Pick Contest: Freedom Through the Ages

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Freedom Through the Ages

Although separated by centuries, both writers from the Age of Reason and the fictional character of Eli, from Eli the Good, are deeply affected by war. Writers Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine come from an era of thinking where logic and science are the primary modes of understanding life. This time in history is known as the “Age of Reason,” and propels them to come to the conclusion that God does not interact with the lives of man, but sits back and lets his people conduct themselves (like a clockmaker does with his creations.) Thinking in this fashion leads them to the actions of fighting for freedom against Britain. Being Deists, they feel they must act of their own accord to obtain their freedom; not leave it to the hands of God.

Writings such as Thomas Paine’s non fiction piece “Common Sense” touch on and discuss these issues eloquently. When arguing for independence from Great Britain, he personifies freedom, and points to the New World as the only place it can rest safely. He states, “For every spot on Earth is covered by oppression. Freedom hath been hunted around the Globe.” This powerful statement is just one example of the stirring imagery he evokes in his propaganda pamphlets he distributes throughout the colonies during his life. Paine’s ideas, although radical, helped stir a nation into action.

Franklin, on the other hand, uses things like satire to make his point. In his piece, a “Speech of Polly Baker” he brings up issues about equality, politics, and other social problems at the time. The thinly veiled cracks at prostitution, taxes, and the unfairness of it all help drive his point home, although pity for poor Polly is not lacking for the reader. In her speech she stands up for herself and opposes outright all of the people voting against her for being a whore. She makes
the claim that she is just trying to support her family. In fact, read as an allegory, Polly is representative of the colonies, being “raped” and taxed by the British. Benjamin Franklin uses this speech as an amusement, but also to show that you can stand up and be heard against your opposition even if everyone is against you, like the colonies against powerful Britain.

These works from the Age of Reason can be connected to *Eli the Good* by Silas House. A young boy named Eli grows up in the 1970’s in the wake of the Vietnam War and the celebration of America’s Bicentennial, the anniversary of the American Revolution that both Paine and Franklin supported two hundred years prior. Eli has his own “Age of Reason” come about as he sees over a summer his family and the world around him crack because of war. His father suffers from the after effects of being an active duty soldier in Vietnam, and thus Eli fights to understand himself and his place as well as his father’s. All of these writings show a nation split in half over action or acceptance. Families are also torn apart over different opinions. For instance, Franklin and his son break ties because his son favors Britain’s side during the Revolution; and Eli and his dad are not able to have a stable relationship as a result of the Vietnam War. Silas House points this out in *Eli the Good* when Eli comments, “We must spend our lives defending our fathers while at the same time trying to understand them.” Many other conflicts in the novel show both family and nation divided over war. This work of fiction not only helps the reader be empathetic to the characters’ emotions, but also transports the reader into the middle of the conflict.

Franklin, Paine, and House may have been from different time periods, but national conflict (no matter what the conflict is) can tear us apart, as seen in “The Speech of Polly Baker” and *Eli the Good*, or unite us together as evidenced by the strong declarations in “Common Sense.” Regardless, it is writing like this that makes an impact on the world. After all, once the
smoke clears, the bodies are buried, families are reunited or torn apart, what endures over the years but words?

Works Cited

