

American Literature of Revolution: Thomas Paine's Common Sense

1. Historical Context

The American Revolution (1775–1783) was not only a political and military struggle but also a battle of ideas. Literature played a crucial role in shaping public opinion and rallying support for independence from British rule. The period was marked by pamphlets, essays, and speeches that articulated the ideals of liberty, self-governance, and human rights. Among these, Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* stands out as one of the most influential works of the era.

2. Thomas Paine: A Revolutionary Writer

Thomas Paine (1737–1809) was an English-born political activist, philosopher, and writer who became a key figure in the American Revolution. Arriving in America in 1774, Paine quickly became involved in the revolutionary cause. His writing was characterized by its clarity, passion, and accessibility, making complex political ideas understandable to the general public.

Paine's most famous work, *Common Sense*, published in January 1776, was a 47-page pamphlet that argued forcefully for American independence. It sold over 500,000 copies in its first year and became a rallying cry for the revolution.

3. Common Sense: Key Themes and Arguments

Common Sense is a powerful polemic that challenged the legitimacy of British rule and made a compelling case for independence. Its key themes and arguments include:

Rejection of Monarchy: Paine criticized the institution of monarchy, calling it unnatural and oppressive. He argued that all men are born equal and that no family has the right to rule over others. His famous line, "Of more worth is one honest man to society and in the sight of God, than all the crowned ruffians that ever lived," encapsulates this sentiment.

The Case for Independence: Paine argued that America had outgrown its dependence on Britain. He emphasized that the colonies were economically and politically capable of self-governance. He wrote, "We have it in our power to begin the world over again," inspiring hope and confidence in the revolutionary cause.

Critique of British Rule: Paine condemned the British government for its corruption and exploitation of the colonies. He argued that Britain's interests were fundamentally opposed to those of America, making reconciliation impossible.

Call to Action: Paine's writing was not just theoretical; it was a call to arms. He urged Americans to rise up and fight for their freedom, declaring, "The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind."

4. Literary Style and Impact

Paine's writing style in *Common Sense* was direct, persuasive, and accessible. He used plain language and logical arguments to appeal to a broad audience, including farmers, merchants,

and laborers. His use of biblical references and analogies resonated with the religious sensibilities of the time.

The impact of *Common Sense* was immediate and profound. It galvanized public support for independence and helped shift the debate from reconciliation with Britain to outright revolution. The pamphlet's influence was so significant that it is often credited with paving the way for the Declaration of Independence, which was adopted six months later in July 1776.

5. Legacy of Common Sense and Revolutionary Literature

Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* remains a landmark in American literature and political thought. It exemplifies the power of the written word to inspire change and shape history. The pamphlet's themes of liberty, equality, and self-determination continue to resonate in American culture and politics.

Revolutionary literature, including works by Paine, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson, laid the intellectual foundation for the United States. These writings not only articulated the ideals of the revolution but also established a tradition of using literature as a tool for social and political critique.

Conclusion

The American Revolution was as much a war of ideas as it was a military conflict. Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* stands as a testament to the transformative power of literature. By articulating the case for independence in clear and compelling terms, Paine helped ignite a revolution and shape the course of American history. His work remains a cornerstone of American literature and a reminder of the enduring power of words to inspire change.

Common Sense

***Summary**

Common Sense (1776) by Thomas Paine is a political pamphlet that powerfully argued for American independence from Britain. Written in clear and persuasive language, Paine criticized monarchy and hereditary rule, advocating for a democratic government based on the consent of the people. He challenged British rule over the American colonies, highlighting the economic and political disadvantages of remaining under British control. *Common Sense* played a crucial role in swaying public opinion toward revolution and is considered one of the most influential works in American history.

***Major Themes**

1. Critique of Monarchy and Hereditary Rule

"To the evil of monarchy we have added that of hereditary succession; and as the first is a degradation and lessening of ourselves, so the second claims power for a lineage rather than merit. There is no natural or divine law that ordains a child fit to govern simply because he is born to a certain family. An absurdity of the highest order is believing that wisdom is

hereditary. Nature disapproves it, and so do reason and experience. Among mankind, though kings are seldom brilliant, they are frequently weak or wicked. Does the history of England not provide us with enough instances of madmen or tyrants ruling simply because of birthright? What advantage is it to the people to have a fool or a brute govern them? A proper government should be one that is accountable to the people, not imposed upon them by accident of birth. To set up a hereditary monarchy is to establish an institution where incompetence is legally permitted, and the interests of the people are secondary to the whims of a single ruler. If we, as rational beings, would not accept a man chosen at random to be our leader, why do we accept one chosen only by the accident of his parentage? No reason can be given, but that we have long been accustomed to it. Let us now break free from this absurdity and establish a system where ability, not inheritance, determines who governs."

(Theme: Monarchy is unjust and hereditary rule is irrational and harmful.)

2. Advocacy for American Independence

"The cause of America is in great measure the cause of all mankind. Many circumstances have, and will arise, which are not local, but universal; and through which the principles of all lovers of mankind are affected. The laying a country desolate with fire and sword, declaring war against the natural rights of mankind, and extirpating the defenders thereof from the face of the earth, is the concern of every man to whom nature hath given the power of feeling. The sun never shined on a cause of greater worth. 'Tis not the concern of a day, a year, or an age; posterity is virtually involved in the contest, and will be more or less affected even to the end of time. What we do now will not only determine the fate of America but the fate of all who seek freedom from tyranny. If we neglect this opportunity, if we submit to the rule of a distant king, we do so at the peril of all who shall come after us. But if we act, if we unite, if we declare independence, we set forth a precedent that will inspire nations yet unborn to rise against their oppressors. Let us, then, seize the moment with courage and conviction. Let us not wait for another insult, another tax, another injury to remind us of what we already know: that a government that is not of our making and does not serve our interests is unfit to rule over us. The time for reconciliation is past. The time for independence is now."

(Theme: American independence is a universal cause with lasting consequences.)

3. The Benefits of Self-Government

"Society in every state is a blessing, but government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil; in its worst state, an intolerable one. For when we suffer under the rule of an unjust government, we do so not because society demands it, but because those in power have made it so. A government should be formed only for the protection and well-being of the people, not for the enrichment of a king or the few at the expense of the many. Here, in America, we have an opportunity unknown to any other people in history: the opportunity to form a government of our own design, one that serves the people rather than subjugates them. We are not bound by the past, nor must we suffer under the same corrupt institutions that have plagued other nations for centuries. The choice is ours. Shall we continue to be governed by a distant and indifferent monarch who knows nothing of our needs, or shall we take upon ourselves the responsibility of self-rule? The path is clear: a just government is one chosen by and accountable to the people. If we establish such a government, founded on reason and fairness, we shall not only secure our own happiness but prove to the world that free men can govern themselves. Let us not hesitate, then, in shaping this new order. The strength of our cause and the justice of our actions will guide us toward a future of liberty and prosperity."

(Theme: Government must be accountable to the people, and self-rule is both possible and preferable.)

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