

WHITTIER COLLEGE VALUES AND TRADITIONS

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Literary Opinions on Slavery in American Literature from after the American Revolution to the Civil War

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PART II

ANTI-SLAVERY SENTIMENT

The opposition to slavery began almost as soon as the first slaves were brought to America. Writers denounced slavery as "the most unremitting despotism on the one hand, and degrading submissiveness on the other."³²

The founders of America did not approve of slavery in principle. George Washington in his will provided for the emancipation of his slaves; he said to Thomas Jefferson that it was among his first wishes to see some plan by which slavery in America might be abolished by law.³³ John Adams declared his abhorrence of the practice of slaveholding, and said that "every measure of prudence ought to be assumed for the eventual total extirpation of slavery from the United States."³⁴ Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, and Patrick Henry all reprobated the principle of the slave system. Thomas Jefferson declared in regard to slavery, "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just."³⁵ Jefferson proposed a draft ordinance (March 1, 1784) for the government of the Northwest Territory, in which it was provided that "after the year 1800 there shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in any of the said states, otherwise than in punishment of crime."³⁶ This proviso was lost, but in the ordinance of 1787 (July 13) for the government of the territory of the United States northwest of the Ohio River slavery was forbidden. At the Convention of Philadelphia in 1787, where the Constitution was drafted, the sentiments of the framers were against slavery. But South Carolina and Georgia insisted on its recognition as a condition of their joining the Union. However, the words "slave" and "slavery" were excluded from the Constitution, because, as Madison said, they did not choose to admit "the right of property in men" in direct terms.³⁷

The Missouri Compromise (1820), the annexation of Texas (1845), the Fugitive Slave Law (1850), the Kansas-Nebraska Bill (1854), the Dred Scott Decision (1857), the attempts to acquire Cuba (1854) were steps in the growth of the slave power. These steps roused a determined spirit of opposition, founded on deep-seated convictions.³⁸

The writers presented their opinions of slavery against the Missouri Compromise, the annexation of Texas, the Fugitive Slave Law and the Dred Scott Decision. Among the writers who opposed the slave system was John Greenleaf Whittier.

John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892) was born near Haverhill, Massachusetts. The family was an affectionate one, close-knit by very strong bonds of religion. Whittier said, "I am a Quaker because my family before me—those whom I loved—were Quakers. And also I am one because the faith pleases me. I believe in it."³⁹

Whittier was instructed in the Bible at home. As a lad, he was able to relate the story of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, and he was able to say most of it. This knowledge of the Bible remained with him. Of all the early influences upon him, Whittier's home life affected him most.⁴⁰

For Whittier to become an abolitionist was natural. As early as 1830, when he became the editor of the *Haverhill Gazette*, Whittier had made it known that he would support, "the reforming spirit, which is abroad in our land."⁴¹ And he had all the Quaker's fighting sympathy for the less fortunate, and especially for the Negro slaves. Whittier fought with his pen the battle that his Quaker principles would not let him fight with the sword.⁴²

Whittier's prose and poetry reveal his anti-slavery convictions. In *Justice and Expediency*, Whittier justifies his active participation in the fight for the emancipation of slaves

by stating that merely to sympathize did not alleviate the suffering of the slaves. The condition called for action. Whittier contended that sympathy alone did not reach the broken of heart; nor would sympathy hold back the whip from the back of the slave. Such sympathy was like that of the Priest and the Levite who saw the wounded man by the side of the road, but did nothing to alleviate his suffering. According to Whittier, it was like painting the sepulchre in order to make the dead bodies within seem less horrible.⁴³

Whittier urged that the unvarnished truth be presented, and that no one attempt to hide the truth. For it was better to meet the truth here with repentance than at the judgment of God. According to Whittier the petitions of the oppressed had gone up to God who as a father pitied all His children, and their blood was upon America as a nation.⁴⁴

New England, stated Whittier, was just as responsible for the evils of slavery as were the slave-holders. And a just punishment would be given by God to all who engaged in the iniquity of slavery. Whittier stated that New England was just as responsible for slavery because it was bound by the United States Constitution to protect the slave-holder in his sins. God would not hold any man guiltless who condoned the principle that "man can hold property in man."

So long as we take counsel of the world's policy instead of the justice of Heaven, so long as we follow a mistaken political expediency in opposition to the express commands of God, so long will the wrongs of the slaves rise like a cloud of witnesses against us at the inevitable bar.⁴⁵

Whittier condemned any system that enslaved fellow creatures, which left women without protection, which considered human beings as merchan-

Whittier College was embedded with the values, moral compass, and ethics by the Society of Friends. When Whittier was founded one of its first tasks was to create a school. Thus, Whittier Academy was founded. Shortly thereafter Whittier College came into being.

In the article above, John Greenleaf Whittier outlines some of the most cherished of the values the Whittier First Friends instilled in the heart, head, and soul of the fledgling Whittier College. To this day, our education is based on these simple truths, this is who we are. This is our educational foundation and this is our legacy.

Another of the values the Whittier Quakers embedded was that of seeking the truth. For year Whittier College has invited unique individuals to share their knowledge.

By way of example, in 1971 Stokely Carmichael was invited to Whittier College to speak.



“Carmichael gave this speech at Whittier College as part of a speaking tour of American college campuses in 1971. On the tour, Carmichael frequently appeared in a white African shirt and slacks with embroidered detailing at the collar and cuffs. He warned his audiences that those who came to hear him shout slogans like, "Off the pigs and kill the honkies," would be disappointed. Instead, he had a Pan-African revolutionary philosophy to impart. (Whittier Daily News)



In 1960, Richard Nixon delivered an address to Whittier College standing on Hadley Field.

Speech by Richard Nixon August 1960

“discrimination and here at Whittier we do not know prejudice and discrimination. This is one of the great features of this college. I think all of us would agree. But sometimes you hear this problem of prejudice and discrimination being spoken of as a southern problem. I want to tell you what it is. It isn't a southern problem; it's a national problem. Other people say the problem of prejudice and discrimination is a legal problem. This is something that the people down in Washington ought to pass laws to solve and laws will help. But it isn't a legal problem primarily; it's a moral problem. And other people say this is a Government problem; but it isn't a Government problem. It's a personal problem. And what I'm meaning to say by that is this: In every part of this country we have prejudice. In every part of this country we have discrimination. And the only way it's going to be dealt with is for each individual American to recognize this very great truth, that prejudice hurts us abroad, that prejudice saps our strength at home and that we individually must assume the responsibility for removing it, removing it so that a hundred years after Lincoln America can realize the great objective of equality of

opportunity for all of our people regardless of what their background may be. [Applause.] This is a personal problem. And as I say that this is a personal problem, I mean that each of you when you deal with this problem in your communities, in your hearts, you help America and you help her be the example that we want of freedom and justice for all the world to see.”



Jane Fonda came to Whittier College to present an anti-Viet Nam war message. The First Friends of Whittier are definitively against any war. See the works of our own Jessamyn West.

At this time there were quite a few Viet Nam veterans on campus. I know because I was one of them. It is all good. It is our Quaker heritage.

A Fast fact:

“More than 50 percent of Whittier College undergraduates, and three of its four Rhodes Scholars, are from underrepresented ethnic and international groups; th kind of cultural diversity, which permeates both classroom and campus community, profoundly strengthens intellectual discourse and provides a realistic exposure to the kind of world students will enter upon graduation.”

(side note: a few years back I had the opportunity to meet one of the heroes of Whittier College, Stan Sanders. Stan is our first Rhodes Scholar and a great football player. Stan and my father-in-law, George Tenopir stayed friends after George admitted Stan to Whittier College back when enrollment was growing from 900 to a high of about 2400 students.)

In 2014 another great speaker came to Whittier College

“Longtime civil rights activist Gwendolyn F. Green can never forget some of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s last words to her and how prophetic they turned out to be.

Green was working for then-state Sen. Mervyn Dymally when she was asked to invite King to speak at the California Democratic Council’s annual convention in Anaheim on March 16, 1968. Green had worked with King and his wife, Coretta, for the past eight years in various administrative positions with King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference and its fundraising affiliate, the Western Christian Leadership Conference.”

And to close out this brief discussion. In this snippet of an article from 2019 that legacy meant something.

“But Whittier also finds itself in rarified air for another reason: The Poets have one of the most diverse rosters in all of college lacrosse. In a sport dominated by middle- and upper-class white families, Whittier has three African-Americans, four Asian-Americans, one Latin-American and even **Miles Moscato**, a player with half his left arm.

This sort of profile wasn't intentional, Coach Nick Marks said. It's more attributed to how Whittier is ranked in the top 15 by U.S. World and News Report for campus ethnic diversity among liberal arts colleges.

"We are aware we're in a weird time in America right now, and I think the fact we have this environment is an example to the rest of the lacrosse world," Marks said. "Lacrosse is growing east to west in numbers, but I think the diversity of this sport is going to grow west to east. That's really what Whittier men's lacrosse is. It's an example of another type of growth that can occur within the sport."

And, as at least some of the alumni know, our La Crosse team is a nationally recognized power house.

Quite honestly, I am proud to be a Poet. We are all special and we are all unique.