

Rhetorical Strategies in Hannah More's “Slavery”: An Analysis of Persuasive Techniques in Abolitionist Poetry

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Abstract

This study analyzes the rhetorical techniques adopted in Hannah More's 1788 poem “Slavery”, a seminal work in 18th-century British abolitionist literature. By means of in-depth theoretical and textual analysis, the research examines rhetorical devices, including ethos, pathos, and logos, as well as literary strategies crafted by More to sway her readers to oppose the slave business. The results illuminate the poetical rhetoric power in public reform movements.

Keywords: Abolition, Rhetorical Strategies, Slavery, Logos, Pathos, Ethos

Chapter One

1. Introduction

The power of rhetorical language to persuade and appeal in favor of human causes has been exercised throughout history. In his seminal work “The Art of Rhetoric”, Aristotle stated that “Rhetoric is the counterpart of Dialectic in its ability to construct effective arguments and sway audiences” (Aristotle 1354a1). Rhetorical strategies in abolitionist literature were one of the means of advocating the anti-slavery movement, significantly influencing the path of emancipation in Britain and America. According to Ramage et al., writers use rhetorical strategies to reach out to readers and those writers need to consider specific elements like “Pathos, Logos, and Ethos” (qtd. In Zulaikha et al. 3)

Slavery has existed throughout history, but in the period of colonialism, historians record the most atrocious acts committed against slaves. Kathleen Campbell gives meaning to slavery as “The removal of an individual’s ‘right’ to self-ownership and identity” (94).

Nicola Westwood defines abolition as it “is seemingly about more than just liberating the enslaved, or national prosperity; it is also about redeeming the souls of sinners on a more spiritual level” (245). Abolitionist literature, including Poetry, prose, and pamphlets, shaped a significant role in abolitionist literature and helped create a collective opinion advancing in the path of liberating slaves. Edith Hall supports this idea in his book “Ancient Slavery and Abolition”, “Verses on slavery were written and published by the score in newspapers and magazines and in longer purpose-made volumes” (Hall 30).

Hannah More’s poem “Slavery”, published in 1788, is remarkable not only for its vehement appeal against the atrocities of the slave trade but also for its strategic use of rhetorical devices to persuade its readers. Janise Anderson describes Hannah More's rhetorical role against slavery, “Through both logic and emotion, she begged the people of Britain to see that slavery was a terrible wrong and a great injustice. She hoped for freedom for all men, not slavery” (Anderson).

This paper explores the rhetorical strategies used in Hannah More's poem "Slavery" (1788) within the background of antislavery poetry from 1780 to 1865. Specifically, this study will examine More's use of pathos, ethos, and logos; her crafting of literary language such as parallelism and allusions.

Chapter Two

2. Literature Review

2.1 Historical background of Slavery and Abolitionism

The late 18th century constituted a focal moment in British history as the nation wrestled with its position in the transatlantic slave trade. Walvin explains that not only Britain had domination in the slave trade in the eighteenth century, but also other countries: "Most of the major maritime nations of western Europe and the Americas involved themselves to some degree in this Atlantic slave system" (7).

2.2 The Evolution of Abolitionist Literature

Brychan Carey mentions different figures in abolitionist writing in the early emergence of antislavery movement whether in fiction or non-fiction: "abolitionist writers, such as James Ramsay, Thomas Clarkson, and William Wilberforce, as well as Black British writers, such as Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cugoana, felt the need to argue for the full humanity of the African slave" (1). More's "Slavery" appeared in this prime period of abolitionist literature.

2.3 Rhetorical Strategies in Anti-Slavery Literature

The rhetoric in literature has been used both in proslavery and antislavery works for arousing sentimentality in the public. Carey clarifies that some proslavery authors availed the narratives of the sufferings of the British working class, while antislavery works such as "Clarkson's work, it argues, is self-consciously written as rhetoric, with a particular emphasis on the sublime possibilities of pathos: the category of neo-classical rhetoric that dealt with extremes of feeling" (1).

While much has been published on the historical background of abolition and the common themes of antislavery literature, the gap offers a window for much research to analyze More's use of pathos, ethos, and logos in "Slavery", in addition to her usage of literary language and poetic structure to deliver her abolitionist message.

Chapter Three

7. Analysis & Discussion

7.1 Logos: Rational Appeal Against Slavery

According to George Kennedy when discussing Aristotle's Rhetoric, "Another Greek word often used of rhetoric is logos, literally 'word', but also meaning 'speech, argument, reason'" (14). In an abolitionist context, it has been used to reason and dissuade the proslavery traders of this heinous act using logical arguments and debates.

Body- mind binary demonstrates how More uses rhetorical questions to expose the hypocrisy of white slavers. The logical argument asks if spirit and mind became less of a standard than color and matter. At the same time More logically addresses the slavers of "how it is possible that skin color could change the moral principle?"

What! does the immortal principle within

Change with the casual colour of a skin?

Does matter govern spirit? or is mind

Degraded by the form to which it's joined? (More, lines 79-82)

Logos was a tool in Equiano's journey against slavery. His autobiographical book the "Interesting Narrative", is taken as an example of a slave who bought his freedom during enslavement in the Americas. Cora Kaplan and John Oldfield explore this account and how Equiano practiced logos, "Equiano's combination of personally experiencing and observing West Indian slavery allows him to make the transition to an emphasis on logos -reason - in his argument against the behavior of slave owners that betrays the hypocrisy of their claim to be Christians" (88).

7.2 Pathos: Emotional Force

Pathos, defined as "the appeal to the emotions of the audience" (Corbett 86). Anti-slavery literary figures took advantage by presenting the horrible stories of slavery in their works.

The story of Oroonoko who has become a symbol of Collective Suffering to point out the universality of slavery and how it has been looked down upon. "No individual griefs my bosom melt, / For millions feel what Oroonoko felt" (More, lines 71-72). Bringing the story of an African prince who was enslaved then killed brutally is stripping away those who are against abolition.

Pathos has also been used in classic drama for arousing pity and fear, but not for a humanitarian goal, as the case in African slavery let alone when it befalls on an African prince. Wylie Sypher goes thoroughly into Oroonoko's case in his book "Guinea's Captive Kings: British Anti-Slavery Literature of the xviiith Century". He states, "Essentially, the noble Negro remains in the tradition of 'fear' and 'terror,' which originates in the grandiose figure of Oroonoko; he rouses 'pity' only when humanitarian readers, in the following period, feel for his lot as a slave" (Sypher 104).

7.3 Ethos: Ethical Authorization

In classical rhetoric, "Ethos concerned itself with the speaker or subject's personality and standing" (1). In abolitionist literature, ethos often stemmed from spiritual or ethical command.

More sets her ethical authority through prudent placement of herself as both a religious Christian moralist and a nationalist British. More's standing as an ethical author and her links to the evangelical movement put extra load to these arguments. The following lines show the moral codes that More appeals to, along with Enlightenment principles of reason and universal rights, which are considered an example of ethical criticism both in secular and religious framework:

Though dark and savage, ignorant and blind,
They claim the common privilege of kind;
Let Malice strip them of each other plea,
They still are men, and men should still be free.
Insulted Reason loathes the inverted trade —

Loathes, as she views the human purchase made;(More, lines 157-160)

Ethos as used in literary context, Hammad explains how Hannah More mixes the ethical appeal with religious ideas to put across a strong case against slavery. He says that "In Hannah Mores' poem on slavery, the cherub 'Mercy' descends softly to shed 'celestial dew' on 'feeling hearts' until 'every breast the soft contagion feels'. The cult of sensibility blended with Christian values to create a humanitarian ethos" (Hammad 100).

Taking ethos from a humanitarian perspective as a result of antislavery efforts, Brycchan Carey draws his thesis on how the abolitionist politician Thomas Clarkson uses ethos in his pamphlets: "Of the four main positions, the earliest was put by the abolitionist Thomas Clarkson in 1808. Clarkson held that abolition was a triumph of a Christian humanitarian ethos that naturally came to the fore when the true facts about slavery were revealed to the public by campaigners such as himself" (1).

7.4 Religious Appeal

More's rhetorical religious appeal intertwines Biblical references with moral commands. In the context of Salvation in Christianity, the phrase "mild Spirit" (line 316) refers to the Holy Spirit, one of the three figures of the Christian trinity. It is also a reference to the book of Genesis, where the Spirit of God is mentioned to hover "over the surface of waters", in the poem it is said to "hovers o'er the coast" (line 316). More's account gives an image of how steadily she predicts the result of abolition impacting people's devotion with regard to her belief. But certainly, many things never come out so easily as perceived in current times.

Religious appeals, symbols, and allusions have not only been used in fiction but in non-fiction such as pamphlets, speeches, and essays by famous abolitionists. The American abolitionist, suffragist, and poet, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, in her famous speech "Our Greatest Want." She says, "who are ready and willing to lay time, talent and money on the altar of universal freedom" (qtd. in Nye 73). Lauren Nye notes that "Her use of the word 'altar' is religious, and yet she combines it with 'freedom'" (Nye 73).

7.5 Parallelism

Linguistically, "Parallelism (PAR uh lel iz um) is the presentation of several ideas of equal importance by putting each of them into the same kind of grammatical structure. Each of the ideas is ordered or phrased similarly:" (Harris 1).

More's use of parallelism is manifested through approaching the two worlds of the slavers and the enslaved from a neutral perspective. More draws paradoxically the paralleled world to the slaves by comparing the Happy west against tragic Africans who weren't luckily born in Europe. "Had fortune placed you on some happier coast, / Where polished Pagans souls heroic boast," (More, lines 105-106). Directing this parallelism to European readers would spread this awareness to the false superiority of the white race. The parallel anatomy fortifies the poem's main debate that Britain's actual grandness lies in disseminating freedom, not eternalizing servitude.

Frederick Douglass's use of parallelism in his 1852 oration, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July" is exhibited in his construction of contradictory tools "you' do this, 'but/' 'yet' then turn around to do something contradictory, helps parallel America's false commitment to liberty and freedom" (Nye 33).

Chapter Four

8. Conclusion

By means of these united rhetorical and literary strategies, More brings about a riveting case against slavery that functions on various levels - logical, emotional, moral, religious, and structural. The effectuality of "Slavery" lies in how these different appeals run hand in hand, authorizing More to extend to different readers with multiple levels of compassion for the abolitionist cause. Her advance rhetorical method contributed in making a sample for future social reforming literature while helping the increasing impetus of the abolition movement. The rhetorical approach used in analyzing the poem within the cultural theory was pivotal in this research to prove the hypothesis and fill the gap found in the literature review. The findings reveal that Hannah More's use of rhetorical strategies and literary techniques did help building up a humanitarian call opposing enslavement and bondage. This was not exclusive for defending Africans but all human beings and all types of slavery. The discussion was underpinned by other abolitionist writings and critical perspectives on the frame of rhetoric and Abolitionism.

Endnote

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