Common Sense Study Guide

Common Sense by Thomas Paine

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* (1776) may have been the first American bestseller, rousing the colonial spirit for American independence throughout the early Revolutionary War. Certainly Paine did not originate the argument for independence, but his timing of articulating it could not have been better. His pamphlet was first published, anonymously, in January 1776, after hostilities between the colonies and Great Britain had already begun. The pamphlet gained immediate popularity, with up to 150,000 copies circulated in its first year, and it underwent numerous reprintings. People passed copies to friends and family members in addition to reading them out loud to those who could not read themselves. With British laws becoming more restrictive by the day and with colonial trade showing great potential, the small collection of states was ready to throw off its parent country and make its own governing decisions. Paine's ideas helped illustrate how life could be in an independent land, and why a republican government suited the new colonies much better than a hereditary monarchy.

Thomas Paine only lived in America for a relatively short time, but his impact on the emergence of the United States is incalculable. Born in England, Paine did not arrive in the then British colonies until his late thirties and after trying his hand at several different occupations. Frustrated with his career opportunities, Paine traveled to the colonies with little more than an introduction from Benjamin Franklin. But quickly, Paine set his rhetorical abilities to work for the colonial cause against the British government. He began by writing for a magazine in Pennsylvania, but, at the urging of some of the founding fathers, he began publishing political pamphlets. After Paine's writings became widely circulated throughout the colonies, citizens who were formerly interested in reconciling with the throne became emboldened to declare their independence. Paine's powerful arguments not only convinced colonials that they should separate from Britain but, more importantly, the style of his arguments reached a mass of people. Paine was undeniably intelligent and astute, but his true genius rested in his ability to communicate ideas to regular people.

Author Biography

Thomas Paine

Born in 1737 in England, Paine was the son of a Quaker corset maker. After trying his hand at the family business, he became bored and looked for other opportunities. His wife and child died in childbirth when Paine was in his early twenties. He tried a variety of jobs including seaman, tax collector, English teacher, and shop owner. He married again in his thirties, but he and his second wife soon separated. Still frustrated professionally, Paine moved to the American colonies at Benjamin Franklin's encouragement in late 1774 and quickly became a successful political writer. He published antislavery arguments and edited *Pennsylvania Magazine* in 1775.

His (literally) revolutionary *Common Sense* appeared in early 1776 and was followed by his *American Crisis* papers—sixteen in all over the next seven years. With these texts, Paine helped lead unsure and weary colonists to their destiny of self-governing Americans. Despite the many opportunities available to him because of his well-received writing, he continued to travel and seek new opportunities. He tried to make a career as an inventor in England in the late 1780s, but he turned his attention to the revolution in France in the 1790s. He was wrongly imprisoned as a royalist sympathizer in France in 1793, and he returned to the United States at the invitation of Thomas Jefferson in 1802. Paine died an outcast in New York City in June 1809. His obituary in the *New-York Evening Post* read, "He had lived long, did some good and much harm." Paine was buried on his farmland when denied burial in the Quaker cemetery. Oddly, Paine's remains were disinterred by a friend wanting to give him a more austere burial in England, but were then lost. Paine's home still stands today in New Rochelle, New York, where a monument and museum honor his contributions to American society.

Paine continued writing throughout his life. Soon after *Common Sense* made a name for its author, he began publishing the *Crisis* papers. Beginning with the famous line, "These are the times that try men's souls," Paine's text has become mythic in American culture; George Washington is said to have read this piece to his beleaguered, freezing troops on Christmas Eve 1776 to hearten their spirits before attacking and defeating the British army in a battle on Christmas day. After the new republic was settled, however, Paine remained restless. He continued writing but left America for England. He dabbled in hobbies, including attempting a new model for an iron-arched bridge. Politics could not let Paine go, however, and after becoming linked with a high-level scandal, he was charged with sedition and fled to France. Impressing a third country with his rhetorical abilities, Paine found himself seated in the French government only to be jailed during the Reign of Terror of the French Revolution. With the help of American ambassador James Madison, Paine was released from prison and traveled back to the United States. But he faced a frosty reception in America because of his most recent publication, *The Age of Reason*, which was perceived to be critical of Christianity. After the respected status Paine enjoyed during Revolutionary times, it is surprising that he spent his last years under public derision in the country he helped establish. Paine died

before public opinion would turn his way again, but history has been kind to his memory. With centuries of admirers, historians have, in the last decades of the twentieth century, become even more interested in his contributions to the early American republic. Paine's writings helped convince the mass of Americans that they could survive without British rule; he so emboldened the young nation that his words still describe the independent spirit that defines the American persona.

Plot Summary

Introduction

Paine begins by proposing to his readers that they have the right to question the King of England because his policies affect their lives. Paine emphasizes that people should question ideas even if they have been long accepted as true, and that the concerns of the colonies will prove to be universal concerns as they involve oppression and liberty, tyranny and freedom. He concludes by establishing that his interests have not been compromised by any political party but are only focused on a reasonable argument.

Of the Origin and Design of Government in General. with Concise Remarks on the English Constitution

Paine establishes the basis for government in society by illustrating how a hypothetically new group of people would first gather to form a society and then organize to form a government. "Government even in the best state is but a necessary evil," Paine writes, and as such, communities often create the vehicle for their own suffering. Governments are necessary because people cannot be trusted; if they were consistently moral, they would not need a governing body but as they are not, they need a system to ensure their security. In the beginning, people band together as a society to meet their needs. Then, they form a government to protect themselves from each other's worst motives. These early governments initially include every member of society and are therefore completely representative. As communities grow, members must be elected to represent the larger groups within the governing body. Because the representatives live with the groups that elected them, it remains in their self-interest to represent their group fairly. Somehow, Paine argues, the English government has strayed far from this originating model of representative government.

Paine begins to analyze the British government to show how it has drifted away from promoting liberty for its people. At its outset, the British system of government was beneficial. "The more simple any thing is, the less liable it is to be disordered, and the easier repaired when disordered; and with this maxim in view I offer a few remarks on the so much boasted constitution of England"; Paine argues that the British structure has gotten too complicated and thus flawed. Examining each part of the British government, Paine concludes that it has become too separated from the people to represent their freedoms fairly. The king's position, for instance, is a contradiction as it both separates him entirely from his subjects and yet requires him to decide upon their fate. And the established checks on the king are ineffective. Proponents of the system exhibit more of a general national pride rather than actual pride in the governing structure itself. Paine proposes to investigate the constitutional system, in detail, to determine the errors inherent in it.

Of Monarchy and Hereditary Succession

Paine begins with examples from Biblical times to establish how monarchies first, and hereditary monarchies second, are evil forms of government. He argues that differences in status, such as rich and poor, are man-made structures because humankind was equal at creation. However, evil is not necessarily the cause of such distinctions, but evil is often the result of them. But the separation into king and subject is completely unnatural, and until there were kings, there was peace; pride and competition comes with monarchies. Kings only encourage idolatry by requiring humans to revere other humans. God never intended for monarchies to exist, Paine writes, using scriptural evidence to bolster his point. God does not endorse a form of government that raises one human to a higher status than others. Israel only receives a king after begging God for one. When Israel asks Gideon to be king, he refuses, chastising them for wanting a ruler other than God. God presents his people with a king but foretells the curse that monarchs will be to humankind. Paine quotes God saying, in 1 Samuel, "ye shall cry out in that day because of your king which ye shall have chosen, AND THE LORD WILL NOT HEAR YOU IN THAT DAY." Paine brings his argument to a point, stating that the scriptures are clear on this subject; either God disapproves of monarchs, or scripture is in error.

Even with the occasionally good monarch, Paine argues, the addition of a hereditary element to monarchies contradicts all logic. First, how can anyone be certain that the son of a king will be as worthy of the position as the father? Each generation is different, and thus the kingship may be inappropriate for some in the lineage. Second, a group should have the ability to choose its own governor. If that group chooses a king, one scenario is presented. However it is inappropriate for that group to then force its choice on subsequent generations, which is the exact circumstance presented by a hereditary monarchy. It is inappropriate to rob future citizens of the right to choose their government representative by establishing a royal bloodline. England's hereditary monarchy began by force, as William the Conqueror took control with violence. Of that originator of the current British monarchy, Paine writes, "A French bastard landing with an armed Banditti and establishing himself king of England against the consent of the natives, is in plain terms a very paltry rascally original." In the same way hereditary monarchies are passed down from father to son, so is original sin; the parallel is not coincidence, according to Paine.

Being raised royal also breeds an aberrant perspective on life, one that is out of touch with regular society. Young and old kings present a further dilemma as well, because age does not restrict a person from becoming a monarch. As such, whomever the young or old king has as a confidant can often manipulate matters of state. Not only does hereditary monarchy not make sense, it also creates nothing good in a society. England has suffered wars and corruption at the hands of its hereditary monarch, even though proponents claim that inherited royalty eliminates civil unrest. Kings often make their personal quarrels matters of state, and thus conflict increases rather than decreases. God never intended anything but a representative republic, Paine argues, stating, "monarchy and succession have laid (not this or that kingdom only) but the world in blood and ashes. 'Tis a form of government which the word of God bears

testimony against, and blood will attend it." England seems to be progressing toward a republic as it incorporates representatives of the people, but the persistence of the monarchy corrupts the entire government.

Thoughts on the Present State of American Affairs

Reconciliation with the British government does not make any sense as it will only prolong a flawed situation that must end at some point in the future. Even though there has been much discussion of the British relationship with the colonies, no effective solution has been found. If the colonies do not take strong action, they will be remembered by history for their weakness. Independence is a worthy cause, Paine argues. "'Tis not the concern of a day, a year, or an age; posterity are virtually involved in the contest, and will be more or less affected, even to the end of time, by the proceedings now." Once fighting began, the colonies entered a new phase where reconciliation is no longer a possibility.

Paine determines to examine the arguments in favor of reconciling with England. One view holds that the relationship was beneficial in the past so it will be again in the future. Paine counters that the past is no good indicator of the future. Plus, he disagrees that the colonies benefited from the relationship in the first place because of their strong trade opportunities. The colonies do not need England to survive because of the rich commerce available to them. Another perspective argues that England has been good protection. To this, Paine counters that the protection has only been according to England's interest, not the colonies'. When connected with Great Britain, America not only gains the parent-country's allies but her enemies as well. Without Great Britain, the colonies would be at peace with France and Spain, for instance. Paine next contradicts that the colonies have no relationship with each other save through England by asserting that, in fact, they only have enemies, not friends, because of England. To the claim that England is the colonies' mother-country, Paine counters that far from a parent, England is rather a "monster" more than a "mother," for "even brutes do not devour their young." If anything, Europe is the colonies' parent, Paine reasons, because people move to America from all parts of Europe, not just England. Some say that England and America should reconcile because, if united, they could be a world power, to which Paine replies that the colonies have no need for being such a power. If trade is the goal, the colonies want to make friends with the rest of the world rather than antagonize it.

Paine asserts that there are no benefits to reconciliation, especially because of the commercial opportunities available to the colonies. To maximize trade, America should have no special relationships with any part of Europe, England included. If England engages in a war with a country, then the colonies will also be at war, thus cutting off a trade option. "Every thing that is right or natural pleads for separation," Paine writes, even the geographical distance between England and North America. Nature must not have meant for the nations to be connected if they are so far apart on the map.

The colonies' independence is inevitable, Paine argues. If separation does not occur soon, the future will inherit the same problems the colonies face now. Those who want to reconcile often have personal motives for doing so, or have not suffered injury from British rule. But, Paine reminds, many have been victims of violence and injustice. Paine makes a personal plea, asking if his readers had suffered the death of a loved one or significant loss of property, would they still wish to reconcile? Appeals for change have repeatedly been ineffective, and it is unreasonable to hope that England will alter its restrictive policies toward the colonies. He uses a vivid example of the folly of "the doctrine of reconciliation":

But let our imaginations transport us a few moments to Boston; that seat of wretchedness will teach us wisdom, and instruct us for ever to renounce a power in whom we can have no trust. The inhabitants of that unfortunate city who but a few months ago were in ease and affluence, have now no other alternative than to stay and starve, or turn out to beg.

Commerce remains a key reason to separate from British rule. With England physically distant from the colonies, its guidance on trade matters would be nothing less than unreasonable. Trade will suffer due to England's foreign relationships, which only underscores the injustice of having to share the profits of that trade with the king. America will eventually rule itself; it is much larger in size than England and it is an isolated landmass. Both these elements make it impossible for an external government to effectively control America. He makes this argument:

To be always running three or four thousand miles with a tale or a petition, waiting four or five months for an answer, which when obtained requires five or six more to explain it in, will in a few years be looked upon as folly and childishness—There was a time when it was proper, and there is a proper time for it to cease.

If the separation is inevitable, then why should the current society leave the fight to its children? Why squander the opportunity the colonies have to start over and install a representative government, Paine asks. The colonies face the unique possibility of creating a truly representative government, free from the corruption of a hereditary monarchy.

Any hope that England could rule the colonies fairly is undercut as Paine explains how the king has no incentive to regulate the colonies' trade appropriately. The king must protect the mainland of England, and so he will make policies that bolster Britain and not America. The King retains a veto power over all colonial matters, which leaves them to the mercy of a foreign ruler. This situation remains unacceptable to Paine. Paine finally addresses the fear that, if the colonies declare independence, there will be outbreaks of unrest, and civil war may ensue. He asserts the true threat to order will be if the colonies remain subject to the British throne. He predicts that the day a compromise and reconciliation is reached will be the day of colonial revolt. Too many citizens have suffered serious loss of property and even death to stand by quietly and accept anything but independence.

With the introduction, "If there is any true cause of fear respecting independence, it is because no plan is yet laid down," Paine details his own plan for the new government of independent colonies. He proposes a charter to establish the system, which will be a sacred bond to protect the freedom of society. There will be a president to lead the government, and there will be a unicameral, or one-house, system to support the president. The colonies will send representatives to the congress, and the president will be regularly elected from those representatives. Each colony will have the opportunity to present candidates for president, on a rotating basis.

Paine states that the opportunity to reconcile has passed and it is now time to demand independence. "There are injuries which nature cannot forgive," he writes, "As well can the lover forgive the ravisher of his mistress, as the continent forgive the murders of Britain." Independence is not only geographically and culturally inevitable, Paine argues, but it is divinely inspired. God intended for the colonies to rule themselves as a democratic republic. And that republic will become a haven, Paine predicts, for all the oppressed in the world: "O! receive the fugitive, and prepare in time an asylum for mankind."

Of the Present Ability of America with Some Miscellaneous Reflections

Paine asserts that the time to declare independence has arrived. Circumstances are ripe for the fight, with unity and size working in the colonies' favor. The population of the colonies is in the perfect situation to begin a new government. They are just the right mass to be highly unified in their fight against the British, and so should pursue independence right away. Furthermore, the colonies do not have debt to hold them back. It is the present citizens' duty to settle this matter for the future, and not leave it as a burden to their children, "leaving them the great work to do, and a debt upon their backs from which they derive no advantage."

The colonies should begin immediately by preparing an adequate navy to aid in the fight, and Paine lists the specific resources the colonies possess to do just that. Natural resources are plentiful for shipbuilding, and there is enough money to finance a navy large enough to battle the British. Concerns about failure can be alleviated because the navy can be sold for funds if necessary. Even without declaring independence, the colonies would need to build a navy, Paine proposes, because they cannot rely on England to protect them adequately. Even though England has a large and formidable fleet of ships, the colonies only need build enough ships to protect their ports. England's navy has other responsibilities besides fighting the colonies, so the entire fleet will not be available. As such, the colonies have an opportunity for victory, Paine argues.

The colonial navy will have uses beyond fighting for separation. During peacetime, the colonies can employ their ships for trade: "To unite the sinews of commerce and defence is sound policy," he writes, "for when our strengths and our riches, play into each other's hand, we need fear no external enemy." The colonies' resources are great, both in natural products such as hemp, iron, and land itself as well as in intellectual

power such as knowledge and motivation. The conflict between the countries will only escalate as America grows, so why put off the inevitable separation? Where England's army suffers from lack of energy (because the soldiers are comfortable and seek personal gain), the colonial army benefits from the deep desire for independence. If the colonies take advantage of these favorable elements, they can choose and form a new kind of representative government. Paine urges the colonies not to let this opportunity pass by. This new government can be a haven for religious differences and can be truly representative.

Paine concludes with some final motivations for the colonies to declare their independence. First, there is no mediator that could effectively reconcile the colonies with England. Both Spain and France would compromise their own self-interests to get involved in the conflict, so they cannot be unbiased mediators. Second, independence would stimulate a robust commercial market in the colonies, which would help establish the republic. Finally, Paine asserts that colonial citizens know they should pursue independence, and so they should begin right away. Paine explains:

Until an independence is declared, the Continent will feel itself like a man who continues putting off some unpleasant business from day to day, yet knows it must be done, hates to set about it, wishes it over, and is continually haunted with the thoughts of its necessity.

Themes

The Evils of Hereditary Monarchies

Paine spends much of his writing arguing against the objectionable nature of hereditary monarchs in general, and one hereditary monarch in particular: King George III of England. Although the colonies directed most of their anger toward the British Parliament for enacting extremely binding commercial restrictions on them, Paine sought to add King George to the list of British offenders. He builds a detailed argument throughout *Common Sense* for why monarchies are not good governments to begin with, but hereditary monarchies are extremely corrupt. He even argues that hereditary monarchs are both unnatural and un-Christian.

Monarchs cannot sustain a just society, claims Paine, because one person cannot fairly make decisions for an entire community. A monarch is not accountable to anyone and thus generally serves his own interests rather than those of his people. Paine says that monarchs are even opposed by God in the scriptures; Israel only received a king after begging for one. And even then, God presented the monarch with a curse, predicting that the subjects would regret the day they asked to become subjects of an earthly master. Kings and queens, even if occasionally good to their people, demand the kind of submission only appropriate for God, Paine argues. People should not worship an earthly leader; they should instead have a government that worthily represents their interests.

If monarchies are inherently flawed, Paine believes that hereditary monarchies are inherently corrupt. Having kingships passed down within a royal family presents so many challenges to rationality that Paine vehemently opposes the practice. Choosing a society's leader based on birthright disregards any actual skill or capacity for the position, Paine argues. No matter how unsuited one is for government leadership, bloodlines still allow the person to assume the throne. Further, the longer a royal family continues, the less connected to the community they become. They are entirely separated from their subjects and thus cannot know the needs of the people they serve. Paine also illustrates his own disgust for the kind of arrogance a royal family can cultivate in its habits of luxury and ego-gratification.

Paine presents a spirited case for why hereditary monarchies should be banished from the British colonies. He describes why the colonies should terminate ties with the English monarchy and begin self-rule. He additionally illustrates why America, once independent from Britain, should not institute a monarch or a hereditary monarchy in their new society. America has the opportunity, he asserts, to rid itself of old, corrupt forms of government in order to start a new republic.

The Inevitability of American Independence

Paine bolsters his argument for colonial independence by making the case that America will ultimately be self-ruling, whether it occurs in 1776 or whether it occurs some other time in the future. Geography tops Paine's list for why the colonies should split from British rule; because the American continent exists so far from Great Britain, it will eventually be independent. No outside force will be able to permanently control such a large, isolated land mass as North America, Paine argues, and so the colonies should recognize the strength of their bargaining position. Furthermore, if the split is inevitable, Paine asserts that the colonies should take advantage of their opportunity to shape the future. Why saddle the next generation with shouldering the fight and responsibility for an independent nation when the problem can be solved presently? Paine argues that the timing for establishing a new government could not be better, and so the colonies should stand up and fight for a new, free republic. Appealing to a sense of duty and a sense of destiny, Paine rallies colonial citizens to provide a better future for their children. Who knows when as good a chance for victory will present itself, he says. Paine seemed to anticipate the kind of unique country America would become, appealing to his readers in a language of freedom and independence that the entire world could admire.

Emerging American Capitalism

A main reason Paine believes the colonies could survive independently of Great Britain is the emerging commerce associated with North America. In the short time the Europeans were settled in the colonies, they were constantly discovering new natural resources. "Tar, timber, iron, and cordage are her natural produce," Paine writes, just to name a few of the products ripe for international trade. Because of the emerging market available to the colonies, Paine argues that independence is financially critical as well as morally correct. First, England will not be able to effectively regulate American trade from such a far distance; considering the travel-time involved in simple communications, trade would presumably be hampered. Second, with all of the Crown's alliances already established, Paine argues that there is no motivation for England to promote the colonies' interests. England will make decisions according to its own material gain and national defense rather than according to what would be best for the colonial market. Finally, Paine emphasizes the need to keep all European markets open to trade with the colonies. As England already had quarrels with France and Spain, for instance, those relationships would be detrimental to trade. As an independent country, the colonies could promote their own trade relationships and not inherit the alliances and enemies of England. Paine makes a strong case for the colonies to protect their great commercial potential by eliminating English restrictions. The capitalist success America becomes over the next two centuries is apparent in Paine's arguments, proving the accuracy of many of his assumptions.

Representative Government for the New Republic

Because hereditary monarchies are not appropriate for the emerging colonial government, Paine suggests a representative government instead. Besides railing against the Crown, he also criticizes the complicated Parliamentary system in England as ineffective. Bureaucracy and corruption make the seemingly representative system actually serve special interests. And since the British government retains an inherited monarchy, any progress toward a representative republic is corrupted. Because the colonies will be starting with a blank slate, Paine encourages them to create a new kind of truly representative government. He recommends a fairly elaborate construction of a one-house system with a president, not the two-house system the United States eventually adopts. Paine's structure, however, places representation as the highest priority. Because he believes government to be only a necessary evil and not an institution to be needlessly expanded, Paine believes that the people's voice should be able to guide the government on all matters. The worst part of England's system, Paine argues, is that it lost touch with the people it supposedly serves and protects. Paine's ideas for a new American republic place the people back in the priority position and make the wellbeing of the community more important than the selfish desires of the rulers themselves.

Historical Context

The American Revolution

Paine's writings entered an already-charged political environment. The British colonies were in direct conflict with their parent-country, Great Britain, over their own governing. Some colonies were more affected by restrictive British laws than others, and those most affected began protesting their treatment. Most famously, protesters in Boston staged the "Tea Party" in 1773 when they threw what they believed to be unfairly regulated tea into the Boston Harbor. After such demonstrations, the British government instituted what became known as the Coercive Acts in order to punish the colonies. These pieces of legislation extremely restricted colonial trade, taxed their property, and installed British law enforcement, all without providing colonial representation in Parliament. With all these issues building up tensions among colonial citizens, hostilities had already broken out when Paine published *Common Sense*. The first battles erupted in 1774 at Fort William and Mary in New Hampshire and in 1775 at Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts. Although in hindsight it can appear inevitable that America defeated Great Britain to become a successful, independent nation, the future was not so clear toward the end of the eighteenth century. Colonial citizens were not united in their point of view on British government, with some willing to reconcile with the throne and some unwilling to cause trouble in the first place. Paine's writings became so important specifically because of the conflicted perspective among the colonies. His passionate argument helped bring some unity to the independence movement and helped continue to rouse spirits throughout the Revolutionary War. The last major battle of the war took place in 1781 when the French helped the Americans defeat the British forces at Yorktown.

Plain Language in Literature

Paine's arguments in *Common Sense* can only be considered well-reasoned and detailed. But his large impact on the colonies is due to the combination of his logical appeal with his incredibly accessible language. Although influenced by various philosophers such as John Locke, Paine articulates his ideas in writing that everyday people could understand. Void of complicated language or obscure allusions, Paine's words use common language and recognizable examples to persuade his readers that America should be independent. Straightforward statements and ordinary vocabulary mark Paine's style. And his arguments are backed up with examples from contemporary politics and the Christian Bible, both sources most people during Paine's time could readily recognize. This plain style was no accident for Paine, who believed strongly in the power of the masses. Not only did Paine's words empower the average colonial citizen, but so did his ideas. He believed that every member of society deserved governmental representation and that monarchies and social aristocracies were unjust. Paine sought to give regular people a voice by providing them with reasonable, understandable arguments for colonial independence. His success can be measured

not only in the high sales of his writings, but also in the way his readers reproduced his arguments on their own. Paine was an uncommonly persuasive writer, certainly, but he was also an irrepressible champion of the average citizen. American ideals of common people finding success in a democratic country can be traced as far back as Paine's earliest writings encouraging independence.

Critical Overview

Although Paine lost America's favor in the final years of his life, he has since become one of the most celebrated patriot writers in the country's history. During the Revolution and soon after, Paine's writings were enormously popular. *Common Sense* not only sold an unprecedented number of copies, but it also helped establish Paine as a valuable national asset. Several members of the Continental Congress encouraged Paine to continue writing for the colonial cause, and so his works continued to spur on the fight for American independence.

Some, Like John Adams, had some reservations about the government Paine outlined; In "Revolution with Pen and Ink," William Kashatus defends him:

Paine wasn't a constitutional theorist. His task was tearing down governments, not creating them. While Congress eventually adopted his suggestion for a unicameral legislature and incorporated it into the Articles of Confederation, it proved to be a dismal failure, just as Adams had feared. Yet at the same time, Common Sense convinced many Americans who had previously been neutral on the subject of independence that a monarchy could no longer address their needs and that they should separate from England.

Reflecting on Paine in 2002, Lewis Lapham notes his power and relevance still today. "To read Tom Paine is to encounter the high-minded philosophy of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment rendered in language simple enough to be understood by everybody in the room," he claims. He goes on:

[Paine wrote] in what he knew to be "the undisguised language of historical truth," leveling a fierce polemic against the corrupt monarchy of King George III that serves (226 years later, and with no more than a few changes of name and title) as a fair description of the complacent oligarchy currently parading around Washington in the costume of a democratic republic. Were Paine still within reach of the federal authorities, Attorney General John Ashcroft undoubtedly would prosecute him for blasphemy under a technologically enhanced version of the Alien and Sedition Acts.

Perhaps perceiving his threat to governments, even ones that owe him for their very existence, conservative American politicians looked down on Paine for centuries. Harvey Kaye explains:

Conservatives certainly were not supposed to speak favorably of Paine, and for 200 years, they had not. In fact, they had for generations publicly despised Paine and scorned his memory. And one can understand why: Endowing American experience with democratic impulse and aspiration, Paine had turned Americans into radicals, and we have remained radicals at heart ever since.

Since his lifetime, scholars study Paine's work from many angles and in many eras. Thomas Edison, for instance, was a Paine enthusiast and helped cement his standing in

American culture by participating in the Paine Memorial groundbreaking. In an article in *American Heritage* in 2005, Kaye argues that Paine is the most underrated Founding Father, and all the others are overrated as a result:

Until we build the monument to Thomas Paine on the Mall in Washington, D.C., authorized by Congress in 1992—that is, until we officially admit Paine into the top rank of the Founding Fathers—I will continue to contend that all the usual suspects, yes, all of them are overrated…. [Paine] he not only turned America's colonial rebellion into a revolutionary war but also, to the chagrin of the more conservative of the patriots, defined the new nation in a democratically expansive and progressive fashion and projected an American identity charged with exceptional purpose and promise.

Because his work appeared in pamphlet form and enjoyed mass popularity, Paine is sometimes regarded as a propagandist rather than a philosopher. As Paul Collins writes in the *New Scientist*, Paine's texts "were radically democratic writings deemed so dangerous that, for decades after his death in 1809, British booksellers were prosecuted for selling them." There is no doubt that Paine's writings reached a wide audience, both physically, intellectually, and emotionally. As Neal Ascherson claims in "The Indispensable Englishman, "Thomas Paine has had far more influence upon the thinking and acting of the human race than any other English writer except Shakespeare."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

In the following excerpt, Woodward describes Common Sense *as the catalyst that set the American Revolution in motion, and contends that Thomas Paine, its author, is thus the godfather of the country*.

It was Thomas Paine who brought all these tangled revolutionary impulses to a head and sent them moving in the direction of independence. He wrote a thin book, or pamphlet, called *Common Sense* in which he pointed out the folly of a strong, self-reliant people taking orders from a nation across the sea; and he showed also that many of the British rules and regulations concerning the Colonies were utterly senseless, and could have been conceived only by stupid officeholders who lacked all sound ideas of America and its people.

Paine was the first author in our history to reach the whole American public. His book was an extraordinary best seller, and its keynote was American Independence.

The Giants of Political Thought: Common Sense, The Declaration of Independence, & The Federalist Papers was released as an audio recording in 1998. Narrated by Craig Deitschman, it is available in a set of four audio cassettes from Sound Ideas.

Common Sense was released as an audio recording in 2002. Narrated by George Vafiadis, it is available on compact disc from Commuter Library.

Common Sense and the Declaration of Independence was released as an audio recording in 2006. Narrated by Craig Deitschman, it is available on compact disc from Knowledge Products.

One may read *Common Sense* from cover to cover in three hours; it contains only twenty-five thousand words. Paine, who was always a most painstaking writer, spent the entire autumn of 1775 in writing and revising the pamphlet. Simplicity and force were two of the vital principles of his creative literary work. He reasoned that if an argument did not carry force and conviction there was no sense in printing it at all; furthermore, if it were so intricate in style and expression that only the learned could gather its full import most of its possible readers were thus excluded.

In the eighteenth century learning and literature were pompous. They were speckled with quotations from Greek and Latin authors. To prove his scholarship, and as a matter of self-respect, an author was moved to refer familiarly to Plato and Aristotle, to Catullus and Cicero, even if his argument concerned nothing more important than the right to catch fish in a pond.

But in *Common Sense* there is not even one quotation from the classics; Paine wrote in the English of the people, in the language that men use as they go about their daily business.

In September of 1775 the North Carolina Provincial Congress disclaimed any thoughts of rebellion. As late as January, 1776, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Maryland instructed their delegates in Congress to vote against independence if the matter was brought up.

James Truslow Adams says, in The Epic of America: "In Boston the upper class, almost without exception, were strongly opposed to it [to independence], and more than half the upper class throughout the whole colony. It was the same in New York, where the bulk of the property owners were Loyalists. In Pennsylvania, a majority of all the people were not only against war and independence in the beginning, but remained so throughout the struggle."

Nevertheless, despite this show of loyalty to Great Britain, half-formed, misty thoughts of a movement toward independence were in the back of the minds of many men. But they were doubtful of such a radical step. When once taken it could not be recalled, and one hesitates naturally at making a decision with such momentous consequences.

The situation may be compared to that of a chemical process where several diverse elements are brought together to form a single compound. They are all present but they will not unite until a catalyst is added to them.

The catalyst of the situation that has just been described was Thomas Paine. He was the godfather of America. It was he who inspired the Declaration of Independence.

The publication of *Common Sense* was like the breaking of a dam which releases all the pent-up water that stood behind it. The reprinting presses ran night and day to fill the demand for the thin pamphlet. Men read it in the streets, standing still on the narrow sidewalks, rapt in attention, while people passed to and fro. It was read aloud by schoolteachers and patriotic speakers to audiences of unlettered laborers. In the Continental Army the officers read it while their men stood at attention, listening to every word.

As soon as its authorship was known, within a few weeks after it had first appeared, Thomas Paine became a famous man overnight. A Maryland subscriber to the *Pennsylvania Evening Post* wrote a letter to that newspaper in which he said, "If you know the author of *Common Sense* tell him he has done wonders and worked miracles, made Tories Whigs and washed black-amoors white. He has made a great number of converts here."

On April 1 of that year (1776) George Washington said in a letter to Joseph Reed:

My countrymen, I know, from their form of government and steady attachment heretofore to royalty, will come reluctantly to the idea of independence, but time and persecution bring many wonderful things to pass; and, by private letters which I have lately received from Virginia, I find Paine *Common Sense* is working a wonderful change there in the minds of men.

Sir George Trevelyan says, in his *History of the American Revolution*:

It would be difficult to name any human composition which has had an effect at once so instant, so extended and so lasting … It was pirated, parodied and imitated, and translated into the language of every country where the new republic had well-wishers … According to contemporary newspapers *Common Sense* turned thousands to independence who before could not endure the thought. It worked nothing short of miracles and turned Tories into Whigs.

In April the North Carolina Provincial Congress, that until then had disclaimed any thought of rebellion, instructed its delegates to vote for independence at the forthcoming meeting of the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. At the September session of the previous year (1776) this body had given explicit instructions to its delegates to vote against independence.

Among the South Carolina delegates to the Continental Congress was Christopher Gadsden, a resolute patriot who stood for independence. Early in February he returned to Charleston, taking with him a copy of *Common Sense*. In the South Carolina Convention he rose and read many passages from Paine's pamphlet and proposed a resolution to the effect that South Carolina, united with the other Colonies, should declare for independence.

"This declaration," says William Henry Drayton in his *Memoirs*, "came like an explosion of thunder upon the members. There had been no intimation of such a purpose, there was nothing in the resolution of the Continental Congress to suggest such a purpose. That the controversy with the mother country might lead to such a revolutionary attempt had been anticipated and dreaded by many from its very inception, but few at the time were prepared to meet the issue. John Rutledge warmly reproved Colonel Gadsden, pronounced the opinion treasonable, and declared he abhorred the idea." Paine, the author of the pamphlet, was denounced and cursed. Even the few who were ready for independence regretted Gadsden's sudden and inopportune declaration.

Gadsden's resolution was voted down. But less than a month later the South Carolina Convention resolved to establish an independent government for South Carolina, with a president instead of a royal governor. It was further resolved to elect a general assembly, and instead of the royal governor's privy council there was to be a legislative council of thirteen members.

This proceeding inclines one to believe that after the "explosion" at the February meeting others besides Christopher Gadsden had been reading Thomas Paine *Common Sense*.

When the Declaration of Independence came before the Continental Congress on July 4 of that year the South Carolina delegates voted for it, together with the delegates of all the other Colonies except New York.

New York delegates refrained from voting on July 4, as they had no authority from their Colonial assembly to vote for independence at that time, but such instructions were received later and they cast their votes for the Declaration on July 9.

The Tories, or Loyalists, constituted a strong minority in all the Colonies. In some of them, in New York and Pennsylvania, for example, they were sufficiently influential to be a distinct menace to the independence movement. The Tories were conservatives, or reactionaries. They wanted no change, or only minor changes in the relation of the Colonies to Great Britain. They feared that separation from the mother country would lead to disaster, and the vexatious laws and regulations imposed on the Colonies by the king and his government seemed to them a lesser evil than those lying quietly hidden in the background of independence.

Many of the Tories were wealthy; it was, indeed, a party of rich landowners, exporters, merchants and professional men, such as college professors, clergymen and lawyers. The common folk included in the Tory classification were, in most cases, tenants or debtors or servants of well-to-do Loyalists.

The Tories were convinced that the independence of the Colonies, if it ever came about, would lead to mob rule, anarchy and disorganization, with "the illiterate trash," as they called the common people, sitting on top of the heap. And, of course, all private property would be seized or destroyed.

Their fears were wholly groundless, but they could not see far enough in the future to perceive that the ghost lying in wait for them on the dark road was only a flapping white sheet. The social system that followed the Revolution was certainly not governed by a mob. It was not even a democracy but an aristocratic republic. The Tories would have been as safe within it as if they were living in the shadow of St. James Palace.

Yet as late as November 24, 1778, after the French had joined the Colonials and the British were losing the war, the French minister at Philadelphia wrote to his government:

Scarcely one quarter of the ordinary inhabitants of Philadelphia now here favor the cause [of independence]. Commercial and family ties, together with an aversion to popular government, seem to account for this. The same feeling exists in New York and Boston, which is not the case in the rural districts.

To counterattack the revolutionary movement the Loyalists distributed innumerable pamphlets and subsidized newspapers and public speakers. Some of their arguments sound exceedingly strange to a twentieth-century reader. "If I must be enslaved," Samuel Seabury wrote, "let it be by a King at least, and not by a parcel of upstart, lawless Committeemen. If I must be devoured, let me be devoured by the jaws of a lion and not gnawed to death by rats and vermin." Jonathan Boucher declared that "a rebel is worse than the worst prince, and a rebellion worse than the worst government of the worst prince that hath hitherto been."

The anonymous author of *Plain Truth*, a Tory pamphlet, wrote that "Independence and slavery are anonymous terms." A startling idea! If that be true, it would certainly be interesting to have the writer's definition of freedom, which he failed to give.

"God is a God of order and not of confusion," wrote another pamphleteer, "and he commands you to submit to your rulers, and to be obedient to the higher power for

conscience sake." The Reverend John Bullman, a Tory divine, preached a number of sermons against the Whigs and the independence movement. In one of them he put forth this specimen of Tory wisdom:

Every idle projector, who perhaps cannot govern his own household, or pay the debts of his own creating, presumes he is qualified to dictate how the state should be governed, and to point out the means of paying the debts of a nation. Hence, too, it is that every silly clown or illiterate mechanic will take upon him to censure the conduct of his prince or governor and contribute as much as in him lies to create and foment these misunderstandings which, being brooded by discontent and diffused through great multitudes, come at last to end in schism in the church, and sedition and rebellion in the state; so a great matter doth a little fire kindle.

The appearance of *Common Sense* and its wide circulation among people of all classes and conditions was a major disaster to the Tory cause. Their leaders, and the secret agents of Britain, encouraged writers in their pay to answer its arguments. As a result a swarm of pamphlets appeared bearing such titles as *A Friendly Address; An Englishman's Answer; The Congress Canvassed; Patriots of North America;* and *True Interest of America*. All of these effusions are pompous, windy, dull and unconvincing.

Source: W. E. Woodward, "Paine Writes a Bestseller," in *Tom Paine: America's Godfather*, E. P. Dutton, 1945, pp.66-84.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

"Night." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the "Criticism" subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on "Winesburg, Ohio." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. "Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition," Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. "Richard Wright: "Wearing the Mask," in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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