

**LITERATURE'S DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE:
THE ROLE OF LITERATURE IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION
AND FORMATION OF AMERICAN IDENTITY**

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American Revolution and the declaration of independence have arguably been the most significant incidents in the history of the United States. A close study of these events indicates that one of the main pillars of the revolution was the idea of American national identity. However there is another aspect to the American Revolution which is less apparent, and that is the role of literature in the creation of American identity. The author of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, to 1820*, writes about this aspect of the revolution in a section titled, "American Literature 1700-1820." Two works of literature that help draw the image of American identity are Thomas Paine's *The Crisis, No. 1*, and de Crèvecoeur's *What Is An American*. As one closely reads the works of these authors in light of the grounding text, it becomes evident that literature played an important role in the creation of the sense of American identity, which united colonists and immigrants in their common struggle for American independence.

In the Norton Anthology's "American literature 1700-1820," Nina Baym presents the foundational aspects of the role of literature in creating the American national identity prior to the American Revolution.¹ Several components of this work must be discussed in order to set the framework in which we are to understand the works of Paine and de Crèvecoeur.

Baym's account of the enlightenment ideals enables us to understand the way in which authors from the revolutionary period appealed to tenets of enlightenment to create the sense of American identity. Baym begins this topic by reviewing the developments of science and

¹ Nina Baym is the general editor of Norton Anthology of American Literature (to 1820).

philosophy in early eighteenth-century. Scientists and philosophers like Newton and Locke had posed great challenges to many religious beliefs of the seventeenth-century (Baym 2003, p. 427). The main reason for these challenges was the fact that some of their findings were in conflict with the traditionally held Christian “truths.” “The inevitable result of such [discoveries] made the universe seem more rational and benevolent than it has been represented in the Puritan doctrine” (Baym 2003, p. 427). Therefore, advancement in science resulted in people developing a larger interest in the progress of ordinary individuals, relating to other humans through experiences they were sharing as colonists, rather than metaphysical wisdom of meditative divine. This aspect of enlightenment is closely related to the literature of the revolutionary period in the sense that authors, such as Thomas Paine, appealed to the ideals of enlightenment to motivate Americans to take a more active role as humans in controlling their destiny, and identify themselves with a larger goal of gaining independence. More specifically, such authors relied on the progress in natural and social sciences as evidence of the humans’ capacity to improve their quality of life, rather than taking those living conditions as elements of a pre-determined divine providence. Therefore, doctrines of enlightenment helped pre-revolutionary authors create a sense of identity among Americans by drawing colonists’ attention to the importance of fighting for independence.

Baym also accounts for the tendency of pre-revolutionary authors to appeal to the basic tenets of enlightenment to influence the course of imperial politics. Politics dominated the lives of colonists in the second half of the eighteenth-century (Baym 2003, p. 429-430). In the years 1774 and 1775, British and American forces confronted one another in multiple occasions. These incidents coincided with Thomas Paine’s arrival in America. Paine is considered an important figure during this time in the transformation of many Americans into revolutionaries “through

the power of the word” (Baym 2003, p. 430). Paine first published *Common Sense* in 1776, in which he spoke in support of revolution. What is most significant about his work is his reliance on beliefs of enlightenment to unite Americans to fight for independence through the creation of a deep desire for sovereignty with which Americans identified themselves. For instance he argued that the separation from England was the only reasonable course, because “‘the almighty’ had planted these feelings in [Americans] ‘for good and wise purposes’” (Baym 2003, p. 430). Such arguments were significant for two reasons; one is, he appealed to the colonists’ religious beliefs to unite them in their struggle by making the argument that it was God’s intentions for Americans to become independent. But the second – and arguably more significant – point about his arguments was that he appealed to the principal concepts of enlightenment to invite colonists to take charge of their own destiny and fight for independence. Baym, therefore, argues that reliance on the tenets of enlightenment was one of the methods which many writers used to lead Americans to identify themselves with the benefits of keeping up the fight against the British.

One of the most important elements in Nina Baym’s “American Literature 1700-1820” is her analysis of the creation of the sense of American national identity through literature. A significant portion of literary writings from 1787 and 1788 are political (Baym 2003, p. 431). The authors of these works, such as Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison, wrote in support of a federal constitution in what became collectively known as *The Federalist Papers*. These works were significant for two main reasons. First, they provided defense for the framework of the American republic and reminded colonists that “the uniqueness of the United States of America resided in the language of the documents” (Baym 2003, p. 431). But even more importantly, these works paved the path for a new group of authors, including Franklin and de Crèvecoeur, whose works marked the beginning of a new sense of national identity. De Crèvecoeur’s *What Is*

An American – which will be analyzed later in detail – was one these works, which helped colonists from different backgrounds and nationalities “find reasons to call themselves Americans” (Baym 2003, p. 431).

Following the analysis of the context in which most American works of literature were produced, it is important to emphasize an aspect of these works, which is they helped form a new sense of American identity either through a common desire for independence, or the creation of a sense of American nationalism. Two works which demonstrate these two aspects well are Thomas Paine’s *The Crisis, No. 1*, and de Crèvecoeur’s *What is an American*, respectively. Hence, it is important to proceed by analyzing these works in detail.

Thomas Paine helped create a sense of identity by writing in defense of American independence in his work, *The Crisis, No. 1* (Baym 2003, p. 430). Shortly before he produced his work, Britons had defeated Washington’s troops on multiple fronts, which had resulted in the demoralization of American troops. Therefore, at this time Americans were in need a defender for the revolution. Paine’s *Crisis* paper – called *The American Crisis* – is accounted to have played an important role in boosting the morale of American troops and inspiring their future success.

One of the ways in which Paine helps unite Americans is by appealing to the basic principles of enlightenment. Toward the beginning of his paper, referring to the British’s declaration that it had the right “to bind [America] in all cases whatsoever,” Paine teaches the colonists that “so unlimited a power can belong only to God” (Paine 1776). In this segment of his work, Paine appeals to the religious beliefs of Americans. By telling the settlers that only God deserves absolute power, Paine achieves two significant goals; one is that he leads his readers in America to see themselves and their struggle for independence in a context they are familiar

with: Christianity. Secondly, by declaring that only God deserves the power the British is claiming, Paine makes the fight for independence a holy struggle, which helps inspire American troops to keep up the fight. Through these two goals, Paine provides a setting in which the colonists are able to find common religious qualities amongst themselves and identify with one another through those qualities. But what is equally important is the way Paine continues to speak about God. Paine states, “I am confident, as I am that God governs the world, that America will never be happy until she gets clear of foreign dominion” (Paine 1776). This segment is significant, because it demonstrates the heart of Paine’s attempt to appeal to the ideals of enlightenment. As mentioned before, one of the main principles of enlightenment was the idea that while there is a God who rules the world, individuals are the main determinants of their own destiny. Paine’s statement touches on this principle. While he acknowledges that there is a God who governs the world, he indirectly urges the colonists to end foreign dominion for happiness. He appeals to this principle in a more clear way when he calls on the colonists to “throw not the burden of the day upon Providence, but ‘show your faith by your works’²” (Paine 1776). Paine appeals to such core principles of enlightenment to bring all colonists together to resist the British rule.

In *The Crisis, No. 1*, Thomas Paine appeals to basic *American* principles to unite and strengthen the colonists in their fight for independence. Paine initially reminds readers of America’s geographical advantage in the world by saying, “[America’s] situation is remote from all the wrangling world, and she has nothing to do but trade with them” (Paine 1776). In this context, he states that should America ever be at peace, “not a place upon earth might be so happy as America.” This segment of Paine’s writing is important, because he creates another idea with which Americans are to identify themselves: a promise for a happy America. Colonists

² “Shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works” (James 2.18).

who read these words of Paine are most likely to have felt their common desire for fighting for that happy America. But he teaches the colonists that this happy America could only be reached by ending foreign dominance. He reminds colonists that “wars, without ceasing, will break out till that period arrives, and the continent must in the end be conquer” (Paine 1776). It is through appealing to the *idea* of a peaceful America that he brings immigrants together to fight for liberty. And referring to the defeats of American troops on multiple occasions, Paine promises that “though the flame of liberty may sometimes cease to shine, the coal can never expire” (Paine 1776). To Paine, flame symbolizes success in military confrontations with the British, but coals symbolize the *desire* for liberty. He considers this desire part of an *American* purpose, and presents this basic American principle in such a strong way to create a sense of invincibility with which every American could identify and continue the fight against the British.

Finally, Paine’s call on all colonists to help in the fight for liberty helps create a sense of identity through which Americans united. Paine states, “I call not upon a few, but upon all: not on this state or that state, but every state: up and help us ... better have too much force than too little, when so great an object is at stake.” Paine calls on people from all states to resist the British forces. What is important about this segment is his reference to an object that is at stake. Although it is not precisely clear what is the object at stake, it is likely referring to the ideas he has emphasized before, such as American independence and liberty. But the importance of this statement is rooted in the idea that there is a common interest that is at stake for Americans from “every state,” and that they must identify themselves with that interest and unite to defend it. By appealing to the core concepts of enlightenment, the idea and potentials of America, and the existence of common interests at stake, Paine helped connect colonists by what is most similar to a web of American identity and united them in the struggle that resulted in the American

declaration of independence.

Baym teaches us about the importance of Thomas Paine's role in the American Revolution. According to Baym, Paine helped the colonists identify with a *common sense* of urgency and unite to prevail over the British forces. In analyzing the role of literature in creating an American sense of identity, Baym draws our attention to another set of writings, which marked the beginning of a new sense of national identity (Baym 1776). One of these writings is de Crèvecoeur's *What Is An American*. Therefore, it is important to continue examination of literature from the revolutionary period by analyzing the main aspects of de Crèvecoeur's work in the framework of the American Revolution and creation of American identity.

Following his arrival in Pine Hill, New York, and settling down as a farmer, de Crèvecoeur began writing a series of essays about America based on his travels as a farmer. After selling his writings to a British bookseller, *Letters from an American Farmer* appeared in 1782 and "was an immediate success" (Baym 2003, p. 657). In Letter III of his work, *What Is an American*, de Crèvecoeur appeals to core values of colonists to create a sense of American national identity. Therefore, it is important to closely read his work in order to understand its place in the literature of the eighteenth-century.

De Crèvecoeur helps shape the American identity by speaking about the value of work and industry in the new world. In describing the economic conditions in America, de Crèvecoeur contrasts America with Europe by saying, "[America] is not composed, as in Europe, of great lords who possess everything, and of a herd of people who have nothing" (de Crèvecoeur 1782, p. 658). He continues this comparison by stating, "Here are ... no invisible power giving to a few a very visible one ... The rich and the poor are not so far removed from each other as they are in Europe." In this segment of his writing, de Crèvecoeur teaches the readers about a more equal

social system in America. By saying there are no lords in America who possess everything, de Crèvecoeur implies the idea that people earn their possessions through hard work in the new world, rather than becoming entitled to them through a system that favors specific classes or clans. De Crèvecoeur emphasizes this sense of equality when he states that there is not a large gap between the rich and the poor. What is important about de Crèvecoeur's teachings on the value of work is that he completely associates this aspect with America. By doing this, he stresses the idea that when it comes to work and industry, America has a quality that is different than every other country. Such specific characteristic allowed his American readers to develop a *definition* for what it is to be an American and identify with it, part of which was the idea that this is a country where hard work is rewarded.

In *What Is an American*, de Crèvecoeur focuses on the racial quality of Americans as another main element of American identity. In addressing the question of where Americans come from, de Crèvecoeur says, "They are a mixture of English, Scottish, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes. From this promiscuous breed, that race now called Americans have risen" (de Crèvecoeur 1782, p. 659). In this section, he attempts to define another aspect of American identity: race. By explaining that this race is a mixture of those from various European countries, de Crèvecoeur develops a unique definition for American race. In 1782, most colonists were first or second generation immigrants. Their short history in America, combined with America's lack of being an independent country, had resulted in immigrants to associate and define themselves more with the countries of their origins, rather than America. The uniqueness of racial characterization which de Crèvecoeur developed was significant, because it helped immigrants develop a sense of racial identity that was different from those of people from any other country.

De Crèvecoeur appeals to the immigrants' sense of resentment toward the British crown as another common quality with which Americans are to identify themselves. In describing conditions of work in America, de Crèvecoeur says, "We have no princes, for whom we toil, starve, and bleed" (de Crèvecoeur 1782, p. 658). Referring to unbearable living conditions in England, he continues by posing the question, "Can a wretch who wanders about, who works and starves, whose life is a continual scene of sore affliction or pinching penury, can that man call England or any other kingdom his country?" (de Crèvecoeur 1782, p. 659). One of the significant qualities which makes the work of de Crèvecoeur effective is the way in which he is able to indicate the differences between immigrants' old life in Europe and new life in the new world in ways they could identify with. The First statement is noteworthy for two reasons; one is that by saying Americans do not "toil, starve, and bleed" for any princes, he underlines the theme of equality in work as previously discussed. But even more importantly, here de Crèvecoeur takes that quality one step farther. Without naming England or any other kingdom, he speaks of princes knowing his readers who have come from various places in Europe will make that connection between their lives in America and past lives in traditional European monarchies. De Crèvecoeur stimulates readers to make that connection in the question that he poses. Even though he is seemingly asking a question, de Crèvecoeur's way of posing hints at his expectation that no European should consider any kingdom his or her country. De Crèvecoeur's way of appealing to the sense of resentment toward monarchies is important, because it gives immigrants in America a sense of national pride with which they could identify.

Finally, de Crèvecoeur's attempt to define an American individual is aimed at creating an American sense of identity. Answering his own question of what is an American, he defines it as "either a European, or the descendent of a European ... who, leaving behind him all his

ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds” (de Crèvecoeur 1782, p. 660). At the time when de Crèvecoeur wrote his work, the idea of American was vague. The significance of de Crèvecoeur’s work is that in it, he attempts to develop a definition for the term American by taking into account all the main elements that are not only unique to America, but could be applied to the majority of immigrants. He does that by considering such elements as value of work, freedom, and other principles shared by the vast majority of those who set foot in this continent. The brilliance of his definition of an American is that, at the time he wrote his work, it was so broad that it applied to the majority of the colonists, and yet it was so unique that it applied only to those in America. Such definition helped create that sense of national identity, with which Baym associates the works of many from this time period.

As Baym explains in substantive ways, the works of Thomas Paine and de Crèvecoeur aim at creating a sense of American national identity. Paine helped create that sense of identity to boost the morale of American troops in their war for independence, while de Crèvecoeur wrote his work when Americans had gained independence and were yearning to develop a new sense of national identity with which to associate themselves and their country. The difference between the goals of the two authors, as well as the contexts in which they were writing led them to use different methods to help create that sense of identity. Nonetheless as Baym claims in his writing, the works of these authors mark the beginning of a new sense of national identity as colonists from different backgrounds and nationalities came together on one land and found reasons to call themselves “Americans.”

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