the audience of the reliability of his argument?
9. How does James Farmer, Jr.'s word choice indicate his perspective/view of these events (tone)?
10. Give three examples in which you believe civil disobedience might be an acceptable response. Use current issues if possible and explain your answer.