The Declaration of Independence Study Guide

The Declaration of Independence by Thomas Jefferson

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Perhaps the greatest of the great documents of American culture is the Declaration of Independence, which was adopted on July 4, 1776. It is a comparatively brief essay because it was intended to summarize the grievances of the American colonists against the British Crown, thus providing justification for the American separation from England. Foremost among the Declaration's associations with the American dream is its firm statement about the "inalienable rights" of all people, including "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Over time this phrase has become a simple summary of what this country stands for and a statement of the basic principles of American democracy. It is these words, more than any others, that have drawn immigrants from all over the globe and served to instill in all citizens the fundamental concept of what the United States stands for. It is in the pursuit of these principles that Americans have fought and died in wars, organized and advocated for civil rights, and pursued political office.

To fully appreciate the Declaration of Independence, it is necessary to understand the background of its composition. England established colonies in North America in the early seventeenth century; for more than 150 years, the inhabitants of these colonies, for the most part, were quite content to remain tethered to the "Mother Country." They considered themselves Englishmen and entitled to the same rights as their brethren thousands of miles across the Atlantic Ocean, an idea shared by the vast majority of British inhabitants. However, the colonists gradually developed an interest in self-sufficiency; they wanted to control their own economic and political affairs, which for the most part were firmly dominated by the government in England.

Nevertheless, there was no widespread, organized agitation for independence until after the French and Indian War, the American name for what Europeans termed the Seven Years' War. Much of the fighting took place in North America, and American militia supplemented the British army and its Indian allies against the French, who also fought alongside certain native tribes. The war ended in 1763 and resulted in the almost complete removal of French authority in North America; from that point on, the British were unquestionably the dominant Europeans on the continent. However, the British government decided that the colonies were not paying their share of the war's cost, and various taxation plans were introduced to rectify the situation. The colonists were enraged, particularly as they had no direct representation in the British Parliament. Eventually the political arguments turned violent, and by 1775 the American colonies were in open revolt against the Crown.

In spite of the fighting that had broken out, many colonists still held out hope for a peaceful resolution to the conflict. By the summer of 1776, however, leaders of the Patriot movement were convinced only independence from Great Britain would be satisfactory. The Continental Congress realized that a formal declaration of independence stating the reasons for severing ties with England was necessary. While a number of Patriot leaders collaborated in drafting the ideas of the Declaration, it fell to Virginia representative Thomas Jefferson, a gifted author, to compose the final draft so familiar to Americans today.

It is not surprising that Americans who remained loyal to the Crown did not embrace the Declaration of Independence, and a careful analysis of the document reveals certain argumentative weaknesses. For example, while Jefferson enumerates the causes of the need for the declaration, he does not provide specific instances of Royal interference with colonial rights. There is no effort to name which British soldiers are accused of harming colonists, nor are the accusations of the revocation of colonial charters—legal recognition of their existence—supported by any evidence or proof. This lack of evidence is a curious omission in a document prepared by a lawyer. Of course, Jefferson did not intend for his declaration to be a formal legal document; he intended for it to serve as a brief explanation of the reasons the colonies intended to leave the British Empire. Excessive legal jargon or detailed evidence, therefore, would have made the document much longer and less likely to make an impression on the average reader.

More troubling, perhaps, to modern readers is the fact that many of the rights defined in the declaration have not always been fully protected by the federal government. The phrase "all men are created equal" is somewhat sexist; the word "people" would be more inclusive of women. Yet women could not vote, seek political office, or hold most jobs in the eighteenth century—an imbalance of equality not corrected until well into the twentieth century. The Declaration appeared at a time when many Americans, including the document's author, owned slaves. Even when African Americans were free, their rights were generally ignored. For that matter, only men who owned property were allowed to vote or run for office in most parts of the infant nation, pointing to either the literalness or hypocrisy of Jefferson's famous phrase.

The phrase "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" has also been restricted in many ways over the years. For example, if all people are guaranteed "Life," why does this country still allow capital punishment? If everybody is at liberty and free to do whatever he or she sees fit, why were interracial marriages illegal in some states until the 1960s? Why is same-sex marriage illegal in most states today? The answer, of course, is that notions of individual liberty were very different in 1776 compared to modern times. Yet it is important to remember that these principles of liberty have gradually expanded in the wake of the Declaration and the publication of the nation's other "Great Documents." Whenever a group of Americans finally achieves its rights—or whenever a new concept is assumed to be a "right" of every American—freedom and democracy are promoted and expanded. Although it can be a long and painful process, the expansion of freedom in democracy within our nation continues as we attempt to perfect the ideals of Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence.

Author Biography

Thomas Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson was born on April 13, 1743, in Virginia. Upon his father's death in 1757, young Thomas inherited five thousand acres of land; eventually he built his famous house, Monticello, on a portion of this land. Jefferson was an incredibly brilliant and dedicated scholar, eventually mastering such areas as architecture, horticulture, archeology, and several foreign languages. In addition to his accomplishments as an author, Jefferson was an inventor; later in life, he founded the University of Virginia, the first college in the United States not formally associated with a specific religious denomination.

Trained as a lawyer, Jefferson held a number of political offices; he served in the Virginia Colonial legislature and as governor of his native state during the latter stages of the American Revolution. After independence was achieved, Jefferson served as secretary of state under George Washington and vice president under John Adams before being elected the third president of the United States in 1800. As president, Jefferson oversaw the Louisiana Purchase of 1804, which greatly increased the size of the United States, and launched the Lewis and Clark expedition, which explored the newly acquired territory and paved the way for its eventual settlement. "The Sage of Monticello," as he has been called, remained interested in public affairs during his retirement. He died on July 4, 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of the adoption of his most important achievement.

Jefferson is buried at Monticello beside his wife; he designed his own gravestone, an obelisk upon which he insisted only three of his many accomplishments be listed: his authorship of the Declaration and the statute of Virginia for religious freedom, plus his title as "Father of the University of Virginia." As quoted by Noble E. Cunningham Jr., Jefferson chose these endeavors "because by these, as testimonials that I have lived, I wish most to be remembered." Interestingly, John Adams, also a signer of the Declaration and a former president, and a friend of Jefferson's despite their political differences, died the very same day.

The Declaration of Independence begins with its famous and oft-quoted introduction:

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

This introduction essentially states that it is necessary when a group of people decide to declare themselves independent "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind" requires them to explain why. The document then outlines the philosophy of government that will become the basis for the American system: "We hold these truths to be self-evident,

that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." It claims that governments are formed by men "to secure these rights," and thus derive "their just powers from the consent of the governed." People therefore have the right to amend or abolish altogether any government that does not protect their fundamental rights.

The Declaration acknowledges that such radical changes should not come about if the complaints about the government are "light and transient…. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security." It claims that the history of the current king (George III, who is never mentioned by name in the Declaration) "is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations" against the rights of the American states. After introducing the evidence with this phrase—"To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world"—the document sets forth a list of the king's offenses.

All of the eighteen charges that follow start with the word "He," indicating that the king, personally, has committed these crimes against the colonies. The first three are that He "refused to Assent," "has forbidden his Governors to pass," and has "refused to pass" laws needed for the public good in the colonies. The Declaration next mentions that the king has interfered with the rightful legislative processes in the colonies by calling legislative sessions "at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant," "dissolv[ing] Representative Houses," and refusing "for a long time, after such dissolutions, to cause others to be elected," which exposed the colonies "to all the dangers of invasion from without, and convulsions within."

The seventh charge is that the king has also limited immigration to the colonies, thereby keeping their populations from growing. The eighth and ninth charges deal with his interference with judicial processes in the colonies, namely that the king has refused to establish a local judiciary and that he appoints all judges and sets their salaries, which assures their loyalty to the Crown at the expense of the colonists' rights.

Next, the accusations turn to the presence of British army troops in the colonies:

He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harrass our people, and eat out their substance.

He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the Consent of our legislatures.

He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil power.

The thirteenth charge is the longest, including nine sub-charges regarding his "Assent to … Acts of pretend Legislation." Following these charges, the document enumerates certain instances in which the king has supported Parliamentary legislation that has infringed upon the rights of the colonists. The Declaration points out that "large bodies

of armed troops" have been quartered in the homes of private citizens without their consent, and that troops who commit crimes against the colonists have been protected from punishment for their misdeeds. The king has also supported Parliament in restricting colonial trade with other countries, imposing taxes on the colonies "without our consent," and suspending the "benefit of Trial by Jury." The Declaration notes that citizens have been transported to England to face trial and that colonial charters have been revoked, which undermines "the Forms of our Governments."

In the last five of the enumerated charges, the Declaration points out that the king is in the process of waging war on the colonies and "has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people." As part of his campaign against the colonies, the king has hired "foreign mercenaries"—primarily German troops—to assist in the subjugation of the rebels, forced Americans to take up arms against their neighbors, and encouraged his Indian allies to wage war on the less populous settlements on the frontier.

Having completed his list of royal offenses, Jefferson insists that the colonists have consistently "Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms," to no avail. This lack of consideration indicates that the king "is unfit to be the ruler of a free People." Furthermore, the Declaration claims, the colonists have appealed directly to the English people, counting on their sense of "native justice and magnanimity" to provide relief. However, these "British brethren … have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity," which further indicates the necessity for separation. The Declaration adds that the English will be considered with the rest of the world as "Enemies in War" and "in Peace Friends." The Declaration concludes with a lofty announcement "That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States." Because the formal links to England have been severed, the States now claim the right "to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce," and otherwise function as an independent nation. Finally, the document announces that the signers of the Declaration "mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor" in defense of freedom and independence.

Plot Summary

The Declaration of Independence is a comparatively brief work, consisting of only thirty-two paragraphs, most of which consist of a single, long sentence. As Lee A. Jacobus observes in his analysis of Jefferson's rhetoric in *A World of Ideas*, Jefferson incorporates causal analysis, "a method associated with legal thought" that indicates Jefferson's legal background. Put simply, the Declaration consists primarily of a list of causes that have encouraged the colonies to sever official ties with Great Britain. Jefferson also makes excellent use of parallelism, the construction of sentences so that they are relatively equal in length and structure. One interesting aspect of Jefferson's emphasis on parallelism is the use of "He" and "For" as the first words of paragraphs 3 through 29. This device is called anaphora, which Jacobus defines as "the technique of repetition of the same words at the beginning of successive lines." Ultimately it is Jefferson's mastery of structure and organization that emphasizes the power of his stirring assertions of colonial rights and explanations for declaring independence.

Themes

Fundamentals of American Government

Perhaps the most important element of the Declaration of Independence is its clear statements of the fundamental principles of the American idea of democracy and freedom. By condemning the excesses of the British king and his Parliament, Thomas Jefferson draws attention to the natural rights of all people. The phrase "all men are created equal" is a statement that implies all people have the same rights, with no person having greater freedom or power simply by virtue of social rank, such as an aristocratic background. Because of the God-given right to "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness," all people are entitled to live without interference from the government and are free to strive for whatever it is that will make them content. Jefferson reiterates the principle that people should control the government, not vice versa; they should choose their own leaders and elect their own representatives.

Among the specific trespasses against the colonists' "self-evident" rights, the Declaration charges that the king refused to "Assent to Laws for establishing Judiciary powers," "made Judges dependent on his Will alone," and "sent hither swarms of Officers to harrass our people, and eat out their substance." Furthermore, "He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the Consent of our legislatures," and "He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil power." Among the "pretended Legislation" the king is accused of assenting to are "imposing Taxes on us without our Consent," and "depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of Trial by Jury." Protections from precisely these infringements are set forth in the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights, which, together with this document, form the very foundation of the United States government.

Together, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights are the American "Charters of Freedom," which define American social and political culture. From these works, our very concept of American government is derived. All three Charters were drafted by leading Patriots, but none of them were aristocrats or members of royalty; furthermore, ratification by the states was required before the Constitution and Bill of Rights became law. Thus the circumstances of the Charters' creation symbolize the rise of democracy and representative government, because the consent of private citizens was necessary for ratification. The documents are also revered icons, significant not just for the ideas they contain but also for the very fact that these ancient papers continue to physically exist after more than two hundred years. Since 1952, the Charters of Freedom have been displayed in a specially designed rotunda in the National Archives, located in Washington, D.C.

Founding Fathers: the First Patriots

One of the most interesting contributions to American culture associated with the Declaration of Independence is the idea of the "Founding Fathers," the group of men who signed the Declaration and who have become symbols of American patriotism. Several other figures from the Revolutionary period are considered Founding Fathers but did not sign the Declaration, including George Washington and Alexander Hamilton. The Founding Fathers continue to inspire patriotism and public service among Americans. These men are considered the personification of the American dream: They were bold, they gambled big and won, and they inspired Americans to follow in their footsteps for the dozen or more generations since they lived.

Fifty-six Patriots signed the Declaration, including future presidents Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. Elbridge Gerry, who would become vice president under James Madison, and from whose name we get the word "gerrymander," which refers to redrawing Congressional districts for political purposes, also signed the document. Benjamin Harrison of Virginia fathered William Henry Harrison, who was eventually elected president but died after only a month in office; his great-grandson, also named Benjamin Harrison, was elected president in 1888.

Many of the other signers would serve as legislators, governors, and other elected officials of their respective states. Among the most notable signers is John Hancock, a Revolutionary leader from Massachusetts, who was the first to sign the Declaration and the only one to do so on July 4, 1776. Hancock served as president of the First Continental Congress and was later governor of Massachusetts. Another famous signer was Benjamin Franklin, the Philadelphian scientist, inventor, and author whose face now graces the $100 bill. Franklin is considered one of the most important of the signers because he influenced so many of the others—and members of the public—to support the Revolution. Franklin also helped secure French recognition of the rebellious colonies, a decision that ultimately brought France into the war as an American ally. Samuel Adams, cousin of John Adams, was one of Massachusetts's most active supporters of the independence movement and organized several protests against British authority, including the so-called "Boston Tea Party" of December 16, 1773. Richard Henry Lee of Virginia composed the resolution of independence contained in the Declaration's last paragraph, which Jefferson subsequently included in the final draft. Caesar Rodney of Delaware rode all night on July 1, 1776, to cast his tie-breaking vote in favor of the Declaration of Independence. Benjamin Rush of Pennsylvania was a physician who later became an outspoken humanitarian and advocate for the abolition of slavery. Charles Carroll of Maryland was the only Catholic among the Founding Fathers; upon his death in 1832 at the age of ninety-five, he was the last surviving signer of the "Declaration of Independence."

Over the years, several myths have developed in regard to the Founding Fathers. For example, John Hancock is reputed to have signed his name in such large letters because he wanted King George III to be able to read it without having to wear his glasses. As a result, the phrase "John Hancock" has become a slang term meaning

signature. However, other documents in Hancock's name, some written before the Declaration of Independence, are signed in a similarly exaggerated manner. Benjamin Franklin is credited with discovering the nature of electricity after flying a kite during a thunderstorm, but evidence suggest that Franklin did not actually hold the kite string as indicated in popular legend. It is also commonly supposed that Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence by himself, but other members of the Continental Congress contributed material and revised Jefferson's draft. In modern times, the Internet has served to promote various myths about the signers; a persistent forward that shows up in people's e-mails around Independence Day includes a tremendous amount of misinformation. Titled "The Price They Paid," the mailing claims that five of the signers were captured and tortured by the British (false), two had sons killed in combat (only one), and nine died of "wounds and hardships" suffered in combat (none died in combat, though Button Gwinnet of Georgia died of wounds sustained in a duel with a fellow American officer).

Historical Context

Origins of the Declaration of Independence

The Declaration of Independence contains ideas from a variety of sources. Certainly the English philosopher John Locke influenced Jefferson, although to what degree has become a point of debate among scholars. There is no doubt, however, that the famous phrase, "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" in the Declaration is a paraphrase of Locke's assertion that men have a natural right "to preserve their lives, liberties, and fortunes." Thus Jefferson differs slightly from Locke in emphasizing the importance of wealth and ownership. Jefferson was also influenced by the great thinkers of the Enlightenment, a time when major innovations in science, art, and philosophy appeared. In addition to the Englishman Locke, Jefferson read deeply among the works of the Scottish Enlightenment writers, such as David Hume and Francis Hutcheson. His religious views were derived in part from Henry St. John Bolingbroke, to whose writings Jefferson was exposed by his teacher, Dr. William Small. From Bolingbroke Jefferson developed his belief in the regularity of the cosmos and thus a natural explanation for God. Bolingbroke also criticized many of the principles of Christianity and was a Deist, meaning he believed God created the universe but has no daily contact with it. Jefferson himself became a Deist, and debate over his and the other Founding Fathers' intentions toward the role of religion in the life of the new republic remain heated today.

Although the Declaration of Independence is certainly influential, it was not the only or even the first "declaration" of American rights to be written during the Revolutionary period. In *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence*, Pauline Maier identifies at least ninety "declarations" published in individual colonies or towns in 1776; in some cases, these declarations were made prior to the one in Philadelphia adopted on July 4. Both Virginia and New Jersey divorced themselves before July 4, and Maryland proclaimed her independence two days later. All of these documents, as well as the "official" Declaration of Independence, were influenced by the English Declaration of Rights, also known as the Bill of Rights, which was approved in 1689. In many ways the English Declaration is similar to the American Declaration; indeed, Jefferson and the other patriots were inspired to declare independence in part because of what they perceived as violations of their rights as Englishmen. Among the important ideas in the English Bill of Rights is the right of Englishmen to petition the king for redress of grievances and freedom from taxation not approved by Parliament. These and other concepts found their way into the Declaration of Independence and later the Constitution of the United States.

Impact of the Declaration of Independence

The Declaration of Independence is undoubtedly one of the most important and influential documents in American history, but it has also had an impact on other countries' histories as well. Jefferson's most famous work became the basis of the

French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, which the French National Assembly adopted in 1789. Drafted by the Marquis de Lafayette, a French nobleman who had fought for American independence and who later became a leading proponent of republicanism in his own country, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen was in many ways inspired by the American Declaration. In fact, Lafayette shared the document with Jefferson himself, who offered suggestions and advice. However, as Pauline Maier notes, Lafayette's document more closely resembles "American declarations or bills of rights, not the Declaration of Independence." Lafayette's declaration also differs significantly in that it outlines the duties of French citizens to the Crown as well as their rights.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the American Declaration was cited as the inspiration for various movements to reform governments. When countries in Latin America broke away from Spain, they declared their independence with documents similar to Jefferson's masterpiece. To a large extent, the American Civil War (1861–1865) was justified by the rebellious southern states because they felt Abraham Lincoln's government threatened their rights in a manner similar to that of King George III's oppression of the American colonies. The Declaration of Independence has also been mentioned in connection with modern revolutions. The Communist leader Ho Chi Minh, for example, justified his efforts to unify Vietnam with principles he identified in the Declaration. In 1997, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) adopted the Universal Declaration on the Human Genome and Human Rights, an important statement of the rights of people all over the world to expect justice regardless of their genetic condition. On the eve of the twenty-first century, then, the potential of science to revise the very definition of "human" inspired UNESCO to declare its support for human rights before troubling questions of genetics could ignite controversy in light of future discoveries or innovations, not after the fact.

Preservation and Promotion of the Declaration of Independence

According to Pauline Maier, "during the first fifteen years following its adoption … the Declaration of Independence seems to have been all but forgotten." It seems not to have been accorded the almost holy status it now enjoys in this country until well into the nineteenth century, although Maier notes a tribute to the document and its author, then residing in France, as early as July 4, 1789, sent to him by his fellow Americans. To a degree, the Declaration was downplayed in the early years of the country because the Federalist party, then largely in control of national politics, were Jefferson's political opponents on the one hand, and were slightly embarrassed by the document's strong anti-British sentiment, which was bad for international commerce by the early 1800s, on the other. After the War of 1812 and the decline of the Federalist Party, the Jeffersonian-influenced Republican party (not precisely the modern Republican party) began to promote the document and Jefferson's reputation. After both Jefferson and fellow ex-president and signer John Adams died on the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration's adoption—July 4, 1826—interest in the document exploded. By the 1850s, Jefferson's

assertion that "all men are created equal" was being used to promote the abolition of slavery. Abraham Lincoln incorporated the Declaration into his political philosophy and specifically referred to it in his Gettysburg Address of 1863. As this document took its rightful place among the acknowledged great documents of American history, the Declaration itself was further enshrined in the hearts of the nation.

For many years there was comparatively little effort made to prevent the ravages of time from affecting the Declaration of Independence. The original document, printed on relatively cheap parchment and with a poor quality of ink, was roughly handled and indifferently preserved for many years. Technological shortcomings and unsophisticated notions of archival preservation techniques further limited appropriate care of the Declaration. It was not until the 1920s that serious efforts to preserve the document got underway. In 1952 the Declaration was permanently displayed in the National Archives in Washington, D.C., There it is sealed in an airtight case; various instruments measure temperature, humidity, and other conditions that might harm the revered statement of the American dream of liberty.

Critical Overview

Reaction to the Declaration of Independence varied depending on the attitudes and personal convictions of the people who read it. Upon receiving word of the Declaration on July 10, George Washington ordered it read to his troops. To the Continental Congress, he wrote, "I trust the late decisive part they (Congress) have taken, is calculated for that end, and will secure us that freedom and those privileges, which have been, and are refused us, contrary to the voice of Nature and the British Constitution." Washington also informed his soldiers that in the wake of the Declaration he hoped "this important Event will serve as a fresh incentive to every officer, and soldier, to act with Fidelity and Courage, as knowing that now the peace and safety of his Country depends (under God) solely on the success of our arms." Not surprisingly, citizens who remained loyal to the Crown were less supportive of the Declaration. Thomas Hutchinson, a former governor of Massachusetts, published his *Strictures Upon the Declaration of the Congress at Philadelphia* shortly after the document was widely distributed. Hutchinson concluded that Jefferson's charges against King George III were "false and frivolous" and suggested the criminality, not the justification, of the revolt, according to Pauline Maier in *American Scripture*.

Scholars of the Declaration of Independence have provided the most useful observations about the document. Garry Wills's landmark 1978 study, *Inventing America*, explores in great detail the influences on the Declaration. Among his most startling claims is that Jefferson was inspired as much or more by such philosophers as Francis Hutcheson and David Hume instead of John Locke, the great thinker whom historians had traditionally credited as being Jefferson's primary intellectual influence. In discussing the "Scottish thinkers" that he considers more relevant to the composition of the Declaration, Willis concludes that "Jefferson drew his ideas and words from these men, who stood at a conscious and deliberate distance from Locke's political principles." As Noble E. Cunningham Jr. points out in his 1987 book *In Pursuit of Reason*, "the Declaration of Independence was to become the most cherished document in American history, not solely because of its proclamation of independence but also because of its affirmation of the political principles that would undergird the new American republic." In *American Scripture* (1997), Pauline Maier asserts that the Declaration was "at once a legacy and a new conception, a document that spoke both for the revolutionaries and for their descendants, who confronted issues the country's fathers had never known or failed to resolve, binding one generation after another in a continuing act of national self-definition."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

In the following excerpts, Lucas champions The Declaration of Independence *as a literary and rhetorical masterpiece*.

The Declaration of Independence is perhaps the most masterfully written state paper of Western civilization. As Moses Coit Tyler noted almost a century ago, no assessment of it can be complete without taking into account its extraordinary merits as a work of political prose style. Although many scholars have recognized those merits, there are surprisingly few sustained studies of the stylistic artistry of the *Declaration*. This essay seeks to illuminate that artistry by probing the discourse microscopically—at the level of the sentence, phrase, word, and syllable. By approaching the *Declaration* in this way, we can shed light both on its literary qualities and on its rhetorical power as a work designed to convince a "candid world" that the American colonies were justified in seeking to establish themselves as an independent nation.

The text of the *Declaration* can be divided into five sections—the introduction, the preamble, the indictment of George III, the denunciation of the British people, and the conclusion. Because space does not permit us to explicate each section in full detail, we shall select features from each that illustrate the stylistic artistry of the *Declaration* as a whole.

The introduction consists of the first paragraph—a single, lengthy, periodic sentence:

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

A Broadway musical based on the signing of the Declaration of Independence, called *1776*, debuted in 1969, and was adapted for film in 1972. The play was revived for another Broadway run in 1997. Sherman Edwards wrote the music and lyrics to accompany the book by Peter Stone. Peter H. Hunt directed both the Broadway production and the movie. The original 1969 cast recording is available on compact disc from Sony. The film version is available on DVD from Sony Pictures. The 1997 revival cast recording is available on compact disc from TVT.

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.

Readings of *The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States, and the Bill of Rights* were released as an audio recording in 2004. It is read by Terry Bregrey and available on compact disc from Audio Bookshelf.

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.

Taken out of context, this sentence is so general it could be used as the introduction to a declaration by any "oppressed" people. Seen within its original context, however, it is a model of subtlety, nuance, and implication that works on several levels of meaning and allusion to orient readers toward a favorable view of America and to prepare them for the rest of the *Declaration*. From its magisterial opening phrase, which sets the American Revolution within the whole "course of human events," to its assertion that "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God" entitle America to a "separate and equal station among the powers of the earth," to its quest for sanction from "the opinions of mankind," the introduction elevates the quarrel with England from a petty political dispute to a major event in the grand sweep of history. It dignifies the Revolution as a contest of principle and implies that the American cause has a special claim to moral legitimacy—all without mentioning England or America by name.

Rather than defining the *Declaration*'s task as one of persuasion, which would doubtless raise the defenses of readers as well as imply that there was more than one publicly credible view of the British-American conflict, the introduction identifies the purpose of the *Declaration* as simply to "declare"—to announce publicly in explicit terms—the "causes" impelling America to leave the British empire. This gives the *Declaration*, at the outset, an aura of philosophical (in the eighteenth-century sense of the term) objectivity that it will seek to maintain throughout. Rather than presenting one side in a public controversy on which good and decent people could differ, the *Declaration* purports to do no more than a natural philosopher would do in reporting the causes of any physical event. The issue, it implies, is not one of interpretation but of observation.

The most important word in the introduction is "necessary," which in the eighteenth century carried strongly deterministic overtones. To say an act was necessary implied that it was impelled by fate or determined by the operation of inextricable natural laws and was beyond the control of human agents. Thus Chambers's *Cyclopedia* defined "necessary" as "that which cannot but be, or cannot be otherwise." "The common notion of necessity and impossibility," Jonathan Edwards wrote in *Freedom of the Will*, "implies something that frustrates endeavor or desire … That is necessary in the original and proper sense of the word, which is, or will be, notwithstanding all supposable opposition." Characterizing the Revolution as necessary suggested that it resulted from constraints that operated with lawlike force throughout the material universe and within the sphere of human action. The Revolution was not merely preferable, defensible, or justifiable. It was as inescapable, as inevitable, as unavoidable within the course of human events as the motions of the tides or the changing of the seasons within the course of natural events.

Investing the Revolution with connotations of necessity was particularly important because, according to the law of nations, recourse to war was lawful only when it became "necessary"—only when amicable negotiation had failed and all other alternatives for settling the differences between two states had been exhausted. Nor

was the burden of necessity limited to monarchs and established nations. At the start of the English Civil War in 1642, Parliament defended its recourse to military action against Charles I in a lengthy declaration demonstrating the "Necessity to take up Arms." Following this tradition, in July 1775 the Continental Congress issued its own Declaration Setting Forth the Causes and Necessity of Their Taking Up Arms. When, a year later, Congress decided the colonies could no longer retain their liberty within the British empire, it adhered to long-established rhetorical convention by describing independence as a matter of absolute and inescapable necessity. Indeed, the notion of necessity was so important that in addition to appearing in the introduction of the *Declaration*, it was invoked twice more at crucial junctures in the rest of the text and appeared frequently in other congressional papers after July 4, 1776.

Labeling the Americans "one people" and the British "another" was also laden with implication and performed several important strategic functions within the*Declaration*. First, because two alien peoples cannot be made one, it reinforced the notion that breaking the "political bands" with England was a necessary step in the course of human events. America and England were already separated by the more basic fact that they had become two different peoples. The gulf between them was much more than political; it was intellectual, social, moral, cultural and, according to the principles of nature, could no more be repaired, as Thomas Paine said, than one could "restore to us the time that is past" or "give to prostitution its former innocence." To try to perpetuate a purely political connection would be "forced and unnatural," "repugnant to reason, to the universal order of things."

Second, once it is granted that Americans and Englishmen are two distinct peoples, the conflict between them is less likely to be seen as a civil war. The Continental Congress knew America could not withstand Britain's military might without foreign assistance. But they also knew America could not receive assistance as long as the colonies were fighting a civil war as part of the British empire. To help the colonies would constitute interference in Great Britain's internal affairs. As Samuel Adams explained, "no foreign Power can consistently yield Comfort to Rebels, or enter into any kind of Treaty with these Colonies till they declare themselves free and independent." The crucial factor in opening the way for foreign aid was the act of declaring independence. But by defining America and England as two separate peoples, the *Declaration* reinforced the perception that the conflict was not a civil war, thereby, as Congress noted in its debates on independence, making it more "consistent with European delicacy for European powers to treat with us, or even to receive an Ambassador."

Third, defining the Americans as a separate people in the introduction eased the task of invoking the right of revolution in the preamble. That right, according to eighteenth-century revolutionary principles, could be invoked only in the most dire of circumstances—when "resistance was absolutely necessary in order to preserve the nation from slavery, misery, and ruin"—and then only by "the Body of the People." If America and Great Britain were seen as one people, Congress could not justify revolution against the British government for the simple reason that the body of the people (of which the Americans would be only one part) did not support the American cause. For America to move against the government in such circumstances would not be a justifiable act of

resistance but "a sort of Sedition, Tumult, and War … aiming only at the satisfaction of private Lust, without regard to the public Good." By defining the Americans as a separate people, Congress could more readily satisfy the requirement for invoking the right of revolution that "the whole Body of Subjects" rise up against the government "to rescue themselves from the most violent and illegal oppressions."

Although the *Declaration* begins in an impersonal, even philosophical voice, it gradually becomes a kind of drama, with its tensions expressed more and more in personal terms. This transformation begins with the appearance of the villain, "the present King of Great Britain," who dominates the stage through the first nine grievances, all of which note what "He has" done without identifying the victim of his evil deeds. Beginning with grievance 10 the king is joined on stage by the American colonists, who are identified as the victim by some form of first person plural reference: The king has sent "swarms of officers to harass *our* people," has quartered "armed troops among *us*," has imposed "taxes on *us* without *our* consent," "has taken away *our* charters, abolished *our* most valuable laws," and altered "the Forms of *our* Governments." He has "plundered *our* seas, ravaged *our* coasts, burnt our towns,… destroyed the lives of *our* people," and "excited domestic insurrections amongst us." The word "our" is used twenty-six times from its first appearance in grievance 10 through the last sentence of the *Declaration*, while "us" occurs eleven times from its first appearance in grievance 11 through the rest of the grievances.

Throughout the grievances action is instigated by the king, as the colonists passively accept blow after blow without wavering in their loyalty. His villainy complete, George III leaves the stage and it is occupied next by the colonists and their "British brethren." The heavy use of personal pronouns continues, but by now the colonists have become the instigators of action as they actively seek redress of their grievances. This is marked by a shift in idiom from "He has" to "We have": "*We* have petitioned for redress …," "*We* have reminded *them …," "We* have appealed to *their* …," and "*We* have conjured *them*." But "*they* have been deaf" to all pleas, so "We must … hold *them*" as enemies. By the conclusion, only the colonists remain on stage to pronounce their dramatic closing lines: "*We* … solemnly publish and declare …" And to support this declaration, "*we* mutually pledge to each other *our* Lives, *our* Fortunes and *our* sacred Honor."

The persistent use of "he" and "them," "us" and "our," "we" and "they" personalizes the British-American conflict and transfigures it from a complex struggle of multifarious origins and diverse motives to a simple moral drama in which a patiently suffering people courageously defend their liberty against a cruel and vicious tyrant. It also reduces the psychic distance between the reader and the text and coaxes the reader into seeing the dispute with Great Britain through the eyes of the revolutionaries. As the drama of the *Declaration* unfolds, the reader is increasingly solicited to identify with Congress and "the good People of these Colonies," to share their sense of victimage, to participate vicariously in their struggle, and ultimately to act with them in their heroic quest for freedom. In this respect, as in others, the *Declaration* is a work of consummate artistry. From its eloquent introduction to its aphoristic maxims of government, to its relentless accumulation of charges against George III, to its elegiac denunciation of the British people, to its heroic closing sentence, it sustains an almost perfect synthesis of

style, form, and content. Its solemn and dignified tone, its graceful and unhurried cadence, its symmetry, energy, and confidence, its combination of logical structure and dramatic appeal, its adroit use of nuance and implication all contribute to its rhetorical power. And all help to explain why the *Declaration* remains one of the handful of American political documents that, in addition to meeting the immediate needs of the moment, continues to enjoy a lustrous literary reputation.

Source: Stephen E. Lucas, "The Stylistic Artistry of *The Declaration of Independence*," in *Prologue*, The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, Vol. 22, Spring 1990, pp.25-43.

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Project Editor
David Galens

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Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

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Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

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.

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

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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.

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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.

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Editor, Novels for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331–3535