

British Intellectuals on Liberty, 1775–1792

by Nathan McAlister (created 2013, revised 2025)

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RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION: One 45-minute class period

GRADE LEVEL(S): 6–8

OVERVIEW

In the eighteenth century the idea of “liberty” was being discussed on both sides of the Atlantic. American colonists and British intellectuals, including John Locke and John Stuart Mills, were discussing and debating what liberty meant. In Great Britain slavery, individualism, and the role of women in society were all being debated. In this lesson students will analyze three short primary sources written by British intellectuals and compare their points of view. These sources are part of the Sid Lapidus ’59 Collection at the Princeton University Digital Library. Student understanding will be demonstrated through discussion and written analysis.

Students will be able to

- Determine the central idea or information in a primary source
- Determine the meaning of words or phrases
- Evaluate authors’ differing points of view (e.g., comparing a set of essays to find different conclusions by the authors on the same topic)
- Integrate information from diverse sources into a coherent understanding of an idea

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- How did British intellectuals understand the meaning of “liberty” during and after the American Revolution?
- What threats to freedom did British intellectuals identify?

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.6.1: Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.2: Determine two or more central ideas in a text and analyze their development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.6: Determine an author’s point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how the author acknowledges and responds to conflicting evidence or viewpoints.

MATERIALS

- Activity Sheet 1: “The Look of Liberty?”
- Activity Sheet 2: “Voices of Liberty!”
- Primary Sources
 - Voice of Liberty 1: Excerpts from Edmund Burke. *The Speech of Edmund Burke, Esq; on Moving His Resolutions for Conciliation with the Colonies, March 22, 1775*. London, 1775, pp. 16–17, The Sid Lapidus ’59 Collection at the Princeton University Digital Library, arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/g158bj04t
 - Voice of Liberty 2: Excerpts from Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Humbly Submitted to the Inhabitants of Great-Britain*, London, 1787, pp. 3–4, The Sid Lapidus ’59 Collection at the Princeton University Digital Library, arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/7m01bm45z)
 - Voice of Liberty 2: Mary Wollstonecraft (Excerpt from Mary Wollstonecraft. *A Vindication of the Rights of Women: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*. London, 1792, pp. vii, The Sid Lapidus ’59 Collection at the Princeton University Digital Library, arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/mw22v6206

PROCEDURE

1. Pose the essential questions to the students.
2. Hand out “The Look of Liberty?” activity sheet.
3. Have the students draw a quick sketch of what liberty looks like to them in the “Pre” section.
4. They do not need to spend a long time drawing this. Stick figures will suffice. They should be more concerned with the concept and image of liberty.
5. Ask for volunteers and have the students share their ideas with the rest of the class.
6. Divide the students up into groups of two or three. This may vary depending on the size of your class.
7. Hand out one copy of each of the primary sources, “Voice of Liberty” 1, 2, and 3, to each group. You may also give each student a copy of the documents.
8. Hand out a copy of the “Voices of Liberty” activity sheet to each group.
 - a. Have each group member put his or her name on the activity sheet.
 - b. Complete the activity sheet as a group.
 - c. Circulate around the room and discuss the differing aspects of their particular primary source documents and assist with questions they might have. In particular whose liberty is each author speaking for?
 - d. Make sure that the groups provide a sentence or two from each document to support their conclusions.

9. When it appears that most of the groups have completed or are near completion, have the student groups share their findings and discuss whose liberty was important for each author and what evidence they discovered based on the primary source materials.
10. Have the students revisit “The Look of Liberty?” activity sheet and draw a quick sketch of what liberty looks like now in the “Post” section. Is it different or the same?
11. Briefly discuss their conclusions and why they have or have not changed.

Name _____ Period ____ Date _____

ACTIVITY SHEET 1: "THE LOOK OF LIBERTY?"

Directions: When you close your eyes what image comes to mind when you hear the word "Liberty"? Using the "Pre" box below, draw your image of liberty. Save the "Post" portion of this activity until after you have completed Activity Sheet 2: "Voices of Liberty."

Pre	Post

Names _____ Period ____ Date _____

ACTIVITY SHEET 2: "VOICES OF LIBERTY"

Directions: After reading each of the three primary source documents, identify whose liberty the writer is talking about and what "liberty" means to the writer.

Voice of Liberty	Whose liberty is important to them?	What does "liberty" mean to them?
1 Name: Date:		
2 Name: Date:		
3 Name: Date:		

Voice of Liberty 1: A British Take on Liberty

Excerpts from a Speech by Edmund Burke, 1775

. . . This fierce spirit of Liberty is stronger in the English Colonies probably than in any other people of the earth. . . . They are therefore not only devoted to Liberty, but to Liberty according to English ideas, and on English principles. . . . Liberty inheres in some sensible object; and every nation has formed to itself some favourite point, which by way of eminence¹ becomes the criterion² of their happiness. It happened, you know, Sir, that the great contests for freedom in this country³ were from the earliest times chiefly upon the question of Taxing. . . . The Colonies draw from you⁴ as with their life-blood, these ideas and principles. Their love of liberty, as with you, fixed and attached on this specific point of taxing. . . .

From Edmund Burke, *The Speech of Edmund Burke, Esq; on Moving His Resolutions for Conciliation with the Colonies*, March 22, 1775, London, 1775, pp. 16–17. (The Sid Lapidus '59 Collection, Princeton University Digital Library)

¹ importance

² decisive factor

³ Britain

⁴ Parliament

Voice of Liberty 2: A British Take on Liberty

Excerpts from a pamphlet by Ottobah Cugoano, 1787

It is therefore manifest, that something else ought yet to be done; and what is required, is evidently the incumbent⁵ duty of all men of enlightened understanding, and of every man that has any claim or affinity to the name of Christian, that the base treatment which the African Slaves undergo, ought to be abolished; and it is moreover evident, that the whole, or any part of that iniquitous⁶ traffic of slavery, can no where, or in any degree, be admitted. . . . But the robbers of men, the kidnappers, ensnarers and slave-holders, who take away the common rights and privileges of others to support and enrich themselves, are universally those pitiful and detestable wretches; for the ensnaring of others, and taking away their liberty by slavery and oppression, is the worst kind of robbery. . . .

From Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Humbly Submitted to the Inhabitants of Great-Britain*, London, 1787, pp. 3–4. (The Sid Lapidus '59 Collection, Princeton University Digital Library)

⁵ current

⁶ wicked

Voice of Liberty 3: A British Take on Liberty

Excerpts from a book by Mary Wollstonecraft, 1792

. . . Contending for the rights of woman, my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge. . . . And how can woman be expected to cooperate unless she know why she ought to be virtuous? unless freedom strengthen her reason till she comprehend her duty, and see in what manner it is connected with her real good? . . .

From Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*, London, 1792, pp. vii. (The Sid Lapidus '59 Collection, Princeton University Digital Library)