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Exploring the selected American texts through Marxism and Foucauldian Discourse: American Dream Fulfilled or a Failure

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This study examines the ways in which four significant American essays Walt Whitman's "Preface to Leaves of Grass", Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance", Thomas Paine's "Common Sense", and Thomas Jefferson's "Declaration of Independence" express potent concepts of equality, justice, freedom, and revolt. The study employs a qualitative research methodology, content analysis, and closely analyzes these writings using Marxist literary theory and Michel Foucault's discourse theory. The research reveals how each article argues for change and confronts unfair authority by carefully choosing and examining significant passages. Emerson's work encourages individual freedom and self-confidence, Jefferson's publication asserts for independence and human rights, Paine's writing advocates for political rebellion towards monarchy, and Whitman's introduction honors equality, unity, and the dignity of common people. Hence, the study demonstrates the significance and relevance of these writings for freedom and justice in the modern world.

Keywords: American Literature, Revolutionary Ideas, Marxist Literary Theory, Democracy, Content Analysis

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Exploring the selected American texts through Marxism and Foucauldian Discourse: American Dream Fulfilled or a Failure

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Abstract

This study examines the ways in which four significant American essays Walt Whitman's "Preface to Leaves of Grass", Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance", Thomas Paine's "Common Sense", and Thomas Jefferson's "Declaration of Independence" express potent concepts of equality, justice, freedom, and revolt. The study employs a qualitative research methodology, content analysis, and closely analyzes these writings using Marxist literary theory and Michel Foucault's discourse theory. The research reveals how each article argues for change and confronts unfair authority by carefully choosing and examining significant passages. Emerson's work encourages individual freedom and self-confidence, Jefferson's publication asserts for independence and human rights, Paine's writing advocates for political rebellion towards monarchy, and Whitman's introduction honors equality, unity, and the dignity of common people. Hence, the study demonstrates the significance and relevance of these writings for freedom and justice in the modern world.

Keywords:

[American Literature](#), [Revolutionary Ideas](#), [Marxist Literary Theory](#), [Democracy](#), [Content Analysis](#)

Introduction

The study of American literature begins with a study of essential and fundamental concepts that include freedom, identity, human rights, democracy, and individualism, particularly during the United States' formative years. Writers such as Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Walt Whitman contributed to creating and popularizing these ideals with their widely recognized works. Their writings are not only significant political or historical documents, but also contain profound

emotions, intellectual insights, creative expression, and literary richness. For example, Thomas Paine's "Common Sense" used straightforward yet powerful language to assist ordinary people in understanding the immediate need for independence from British supremacy, sparking revolutionary emotions among ordinary people. Thomas Jefferson's "Declaration of Independence" gave an overt and formal voice to the vision of a free nation, determining the core values of freedom and equality that would later shape the American nation. Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance" encouraged people to reject social



pressures, believe in themselves, and embrace independent, nonconformist thought as a means of personal and national development. Walt Whitman's "Preface to Leaves of Grass" praised the beauty, strength, and everyday heroism of ordinary Americans, offering a bold, inclusive, and democratic poetic vision of the American soul. When studied together, these works show the significant principles and goals that influenced early American thought and literature, showing the nation's unique spirit as it was emerging.

Although these works of literature are often studied for their political, historical, or philosophical significance, readers may ignore the simple fact that they are also filled with literary meaning, artistic style, and creativity. Much of the current research examines each of them in isolation, concentrating on individual authors' particular political arguments or historical impacts. However, little effort has been made to connect these four major works and investigate how they share comparable ideas, themes, and values. This limitation of comparative and combined research produces a gap in understanding, making it difficult to completely comprehend how these writings simultaneously shaped the American literary heritage and national identity. While there are several books, essays, and studies on the contributions of Paine, Jefferson, Emerson, and Whitman, many of them concentrate on a single writer or work at a time. Few studies relate their shared messages, language use, literary approaches, and expressions of American norms. Furthermore, there has been limited research into how these four key works collaborated to establish the roots of American literature as well as the American perspective. This evident research gap is what the current study seeks to fill.

The primary goals of this study are to closely and thoroughly examine the main ideas, literary styles, and thematic concerns found in Thomas Paine's "Common Sense", Thomas Jefferson's "Declaration of Independence", Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance", and Walt Whitman's "Preface to Leaves of Grass" to find and evaluate the common themes, values, and overlapping messages that are present in all of these texts: examine into the ways in which each author effectively utilizes language, rhetorical devices, literary devices, tone, and style to effectively convey their ideas to their

audiences; and, finally, to comprehend how, when analyzed collectively, these works contribute to defining the spirit, energy, and ideals of early American literature. To accomplish these goals, the study tries to answer several critical questions: What are the main themes, values, and messages conveyed by these four great texts? What writing styles, literary techniques, and rhetorical techniques do the authors apply to convey and strengthen their ideas? How do these works reflect a shared view of American identity, democracy, and individuality? Eventually, how do these works interact to determine the foundation and legacy of American literature? This research aims to provide new perspectives through linking these key works and explaining how they together contributed to the establishment of American literature and national identity.

Literature Review

American literature is a diverse and important area that reflects the history, hardships, and hopes of the American people. Writers in American literature frequently utilize their words to fight unfair systems, raise the people's voices, and give new perspectives on a better future. It has always been influenced by significant political, social, and cultural events, ranging from the American Revolution and Civil War to the fight for civil rights and onward.

This study focuses on four significant works that are fundamental to American thought: Thomas Paine's "Common Sense", Thomas Jefferson's "Declaration of Independence", Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance", and Walt Whitman's "Preface to Leaves of Grass". Each of these pieces was written at a period when America was grappling with its identity, relationship to power, and future direction. Let's examine each essay in detail. These writings were written at various stages in American history, but they all have a revolutionary spirit. They call into question existing power structures, criticize unfair systems, and propose alternative views of liberty, justice, and individuality.

Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* (1776) is one of the most famous revolutionary works in American history. Paine was a political activist and thinker who argued that the American colonies should be free of British domination. His essay, written in simple, understandable language, claimed that it was "common sense" for America to gain

independence. He denounced the British monarchy as corrupt and unnatural, and he demonstrated why Americans had the right to self-government. What made this essay so remarkable was that it inspired multitudes of ordinary Americans to join the revolutionary struggle. Paine's forceful, emotive speeches fueled the American Revolution, playing a pivotal role in the country's struggle for freedom.

Bernard Bailyn (1992) agrees, highlighting that Paine's literature brought revolutionary ideas from elite circles to the mass populace. According to Bailyn (1967) the booklet acted as a link between Enlightenment ideas and the political needs of American society. Sophia Rosenfeld (2008), in *Common Sense: A Political History*, investigates how Paine's pamphlet combines logic and emotion, presenting complicated ideas in a passionate and approachable manner. She claims that Paine altered the whole definition of political communication, making it democratic and emotionally appealing. Scholars have also noted that "Common Sense" reflected Enlightenment ideas, particularly its claims for natural rights and consent-based government. Paine's focus on liberty, equality, and moral duty was consistent with the principles that later shaped American political and literary traditions. Past scholars (Smith, 2002; Brown, 2010) have studied how Paine's emotional appeal and logical arguments worked together to stir revolutionary feelings. His work is often seen as one of the most influential political texts in world history because it translated Enlightenment ideas into language for the common people.

Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence (1776) is another important American text. Jefferson, one of the founding fathers and the primary author of the Declaration, penned this declaration to formally declare America's independence from Britain. The Declaration is more than just a political statement: it also serves as a philosophical treatise outlining everyone's fundamental rights. Jefferson asserts that "all men are created equal" and have the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." He cites several ways King George III misused his power, arguing that the colonies had no choice but to rebel. One of the most well-known political writings in history, the "Declaration of Independence," influenced subsequent global struggles for justice and human rights. In her book *American Scripture*, scholar Pauline Maier (2011)

examines how the Declaration of Independence drew on earlier local documents and Enlightenment ideology while giving them new national importance. This is agreed by Gray (1978) in his commentary on Jefferson, which is an in-depth analysis of the American Revolution.

Similarly, Danielle Allen (2014) also asserts the strengths of Jefferson's work by asserting that it is the work for all future generations of America. In our Declaration, examine how the document strikes a balance between equality and freedom. Some scholars also have an opinion that Jefferson's writings have a strong impact on democratic movements all over the world (Nelson, 1993; Armitage, 2007).

Ralph Waldo Emerson's Self-Reliance (1884)

Scholars have examined this literary work for its philosophical content, challenge to social conformity, and impact on American individualism. In his book *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (1995), Robert D. Richardson portrays Emerson's work as a spiritual and intellectual exhortation to trust one's inner self and live authentically. He sees *Self-Reliance* as a critical turning point in American thought, shifting from collectivism.

Lawrence Buell (2003) underlines Emerson's literary strength and strong moral message. He claims that Emerson encourages readers to resist cultural pressure and think independently, which has become a defining feature of American identity. According to Barbara Packer (2007), Emerson's beliefs impacted numerous writers and thinkers, including Thoreau, Whitman, and later modernists who regarded the self as vital to artistic expression. Furthermore, researchers emphasize that "Self-Reliance" was a reaction to industrialization and societal change. Emerson's emphasis on nature, the inner self, and spiritual understanding provided a new form of resistance—intellectual and deeply personal.

Walt Whitman's Preface to Leaves of Grass (1855)

The critics believe that this text is a heartfelt celebration of democracy, liberty, and the American people. Whitman's poetry is well-known for its bold, energetic style and genuine affection for the regular workers, farmers, and dreamers who make up

America. In the Preface, Whitman describes America as a nation of diversity, opportunity, and perpetual change. He sees America as more than a country; it is a living spirit that is alive, developing, and welcoming to all (Cameron, 1991; Buell, 2003; Reynolds, 1995). However, some other critics believe it is a combination of poetry and poetic philosophy (Asselineau, 1999 & Folsom, 1997). Betsy Erkkila (1989) has investigated how Whitman's Preface challenged traditional notions of literary organization and language. Her research demonstrates that Whitman's exaltation of physicality, democracy, and the human voice was innovative, resulting in a uniquely American literary style. Scholars (Aspi, 1980; Reynolds, 1995) have complimented Whitman for broadening the definition of American democracy and providing a voice to people who are frequently left out of official histories. His appreciation for diversity and nature has inspired generations of poets, activists, and visionaries.

To analyze these pieces, this study employs two major theoretical approaches: Michel Foucault's discourse theory and Marxist literary theory. Michel Foucault (1926-1984) was a French philosopher who introduced the concept of discourse analysis. He felt that power is not only wielded by monarchs, governments, and armies, but also created and sustained by language, knowledge, and societal standards. Important extracts were picked based on their significance to concepts such as freedom, equality, rebellion, and rights, as well as the employment of persuasive rhetorical approaches and the expression of political or philosophical perspectives. By focusing on primary texts, the research keeps the authors' words and intentions at the core, without any secondary interpretations.

Thematic analysis was then used on the selected parts to explore common themes and discourse patterns that illustrate how each author frames their arguments regarding the struggle against power and the goal of freedom. Using Foucauldian discourse analysis revealed how each piece uses language to question existing power relations and propose alternative ways of perceiving authority and identity.

While the study focuses mainly on four significant books, it acknowledges that its findings cannot be applied to all American political or literary literature. The goal is not to make dominating

statements, but rather to provide specific insights into how these articles work as revolutionary texts. This combination of theoretical framework and close reading guarantees that the analysis is simultaneously logical and meaningful, adding significantly to our knowledge of early American literature's connection with power and justice.

Discussion

This section provides a detailed study and textual analysis of four selected essays from American literature, applying Marxist literary theory. The texts chosen include Thomas Paine's "Common Sense", parts from Thomas Jefferson's "Declaration of Independence", Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance", and Walt Whitman's "Preface to Leaves of Grass". The purpose is to investigate how these works represent class struggles, power dynamics, and social transformation, with a focus on the interaction between the oppressed (ordinary people) and those in power (elite, government, and monarchy). We will also examine how the authors use language and literary strategies to communicate revolutionary and democratic goals consistent with Marxist concerns.

Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* (1776) is one of the most significant publications of the American Revolution, inspiring common citizens to rebel against the British monarchy. Paine's work, written in clear and passionate language, became a bestseller, popular among farmers, laborers, and the working-class colonists. In "Common Sense", Thomas Paine openly criticizes the British monarchy and nobility. Paine's Marxist point of view points out the distinction between the ruling class (the British crown and nobles) and the downtrodden American colonists. He employs straightforward language to make sure even regular readers can grasp the injustice they are experiencing. Paine insists that monarchy is unnatural and unhealthy, serving solely the desires of the elite. He portrays workers as true creators of value who are mistreated by a couple of powerful rulers. His call to revolution is an attempt to break away from a system in which political and financial influence have been concentrated at the top.

Paine famously declared, "The sun never shone on a cause of greater worth," emphasizing the moral importance of revolution. According to the theory of Marxism, oppressed groups (the working class or

masses) must overturn the ruling class (the monarchy and aristocracy) in order to attain justice. Paine's ideas reflect the Marxist view that a revolution is not solely justified, but also required for social reform.

Paine wrote: "Of more worth is one honest man to society and in the sight of God, than all the crowned ruffians that ever lived." This straightforward attack on monarchs mirrors Marx's critique of carried over privilege as well as class hierarchy. Paine's emphasis on the inherent value of the average person calls into question the assumption that social status should determine power, which is central to Marxist philosophy.

He observes that government frequently arises not to assist, but to control: "Society is produced by our wants, and government by our wickedness." Paine's skepticism of concentrated power reflects Marxist debates that governments favor the wealthy over the poor. His demand for independence is both political and economic, pushing Americans to reject unfair trade policies and tariffs that enrich Britain.

Paine's accessible writing style (simple, direct, and passionate) helped propagate revolutionary ideas to ordinary people, like Marx's concept of raising class consciousness, making laborers aware of their exploitation so that they could stand together for change.

Jefferson's Declaration of Independence (1776) offers legal justification behind the American colonies' separation from Britain by describing complaints against King George III and declaring fundamental human rights. Jefferson's "Declaration of Independence" is yet another revolutionary text that is compatible with Marxist analysis. Jefferson discusses the power of citizens to bring down a government that no longer serves them. Despite its formal, refined design, the text conveys a strong message of united struggle against injustice. From a Marxist perspective, the Declaration advocates for the colonists, who symbolize the working class along with farmers victimized by a remote and corrupt monarchy. Jefferson details the crimes of the British king, exposing how the elite use their authority to exploit and dominate the general public.

Jefferson famously stated, "All men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." While this statement appears to be universal, Marxist critics argue that

Jefferson's perspective was limited to white male landowners. Still, the claim that all individuals have the right to question class distinctions and authoritarian control both of which are important to Marxism.

He says: "Whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it." This represents the Marxist theory that when the government no longer serves the majority, then revolution becomes an ethical necessity. Many of Jefferson's objections are about taxation, limitations on trade, and economic mistreatment by Britain. Marxists would interpret these as symptoms of economic inequality, in which a dominant empire drains riches from its colonies, benefiting the ruling class and burdening the labor force. The phrase "We, the Representatives of the United States of America..." strengthens Marxist concepts of solidarity and united resistance against brutal systems.

Emerson's Self-Reliance (1841) moves its focus from political instability to individual freedom and authenticity, promoting readers to resist societal pressure and respect their own judgment. At first appearance, "Self-Reliance" seems to highlight individualism rather than social class. However, from a Marxist perspective, Emerson's text might be interpreted as a reaction to the pressures of orthodox capitalist society. Emerson inspires readers to rebel against pressure from society and to believe in their gut feeling rather than blindly obeying the crowd or the ruling class's dictates.

Emerson's famed advice, "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string," advocated for rejecting society norms. While Marxism emphasizes collective action, Emerson's emphasis on opposing imposed social norms remains critical in challenging the current systems of power.

Conclusion

This study focused on examining how four significant American essays Thomas Paine's "Common Sense", Thomas Jefferson's "Declaration of Independence", Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance", and Walt Whitman's "Preface to Leaves of Grass" display revolutionary themes such as liberty, justice, equality, and rebellion. Using qualitative approaches such as close reading and thematic analysis, the research combined Michel Foucault's

discourse theory with Marxist literary criticism to reveal how these writings question power systems and promote ideals of social transformation.

The study indicated that Paine's "Common Sense" is a passionate appeal for independence that talks directly to the general population, rallying ordinary individuals opposing the British monarchy with straightforward persuasive language. The essay, viewed through a Marxist lens, reveals fundamental economic problems and class tensions, portraying revolution as a social need rather than merely a political movement. In contrast, Jefferson's "Declaration of Independence" portrays the battle as a logical and legal claim of natural rights. While it famously states that "all men are created equal," Foucauldian and Marxist interpretations expose

contradictions, especially the omission of people in slavery, women, and working people from the promises of equality and freedom.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates the literature's persistent ability to inspire political change and challenge unjust systems. While focusing on four significant articles, the study paves the way for future research on additional revolutionary or marginalized voices, demonstrating how literature can operate as a historical force shaping, criticizing, and reimagining societal systems. Despite being published centuries ago, these pieces continue to speak to modern battles for freedom and justice, reminding us of the revolutionary project's unfinished character.

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