Review

Philip Freneau’s literary reactions to the American revolution: A study of selected poems

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This research explores Philip Freneau’s literary reactions to the American Revolution by examining five of his poems. These are: “To the Americans,” “On the American Frigate Alliance,” “A Political Litany,” “George, The Third’s Soliloquy,” and “An Ancient Prophecy”. All poems contain ideas, which are closely related to the American Revolution. It is expected that these poems reflect Freneau’s support of the American Revolution and reveal his rejection of British Monarchy in America. There are two main ideas expressed in the poems selected in this study: the American spirit toward the revolution and satires directed to Great Britain. The ideas related to the American Revolution in the poems are greatly influenced by the social condition of the American Revolution and Freneau’s involvement in it. The expressions toward the American Revolution in these poems refer to those of the American society that strongly wishes to live in an independent nation.

Key words: American Revolution, freedom, literary reactions, Philip Freneau.

INTRODUCTION

The American Revolution is one of the important movements that brought British colonies into an independent nation called the United States of America. The American Revolution began practically in 1763 when Great Britain decided to apply acts in the territory of the American colonies to get more financial benefit. Among the acts were the Proclamation of 1763, The Navigation Act, and The Stamp Act (Furlong, 1963: 84). The colonists really opposed Greenville’s programs because they would make bad impacts on the colonists. The programs made colonists reconsider their relationship with British authority.

One of the great influences of the American Revolution on the development of American literature is its concern about political issues which were conveyed through pamphlets, magazines, and newspapers. The political writings during this revolutionary period were characterized by their content, style and purpose. In this sense, literature became propaganda to oppose Great Britain’s policies in the colonies. In the words of Spiller et al. (1978:116), “Literature became a weapon in the struggle for liberty: the art of whipping up public opinion by propaganda became the chief study of American writers”. The American Revolution also influenced the development of American poetry. The American poetry at this age was marked by the beginning of nationalism.
which produced patriotic poems and satires to oppose the Stamp Act. One of the American poets during the revolutionary era is Philip Freneau. Through his poems, Freneau expressed his reactions to the American Revolution. He conveyed his rejection to the British monarchy in America and he strongly went in the line of the American Revolution.

Freneau’s literary reactions toward the American Revolution are the expressions of the Americans toward the Revolution, an expression of the society, as speech is the expression of man (Levin in Elizabeth and Tom Burns, 1973: 62). Actually, Freneau’s reactions can be seen not only in the field of his literary activities but also in his participation in the American army when he strongly fought against the British soldiers. Freneau's poems, particularly the ones selected, reveal what happened in America during the Revolution. Quinn (2001:168) remarked that a novel or a poem is a representation of the author’s understandings of the human condition and how the world works. The analysis of Freneau’s poems dealt with in this study will attempt to find out his literary reactions to American Revolution by using the method of content analysis and historical approach.

**American spirit in the American Revolution: Freneau’s “To the Americans” and “On the American Frigate Alliance”**

In “To the Americans,” Freneau arouses the Americans to fight against the British. He uses certain ways to arouse the American spirit. The first way is judging the virtue of American rebellion against Britain. Freneau believes that the rebellion against Britain is right and thus in this poem he states firmly that truth of rebellion must continue to stand at the front of the war. Freneau also advises the Americans not to worry when the British people consider them as rebels. As Freneau (1963: 186) states in the poem:

**REBELS you are—the British champion cries—**

**TRUTH, stand thou forth!—and tell the wretch. He lies:—**

**Rebels!—and see this mock imperial lord**

**Already threats these rebels with the CORD.**

The use of the capital letters on the words “REBELS”, “TRUTH”, and “CORD” indicates certain meanings. “REBELS” means that Freneau had a great attention and respect to what Americans have done to separate from the British monarchy. “TRUTH” means that Americans have done the right actions to oppose Britain in the American Revolution. “CORD” implies that strict restraint power felt by the Americans when the British government applied unfair policies to the colonists.

The second way to arouse American spirit is looking at what Britain had done to the colonies. Freneau says that British reign is the “mock imperial lord”. This is a mock toward the British power which really restrains the activity of her colonies to have freedom. The strict restraining of Britain is indicated by the word “CORD”. A cord functions to tie something. In this case, the cord ties the rebels so that Americans cannot determine freely their own fate under the British reign. Also, the word “cord” is very suggestive. It refers to the umbilical cord that strongly connects the fetus to his mother. Thus, it implies the strong bond connecting the Americans together. The inducement to oppose Britain and her flag implies that Freneau really rejects whatever British authority in America. The expression “generous genius” refers to the English people who had devoted their life to improve the wild land of America at the early time of their coming to this land. But Freneau shows the contradiction to what the English people left in America at the time. They only leave impostors in America. As Freneau (1963: 186) states in the poem:

**AMERICANS! At the freedom’s fane adore!**

**But trust to Britain and her flag, no more:**

**The generous genius of their isle has fled**

**And left a mere impostor in his stead.**

The use of capital letters at the word “AMERICANS” indicates that Freneau had strong attention to support Americans to search for freedom.

The third way is telling the possibilities that will happen if America is conquered by Britain. In the last two lines of the fourth stanza, Freneau states that if the British succeed in conquering America, Americans who rebel against her will not get mercy from the parent foe. It implies that Americans must win the war of the Revolution to reach freedom in America. Freneau (1963: 186) further states in the poem:

**If conquered, rebels (their Scott record show)**

**Receive no mercy from the parent foe.**

Even Freneau stresses that the rebels will not get mercy if they cannot conquer Britain. When they are buried in the grave they cannot get mercy although grave is a friendly place to get peace or a place where the woes of men will come to an end. It implies that Freneau further states that the corpses will be raised and hanged like what they have done in war. It suggests that the dead soldiers have responsibility if America is conquered by Britain. Then Freneau also shows that the dead soldiers are like devils that swell the soul of Americans with anger. It means that death of the soldiers will induce Americans to fight against the British. Freneau (1963: 186) further states:

**Nay even the grave, that friendly haunt of peace,**

**(where nature gives the woes of man cease)**
If in their struggle for freedom American soldiers are conquered, Americans will ask for God's help. Americans have strong hope to be free from the British they seek God's help to achieve their hope. This implies that Americans have strong hope to be free from British and they want to escape from this world because if Britain wins the war, Americans will disappear and American land becomes a killing field in which the children's blood will be shed. Americans will moan if their country is defeated by British monarchy because when they were still alive, they had justified that American land belonged to them.

In stanza five, Freneau believes that the war between America and Britain will kill American soldiers. Here, he uses the expression "HANGMAN'S CORD" to show the people who will die in the war. The use of the capital letters in this expression implies the more intention toward the death of many people caused by the war. Freneau asks Americans now to struggle to search "desperate freedom". If Americans keep the call for the honor difficulties in the war, such as frozen lake and snow will disappear from their mind. Freneau adds that hard work will not daunt the Americans and thus they will fight against British bravely to get freedom.

In the last stanza Freneau asks Americans to end British authority because Americans can get freedom if only the British tyrants disappear in America. Here, the word "SLAVES" with capital letters refers to the British. Then Freneau reminds Americans that they have right reasons to fight against the British. Then he explicitly states that America will be hell if America is conquered. As Freneau (1963: 186) states:

\[ \text{Haste!—to your tents in iron fetters bring} \\
\text{These SLAVES, that serves a tyrant, and a king} \\
\text{So just, so virtuous is your cause, I say,} \\
\text{Hell must prevail, if Britain gains the day.} \]

(Stanza 8, line 41-44)

When Freneau says that American will be hell if Britain conquers her, he wants to stimulate the deepest American emotion in order to arouse people to participate in the American Revolution. Here, hell means the unsatisfied and worse condition that will be made by British reign in America. Freneau's hopes for Americans in this poem indicate his support to the American Revolution.

In "On the American Frigate Alliance" the patriotic spirit is depicted through a story about the intensity and courage of America's warship in the sea. Referring to American history, war at the sea was one of important parts of the Revolutionary war. This poem is told by two speakers, namely Neptune and Triton who both came from ancient time. In primitive Roman religion, Neptune was a god who had to do with the perpetuity of springs and streams and the later he was identified as the chief god of the sea, and Triton in Greek mythology was identified as a sea demigod had the lower part of his body fish like.

Along the poem Neptune and Triton tell the intensity and bravery of the American navy on the new American warship. The words of the two sea gods are greatly useful to describe the patriotic spirit of Americans in the war of Revolution. In the American Revolution, the American navy was small, but at sea war it fought gallantly (Steeg and Hofstadter, 1981:71). However, in this poem Freneau reveals the warship with strong power and courage. This poem opens with the picture of Neptune who is tracing the ocean. When he sees a new warship sailing at the sea, he is really surprised with her intensity. He acknowledges that warship is "so swift, so war like, stout and strong". Then he questions the flag fluttering on the ship. The warship is identified as the new America's warship which is sailing to wage war against the British. As Freneau (1963: 286) states in the poem:

\[ \text{"To those new, rising States belongs,} \\
\text{"Who, in resentment of their wrongs,} \\
\text{"Oppose proud Britain's tyrant sway,} \\
\text{"And combat her, by land and sea.} \]

This ship is ready to combat British warship and she fights her enemy without fear. Freneau (1963: 286) states:

\[ \text{"When she displays her gloomy tier,} \\
\text{"The boldest Britons freeze with fear,} \\
\text{"And, owning her superior might,} \\
\text{"Seek their best safety in their flight.} \]

The portrait of the powerful ship above implies that the American soldiers fight against the British navy with a powerful spirit. The ship continues attacking and she even destroys British navy at the sea. The ship is really needed because it functions "to guard her native shore".

Then Neptune tells that the new American warship succeeds to defend America from the British invasion. At the end of the poem, Neptune states that the existence of the warship functions to vanquish tyranny. The success of the new American alliance is great because during the Revolutionary period Britain had the world’s largest navy in the world (Furlong, 1963:110).

**Satire Directed to Britain: Freneau’s “A Political Litany,” “George The Third's Soliloquy,” and “An Ancient Prophecy”**

In Freneau’s “A Political Litany,” the opening lines show
his political prayer and he hopes that God will give freedom to Americans. Freneau wants America to be free from the British dependence and other tyrants. Other tyrants mean the people or British institutions that impose their authoritarian power on Americans.

Although the opening stanza contains political prayer, most of the lines of the poem depict bitter satire on Britain and her henchmen. This poem is regarded as Freneau’s effective satire on Britain (Lemay, 1989:677). Freneau first directs his satire on British dependence because Britain with her absolute power has proclaimed that all her colonies in America must obey the laws stated by Britain. As one of the British colonies, America did not have rights to manage her own fate. The existence of the Proclamation of the 1763, The Stamp Act and Townshend Act prove that Britain enforced her law to the colonies. Freneau’s satire to Britain implies that Americans reject the British reign in America.

In the first stanza, Freneau criticizes “a junto” or administrative council that use absolute power. Freneau draws that the “junto” has made disappointed policy to Americans. Here, Freneau stresses his satire on the absolute power and the policy of the “junto”. As Freneau (1963: 140) states in the poem:

From a junto that labour with absolute power,
Whose schemes disappointed have made them look sour,
From the lords of the council, who fights against freedom,
Who still follow on where delusion shall lead them

The lords of the council are considered as the tyrants because they fight against freedom. The responsibility of the lords of the council to make foreign policy to the colonies makes Freneau think they are tyrants who restrain freedom in America. Freneau also says that in making the decision they are controlled by their delusion. It implies that the lords of the council do not care with the necessity of colonists to live independently in America. Furthermore, the lords of the council reject such freedom and they strictly state that the British colonies must obey all polices made by them.

The petition of freedom proposed by the Americans is slighted because America is under the British authority. In this poem, Freneau shows that the group at St. James neglects the petition. St. James is the location of the royal court in London (Lauter, 1990:1048). This neglect certainly makes colonists angry and thus Freneau directs his bitter satire to the group. Even Freneau says that they are just waiting for submission from Britain.

In the second stanza, Freneau explicitly states that Britain shows bad manners such as “rough and severe” to her colonies. It implies that the British is not friendly to the colonists anymore and seems to practice severity in America. The hardness and severity of Britain are proved when she decided to practice the so-called intolerable acts such as Tea Act and Townshend in her colonies. Freneau further calls the British with crude words such as “scountrels and rascals”. It implies that Freneau is very angry with the British who keep enforcing unfair policy to the British colony in America. As Freneau (1963: 140) states in the poem:

From the group at St. James’s, who slight our petition,
And fools that are waiting for further submissions—
From a nation whose manners are rough and severe,
Fro scoundrels and rascals,--do keep us all clear.

In the third stanza, Freneau directs his satire at pirates, Wallace and Greaves. The meaning of pirates in this poem is more than just sea robbers. It may refer to the British navy like Wallace and Greaves. Freneau draws that they have killed Americans and robbed their goods. Since they are very strong, they never give up. As Freneau (1963: 140) states in the poem:

From pirates sent out by command of the king
To murder and plunder, but never to swing.
From Wallace and Greaves, and Vipers and Roses
Whom, if heaven pleases, we’ll give bloody nose.

Freneau’s criticism on Wallace and Graves implies his anger with them because they kept the American coast with their ship, namely Vipers and Roses. Lemay describes both Wallace and Greaves are Captains of British navy who kept the American coast cities in a state of constant terror during the summer of 1775 (1989:678). Then Freneau shows his antipathy to Wallace and Greaves. He says that Americans will give “bloody nose” to them. It means that Americans will really declare war to them.

Then Freneau directs his criticism at Dunmore and Montague. According to Lemay, Dunmore is the last Royal Governor of Virginia, in April 1775, he removed public stores from Williamsburg, and he waged war to colonies (1989:678). In this poem, Freneau shows explicitly that Dunmore really plunders Virginians by removing public stores from Williamsburg city. It seems that Dunmore’s unfriendly actions to oppose colonies induce Freneau to write bitter satire to him. Freneau further says that Dunmore and his British crew are bandits or robbers since they have bad and cruel actions to Americans.

From the valiant Dunmore, with his crew of banditti,
Who plunder Virginians at Williamsburg city,

Besides, Freneau criticizes hotheaded Montague. According to Lemay, he was the admiral of British. He fled during the early part of the war and he exasperates the colonist (1989:678). The phrase “hotheaded” and “mighty to swear” indicates that he is a cruel man who is
ready to kill Americans. That is the reason why he is told that he much exasperates colonists. Freneau (1963: 140) further states:

From hot-headed Montaque, mighty to swear,  
The little fat man with his pretty white hair

Freneau’s criticism against bishop in Britain, who seemed to allow murdering in America, implies that Bishops cannot perceive the conflict between America and Britain that has killed many people. In this poem Freneau hopes that Bishops as Christian clergymen should assist to avoid bloodshed in America and they should receive American rights to gain their freedom in their own country.

In criticizing the British henchmen in America, Freneau calls them “slaves that would die for smile from throne”. The use of the word “slaves” here indicates that the British henchmen just run their job in accordance to the throne and they do not care whether their action can make people suffer or even die. As Freneau states they really devote their life to please the throne. They become enemy of the Americans who struggle for their freedom.

Freneau’s criticism on assemblies implies that he is disappointed with their voting against Congress proceeding. Here, Congress means the Continental Congress which consists of representatives of each colony. This Congress was established to counter British power in America. Freneau seems to hope that assemblies support Congress. In fact, the assemblies have realized their wrongs and now see the result of their stupid choice. As Freneau (1963: 140) states in the poem:

From assemblies that votes against Congress proceeding  
Who now see the fruit of their stupid misleading

Freneau’s satire against Tyron implies that he felt dejected after he saw what Tyron had done to Americans. Tyron was Royal Governor of New York, who fled the city at the outbreak of the American Revolution (Lauter, 1990-1048). One of Tyron’s irritated actions is the decision to declare that Americans are his enemy after flying from America. Freneau draws Tyron as a devil that will follow and disturb men wherever they go. Freneau criticizes lord North is a prime minister of Great Britain during the revolutionary era (Lauter, 1990-1048). He considers that the British colonies in America must follow all rules or policies made by Britain. Freneau draws his tight restraint by expression ‘binding in chain’. It implies that colonists may not manage their own fate. After criticizing lord North, Freneau addresses his satire to the royal king Log who has mighty power to conquer America. King Log is referred to George III (Lauter, 1990-1049). Here, Freneau illustrates that George III can conquer America when he wakes up from taking a nap. The picture of George III with toothful of brains means that he is greedy as well as tricky. As Freneau (1963: 140) states:

From loyal king Log, with his tooth-full of brains,  
Who dream, and is certain (when taking a nap)  
He has conquered our lands, as they lay on his map.

Freneau’s last criticism in this poem is directed to the kingdom. Freneau draws that British kingdom has bullied, hectored, and swore Americans. Her policies to the colonies certainly make Americans suffer and they cannot enjoy a life with freedom. Therefore, at the closing part, this poem draws the Americans’ wish into a prayer to God. Americans acknowledge that they are disunited but they will be still freemen. At last, Americans hope Britain to be cursed if she continues to enforce her power to the colonies. As Freneau (1963: 140) states in the poem:  

From a kingdom, that bullies, and hectors, and swears  
We send up to heaven our wishes and prayers  
That we, disunited, may freemen be still,  
And Britain go on—to be damned if she will

In “George The Third’s Soliloquy” Freneau satirizes George III who became king of Great Britain when the American Revolution broke up. When he mounted the throne, he was still a young man. He really rejected the American Revolution and he finally waged war against America. His rejection and unfair political treatment of America attracted Freneau to write bitter satires to him. When Freneau wrote the satires, George III still became King of Great Britain but in this poem, Freneau portrays him as a king who has already lost his strong power and lived in pain.

Satire in this poem is depicted through the confession of George III. He confesses that he is in pain, regret, defeat, and desperate. The portrayal of George III as the speaker who is speaking to himself in this poem is very important to find the significance of the satire. All these confessions are George’s self-criticism directed to himself, specifically and to the leaders of Great Britain generally. From Freneau’s view as an American the confession of George III’s pain means that George III acknowledges his wrong decision when he declares war to America. Here, Freneau seems relate that he declares war to America is not a proper choice for Great Britain because it will cause bad effect for English men.

The first satire is the expression of George III’s pain. His pain is seen in the beginning of the poem. As Freneau (1865: 66 ) states in the poem

WHAT mean these dreams, and hideous forms that rise  
Night after night, tormenting to my eyes—  
No real foes these horrid shapes can be,  
But thrice as much they vex and torture me
He suffers from pain as if he were dreaming. He seems not to believe that he could feel such pain because he is King of Great Britain. The expression of pain here indicates that he confesses that his pain is the reward of his cruel attitude toward America during the Revolution. In conveying his pain, George compares himself with Cesar and Brutus. Cesar is the King Rome and Brutus his assistant (Webster International Dictionary). George says that he is not as successful as Cesar and Brutus. When Cesar and Brutus die nature will show its sorrow immediately but when he dies, he doubts that people will give him a successful day. This comparison implies that Freneau wants to show George’s worse condition.

The second satire is referred to George III’s cursing. He curses himself because he suffers from pain in his life. It implies that as king of Great Britain criticizes himself because he thinks that his pain is his failure in life. As Freneau (1865: 66) states in the poem:

How curs’d is he,--how doubly curs’d am I –
Who lives in pain, and yet who dares not die;

His curse to the day when he was born indicates his regret toward what he had done in his life. Freneau (1865: 68) further states:

Curs’d be the day, when first I saw the sun,
Curs’d be the hour, when I these wars begun

His curse to the hour when he wages war with Americans implies his criticism on his to begin war. Referring to the American history, George III declares war to America when he sent British army guided by General Gage to America because America as the British colony refuses to accept British unfair policies.

The third satire is seen through George III’s defeat and desperation. In this poem George III confesses that his strong army called Burgoyne is defeated in the battle with Americans. George III’s confession of defeat is a satire directed to the defeat of the British army in the battle. George acknowledges that his defeat make British people hate him and his nation become ashamed. As Freneau (1863: 67) states in the poem:

My armies vanquished, and my heroes fled,
My people murmuring, and my commerce dead,
My shatter’d navy pelted, bruish’d, and clubb’d,
By Dutchmen bullied, and by Frenchmen drubb’d
My name abhorr’d, my nation in disgrace”.

In Freneau’s “An Ancient Prophecy” his satire is directed against the king of England, George III. The title of the poem implies a prediction concerning bad fate of the King after he fails to subdue America. In the first stanza, Freneau portrays that George III gets trouble when American rejects the Stamp Act and the Tea Act since the Stamp Act levied tax on legal documents such as newspaper, letters, and deeds. They also rejected the Tea Act because it levied a tax on tea and even Great Britain force Americans to drink tea imported by the British company. As Freneau (1865: 112) states in the poem:

WHEN a certain great King, whose initial G,
Forces STAMPS upon paper, and folks to drink TEA,
When this folks burn his tea and stamp paper like stubble;--
You may guess that king is then coming to trouble

The prediction of the coming of trouble to George is a satire directed him for his unfair policies in America. As the reaction to the acts, Americans burnt the stamp paper and British tea in Boston. This event is named as the Boston tea party and it happened in 1773 (Steeg and Hoofstadder, 1971:50)

In the second stanza, Freneau directs his satire against George III who is getting bad prospects since his army fail to subdue the Americans soldiers. George III rejects the petition proposed by Continental Congress of British colonies. This petition asked George III to accept American’s request for the right. In fact, George III is angry about this petition and he even send the British army to America to wage a war. But the British army fail in controlling the Americans and later they are famished and frantic. They really are rejected when their leader gives up.

In the third stanza, Freneau describes that George III is getting a stroke when the British army led by General Burgoyne and General Cornwallis does not succeed in subduing the American army. As Freneau (1865: 112) states in the poem:

But when B. and C. with their armies are taken
This king will do well, if he saves his own bacon:
In the year Seventeen hundred and eighty and two
A stroke he shall get, that will make him look blue:
And soon, very soon, shall the season arrive,
When Nebuchadnezzar to pasture shall drive

As shown above, Freneau just writes the initials of the two generals. The consideration of the interpretation initial B and C as Burgoyne and Cornwallis is that both names are regarded as the prominent British general during the war of the American Revolution. Freneau describes that George III will save himself when the British Army went back without getting victory. Then Freneau predicts that George III in 1782 is getting a stroke and dejected because of the failure of the British army. Freneau also predicts that George’s reign will end when Nebuchadnezzar drives to pasture.

In the last stanza, Freneau predicts that in the year 1783 George’s reign will be over. Freneau also mocks
George by saying he shall eat turnips in Hanover. It means that George will be famished in his own homeland in the future. Then Freneau compares George to the lion. As Freneau (1865: 113) states in the poem:

The face of the lion become pale,
He shall yield fifteen teeth, and be sheer’d of his tail—

This comparison indicates that although George is a king like a lion as the king of the jungle, now he is very weak because his reign is over. He will surrender to fifteen teeth. Here, fifteen teeth refers to the fifteen American States which struggle against British monarchy in America. The expression “be sheer’d of his tail” means that George’s power will disappear because of the birth of the United States. Freneau further describes George’s worse condition. As Freneau (1865: 113) states in the poem:

O king, my dear king, you shall be very sore,
From the Stars and the Stripes you will mercy implore

George’s request mercy means that he wants the United States to give him mercy. The Stars and Stripes above refer to the flag of the United States. In the last line of the poem, Freneau says, “Lion shall growl, but hardly bite more”. It means that George will have anger but he cannot fight Americans because he has already lost his power.

Conclusion

After this close analysis of Freneau’s: “To the Americans,” “On the American Frigate Alliance,” “A Political Litany,” “George The Third’s Soliloquy,” and “An Ancient Prophecy,” it is found that the ideas and themes revealed by these poems clearly reflect the poet’s literary reactions toward the American Revolution. This research shows that Freneau’s poems are greatly influenced by the American Revolution. These influences include the themes that are closely related to the ideas of the Revolution. Furthermore, it is obviously seen that all the concerned poems are directed to support the American Revolution and to reject British monarchy in America. To conclude, Freneau’s poems reflect their author’s reaction to the American Revolution and shows how he gives place in his poetry for the national spirit to create an independent nation.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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