SAMPLE ESSAY

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THE ABOLITIONISM OF WILLIAM LLOYD GARRISON: SUCCESS THROUGH CONTROVERSY

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William Lloyd Garrison feared no one, and the force and tone of his words, both written and spoken, reflected his disregard of other people's opinion of him. Garrison was immensely unpopular for most of his life, a hated enemy to southerners and a radical loudmouth to northerners. In an era in which the overwhelming majority of Americans were either in favor of or indifferent to the institution of slavery, he was unrelenting in his abuse of anyone who was not firmly opposed to it. He embarrassed, exasperated, shamed, and infuriated people, and as a result, many other abolitionists considered Garrison a hindrance to the common goal of freeing the enslaved blacks. These abolitionists feared that he alienated moderates who could be potential opponents of slavery, and they were correct to an extent. His embracing of "non–resistance" principles, disunionist policies, anti–clergy doctrines, and the women's rights movement, and his uncompromising opposition to any political means of bringing about abolition caused much of the controversy. Over the years, many historians have depreciated or even denounced Garrison's role in abolitionism. They have seen him in much the same way as his aforementioned contemporaries did, as a bullheaded, egotistical troublemaker who disrupted the movement. These historians have overlooked the essential element of the Garrisonian approach: his appeal to the consciences of thousands of Americans by means of his rebuke of their ambivalence to the existence of slavery.

Garrison helped the antislavery cause much more than he hurt it. His words were accepted as little more than rhetoric by most people in the 1830s and 1840s, but by the 1860s, Garrison was finally seeing the fruition of his life's work; the North had come to realize that he had been right all along, that slavery was a great

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evil that must be abolished.[1] Garrison once said, "Slavery will not be overthrown without excitement, a most tremendous excitement,"[2] and he was undoubtedly correct. It was a result of the prevalent attitudes of his time that it took such a long while for a significant number of others to understand this fact.

Before one delves deeply into an analysis of Garrison and an evaluation of the effectiveness of his agitation regarding the slavery question, it is necessary to have some conception of the nature of his career and of the abolitionist crusade as a whole. The pursuit of abolition had existed in America since the colonial period, but it was not until the nineteenth century that an organized front developed. Up until the 1820s and early 1830s, the proponents of abolition were concerned primarily with the prospect of colonization, the shipping of the slaves back to Africa.[3] The American Colonization Society was the principal antislavery organization.[4] There were only a minute number of opponents to slavery who were not satisfied with colonization as the alternative to slavery; this was the case chiefly because almost no one, even among the abolitionists of the time, considered blacks the social or mental equals of whites and thus felt no guilt in simply sending them out of the United States.

This was the antislavery atmosphere into which Garrison burst in 1829, at the age of twenty–three. He joined Quaker Benjamin Lundy as co-editor of the Genius of Universal Emancipation, a Baltimore antislavery newspaper.[5] Garrison, a Massachusetts native, had already several years of experience as a printer, publisher, and editor of various New England reform publications but had not yet begun to focus on abolition until he joined Lundy. Unlike Lundy, Garrison quickly came to favor immediate, not gradual abolition, and he began to launch attacks on the colonizationists, calling them hypocrites.[6]

Garrison came into prominence in 1830, when he was jailed in Baltimore for seven weeks on a charge of libel.[7] He had been attacking the slave traders of the city, calling them "highway robbers and murderers," and calling for them to be "sentenced to solitary confinement for life." He attracted the attention of Lewis and Arthur Tappan, brothers and New York philanthropists who led the non–colonizationist branch of abolitionism.[8] The Tappans were helping to establish James Birney and Theodore Weld as leaders of abolitionism in the West and were joined by men such

as Joshua Leavitt and Henry Stanton in New York. In 1831, Garrison began publication of the Liberator in Boston.

Even though it had only about two thousand subscribers, most of them northern blacks,[9] the Liberator immediately became known because of the harsh vocabulary of Garrison's vituperation. "I am aware that many object to the severity of my language, but is there not cause for severity? I will be as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice. On this subject, I do not wish to think, or speak, or write, with moderation,"[10] Garrison replied to his many critics. Because he called slaveholders "thieves," "moral lepers," "Satanic manstealers," and "degraded bullies," the South came to blame him for Nat Turner's revolt, saying that he inspired the slaves to rebel.[12] In fact, Garrison was a pacifist and regretted that violence had erupted; he merely felt that if violence were to break out, he would naturally prefer that the rebelling slaves were the victors, rather than their oppressive masters.[13] But the southerners failed to see Garrison's point. In states such as South Carolina, North Carolina, and Georgia, the state legislatures passed acts offering rewards for his arrest and prosecution.[14] At the age of twenty–five, Garrison had suddenly become a national figure.

The early 1830s was an important period for the abolitionists. In 1832, Garrison helped to found the New England Antislavery Society and also published his highly successful pamphlet Thoughts on African Colonization, which effectively put the colonization movement to rest. Then, in 1833, the American Antislavery Society was established, and it was at this time that the hostility of other abolitionists to Garrison began to become apparent; many members of the new national society demanded that Garrison's name not be mentioned, for they feared that the public would assume Garrison's opinions to represent the sentiments of all abolitionists.[15] So he was given only a minor official position in the society: secretary of foreign correspondence.[16] But nevertheless, the masses considered Garrison the leader of abolitionism and considered the Liberator its main instrument.

In the early 1830s, Garrison declared, "There shall be no neutrals. Men shall either like me or dislike me,"[17] and he was right. As the decade progressed, he became the outlaw of abolitionism, and only a handful of loyal followers—Samuel May, Edmund Quincy, Samuel Sewell, Oliver Johnson, and Wendell

Phillips, to name a few—supported him.[18] In fact, the American Antislavery Society split in 1840 (this was known to abolitionists as the "schism of 1840"). The anti–Garrison faction which made up the great majority left to form its own organization, the American and Foreign Antislavery Society.[19]

A key source of Garrison's unpopularity was his impulsiveness, his insistence upon fighting for any reform that caught his attention; he was driven by his conscience, and whatever he decided was morally right, he backed wholeheartedly. The historian John Jay Chapman wrote of Garrison, "It is safe to say that he would, at a moment's notice, have delivered a violent judgment upon any subject that aroused his compassion."[20] Because he felt the Constitution permitted slavery, he burned copies of it in public and urged the dissolution of a government based on such a document. Because he knew that women deserved equal rights, he lost many friends by supporting the women's rights movement. Because he thought politicians corrupt, he refused to participate in political action; he argued that people follow a "higher, inner law" rather than (the legal one.) And, probably most detrimental to his popularity, because he felt the clergy corrupt and hypocritical since it did not espouse the cause of immediate emancipation, he attacked the leadership of the church.

Garrison's opponents were numerous and vocal. After 1835, his criticisms of the church had become increasingly intense, and the Congregationalists had responded by denying their pulpits to abolitionist spokesmen.[21] Most people came to see Garrison as an enemy of Christianity because of his behavior; actually religion was very important to him, but he was simply unwilling to sacrifice his morally correct pursuits to satisfy the church hierarchy.[22] And since many believed that the churches were crucial to the antislavery cause, abolitionists were very upset with Garrison. James Birney wrote, "I greatly lament the course Mr. Garrison seems to be taking. I have been disappointed in him...I have no expectation that Garrison can be reduced to moderation, and I am not prepared to say, that his departure from us may not be the best thing he could do for the cause of Emancipation."[23] Gamaliel Bailey, another moderate abolitionist, had a similar view. He was particularly concerned with Garrison's attacks on the clergy and wrote in 1837, "...my heart is sick. I try to restrain myself, but the disgusting gross egotism of Garrison...

is continually urging me to say something...I believe in my soul that we have all overvalued Garrison...Pride has driven him mad."[24] A third man complained that Garrison made more difficult "all judicious schemes of emancipation, by prejudicing the minds of slaveholders."[25]

Twentieth–century historian Gilbert Hobbs Barnes considered Garrison at best useless to the abolition movement and at worst a serious impediment to its success.,[26] and he based his arguments on his reading of quotes such as Birney's and Bailey's. Barnes thought western abolitionists Birney and Weld far more important than Garrison.[27] Barnes's 1933 book The Antislavery Impulse epitomizes the widespread historical criticism of Garrison. In this book, Barnes dismissed Garrison's role in the movement, saying that the "Garrisonian Legend" developed not because of Garrison's merit but because of his loyal followers' "sheer repetition" of their claims of his being responsible for each abolitionist victory.[28] He claimed Garrison had "no qualifications for leadership" and called him "a figurehead of fanaticism."[29] Barnes viewed Garrison and his disciples as "dead weights to the abolition cause."[30] The arguments of historians such as Barnes do have some validity, but these historians have been too narrow–minded in their analysis; to understand that Garrison was a positive force in, not a hindrance to the antislavery crusade, one must look beyond his isolation from the majority of other abolitionists of his time.

Garrison was an important abolitionist for a number of reasons. He ended the colonization movement, won the support and admiration of key British abolitionists, provided hope and inspiration to blacks, helped to bring forth the already existing Southern defense of slavery as a "positive good," and, perhaps most importantly, aroused the consciences of white northerners. Some of these accomplishments are more easily apparent than others.

Garrison's early writings in the Liberator and his Thoughts on African Colonization unquestionably convinced many abolitionists of the futility, both moral and practical, of the colonization effort.[31] This was significant, for it helped to focus people's attention on the severity of the slaves' plight rather than on expediency. As modern historian George M. Frederickson has written of Garrison, "He succeeded in altering the course of the

antislavery movement by reducing colonization to irrelevance."[32] Also, Garrison was praised lavishly by British reformers such as John Stuart Mill and George Thompson and was seen by the British as the leader of American abolitionism,[33] though he was in fact the isolated, left-wing radical of the movement. Garrison's winning of British acclaim was important because the British abolitionists had achieved great success in their work and thus had substantial influence on the antislavery drive in the United States.[34] The British praise gave Garrison's immediate emancipation doctrine more credibility.

Garrison's impact on the blacks has long been overlooked. His calling slaveholders "thieves" and "Satanic manstealers" made whites feel guilty and made them defensive, but it encouraged blacks, giving them hope that there were whites who realized the horrible injustice of their condition and were willing to fight hard for their freedom. Free blacks were the principal subscribers to Garrison's Liberator, and they spread word of his attack on slavery, making Garrison a hero to the slaves. Blacks admired him, because they knew that his priority was abolition, not what other whites thought of him. He was a much-needed ally to blacks, a man who showed them that maybe abolition of slavery was possible.

Looking back on the abolitionism of the 1830s, Theodore S. Wright, a prominent black minister and contemporary of Garrison, said, "We declared, 'this is our country, and our home;—here are the graves of our fathers.' But none came to the rescue. At that dark moment we heard a voice; it was the voice of Garrison, speaking in trumpet tones. It was like the voice of an angel of mercy. Hope, hope then cheered our path. The signs of the times began to indicate better days." There is further evidence of this hero status that Garrison enjoyed. In 1865, he toured South Carolina and Florida, met everywhere by cheering blacks who pelted him with flowers and surged after him in crowds to touch his clothes.[36] And even Frederick Douglass, the renowned freed slave and black statesman, who was critical of Garrison's unwillingness to wage his antislavery war in the political arena, regarded him as "the foremost, strongest, and mightiest among those who have completely identified themselves with the Negroes in the United States."[37]

Garrison was hated and feared particularly by southerners, and he greatly affected southern opinion. Slaveholders understood the danger that Garrison's extremism presented to the maintenance of slavery. [38] According to Frederickson, "Garrison is important because of the intense opposition he aroused."[39] He was loud and uncompromising, and he did not hesitate to rebuke them in the harshest terms. Declared Garrison, "Slaveholders are the fiercest enemies of mankind and the bitterest foes of God!" Because of words like these, each young southerner was brought up to think of abolition as an attack on his father's character and property.[40] Southerners felt threatened by Garrison, and they fought him as hard as he fought them. One letter to him by an anonymous Georgian called him "base villain" and "impudent scoundrel."[41]

The southern argument that the institution of slavery was beneficial for all, black and white, had existed for many years before Garrison's time, but it was he who forced the South to use this reasoning on such a broad scale (Ulrich Phillips was still arguing that slavery was a "positive good" in the twentieth century.) As Frederickson has written, "The reaction to Garrison in the South is of great historical importance...because it helped bring the South's militant defense of slavery out into the open in a way that aroused northern fears and anxieties."[42]

To appreciate the northerner's alarm and realize the significance of Garrison's role, one must see the southerners' words first hand. Here are some excerpts of another angry southern letter to Garrison:

> Your paper, Sir, is a lame and impotent production, designed obviously for the most base and infamous purpose; and can have no other ultimate effect than to render negroes dissatisfied with their condition, and thereby make it necessary to hold them in stricter subjection...All that is required of the slaves is moderate labor...the blacks and whites cannot assimilate: one must be subordinate to the other: we must control them, or submit to their control...You may be assured that the more you attempt to wrest the slaves from us, the stronger will be our grasp; and if they succeed for a moment in loosing their bonds, it must only be to submit to those which are more firm. We hold them in self defence; let them alone, or take them entirely from us...The progeny of a Yankee and a Negro would indeed be nondescript in natural history; uniting the selfishness, duplicity, canting hypocrisy and vicious propensities of the one, to the recklessness, obstinacy and folly of the other: in short, just such a monster as yourself."[43]

When such letters were printed in the Liberator and other northern papers, northerners became concerned about the dangers of slavery, seeing that it had caused a perversion, a twisting of the minds of southerners. The South was attempting to justify slave labor and appeared to be becoming increasingly adamant in its defense of the institution. These northern reactions were important in the growth of the Republican party, whose members realized the evils of slavery and fought to keep it from entering the territories which represented opportunity, an important aspect of the American identity. This new northern awareness was due in part not only to Garrison's bringing forth of the violent southern defense but also to his direct appeal to northerners' consciences through years of agitation. Even those northerners who did not see the South as an immediate threat to their freedom came to favor abolition, because Garrison's long-time insistence that slavery was immoral, that people follow a "higher, inner law," had finally become clear to them.

Very few Americans spoke out against slavery until the 1850s. The great majority of northerners felt compelled to keep quiet about the issue; it was generally agreed that in the interest of sectional harmony, it was best to let the South have its slaves.[44] Economic factors were partly responsible, for the northern manufacturers needed the southern markets, and the northern merchants wanted the cotton and tobacco that the South produced. The term "conspiracy of silence" has been widely used to describe the situation, because people were afraid that any discussion of the slavery question would disturb the already precarious North–South relations. So most northerners ignored slavery throughout the first half of the nineteenth century and tried to quiet the few abolitionists who protested the institution. Garrison was successful because he played on the nervousness, the doubts, the humanity of the northerners; he saw their underlying dissatisfaction with the existence of slavery that they tried to deny to themselves, and through his agitation, he aroused their consciences and brought this dissatisfaction out into the open.

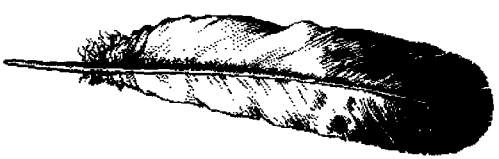
The apathetic Americans of the 1830s and 1840s complained that Garrison was "disturbing" the situation with his abuse of anyone not firmly antislavery; his strong language made him controversial and turned people against the abolition movement. Garrison was undaunted. "Opposition and abuse and slander and

prejudice and judicial tyranny add to the flame of my zeal...I am in earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—and I will be heard. The apathy of the people is enough to make every statue leap from its pedestal..."[45] Many historians (Barnes being the most prominent of them) have used this attention that Garrison brought himself as evidence for their belief that Garrison's role in abolitionism was merely symbolic and that he actually damaged the cause. It is easy to take this view if one looks only at the early reaction to Garrison; to comprehend his great impact on northerners, one must see the relation between public opinion of Garrison in the 1830s and that of the 1850s and 1860s. When he said such things as, "I am sick of our unmeaning declamation in praise of liberty and equality; of our hypocritical cant about the unalienable rights of man,"[46] he stirred up the people. As James Ford Rhodes wrote, "It was due to Garrison and his associates that slavery became a topic of discussion at every Northern fireside."[47]

Even if they did not consider blacks equal to whites, many northerners began to wonder about the moral question of one group of people's enslaving another group. As northerners tried to protest Garrison, they found that there was little to find fault with his fundamental argument that the enslavement of anyone, white or black, was wrong. As Rhodes said, "Slavery could not bear examination. To describe it was to condemn it."[48] A contemporary of Garrison, Lydia Maria Child, declared that he affected people "by pulling on the strings of conscience."[49] Evidence of this aspect of Garrisonian influence is clear; the unwillingness of the North to obey the expanded Fugitive Slave Act portion of the Compromise of 1850 and the northern uproar over the Kansas–Nebraska Act of 1854 are two excellent examples of the change in northerners' opinions of slavery. The generation of people who had been young when their parents were sharply critical of Garrison in the 1830s came of age in the 1850s, fiercely opposing slavery and joining the Republican party. Modern historian Russel Nye wrote that "Garrison, more than any other person, shattered the 'conspiracy of silence' about slavery."[50] And in so doing, Garrison helped to cure the North of its apathy.

Garrison considered the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment to be the fulfillment of his lifelong goal to free the blacks.[51] By 1865, he was in poor health and had

lost the remarkable energy that had made him an effective agitator. He realized that much still needed to be done to assimilate blacks into American culture, and he was not optimistic that whites would quickly accept blacks as equals.Yet he felt that the remainder of the fight should be left to younger, healthier reformers such as Wendell Phillips.[52] Garrison had published the Liberator for thirty–five years and had had a greater effect on the anitslavery movement than any other abolitionist. He had ended the futile colonization movement, given hope to thousands of oppressed blacks, free and enslaved, and, most importantly, forced white northerners, through his absolute insistence to bring the plight of the slaves to the forefront of northern priorities, to realize the evils of slavery. Particularly after the Civil War, northerners, finally understanding that he had always been right in his principles, if not in his methods, respected Garrison for his adherence to what he called his "higher, inner law." He once said prophetically, "...posterity will bear testimony that I was right."[53] Now, many years later, one can see that he was not only right but also, as Nye called him, "...a person of real historical importance..."[54] Frederickson has even considered him "the central figure in the crusade against slavery."[55] It would be nonsense to dismiss William Lloyd Garrison as merely a "figurehead of fanaticism."



[1] Russel B. Nye, William Lloyd Garrison and the Humanitarian Reformers (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1955) p. 183

[2] George M. Frederickson, editor, Great Lives Observed Series: William Lloyd Garrison (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice–Hall, Inc., 1968) p. 176

[3] Nye, p. 16 [4] Nye, p. 16 [5] Nye, p. 22

[6] Nye, p. 24 [7] Nye, p. 28

[8] Frederickson, pp. 72–74

[9] Nye, p. 49

[10] Frederickson, p. 23

[11] Nye, p. 76 [12] Nye, pp. 52–53

[13] Nye, pp. 53–54 [14] Nye, pp. 54–55

[15] Nye, p. 69 [16] Nye, p. 70

[17] Nye, p. 51 [18] Nye, p. 102 [19] Nye, p. 130

[20] John Jay Chapman, William Lloyd Garrison, (New York: Moffat, Yard and Co., 1913) p. 42

[21] Frederickson, p. 72

[22] Nye, p. 140

[23] Frederickson, p. 79 [24] Frederickson, p. 79

[25] Nye, p. 55

[26] Frederickson, p. 145 [27] Frederickson, p. 145

[28] Frederickson, p. 155 [29] Frederickson, p. 148

[30] Frederickson, p. 156

[31] Nye, p. 58

[32] Frederickson, p. 2

[33] Nye, p. 189 [34] Nye, pp. 66–67

[35] Frederickson, pp. 85–86

[36] Nye, p. 186

[37] Frederickson, p. 89

[38] Nye, p. 53

[39] Frederickson, p. 3

[40] Chapman, p. 24

[41] Frederickson, p. 103 [42] Frederickson, p. 102

[43] Frederickson, pp. 104–106

[44] Chapman, pp. 18–19

[45] Frederickson, p. 23 [46] Frederickson, p. 15

[47] Frederickson, p. 136 [48] Frederickson, p. 136

[49] Nye, p. 77 [50] Nye, p. 206 [51] Nye, p. 184

[52] Nye, p. 182

[53] Frederickson, p. 23

[54] Nye, p. 205

[55] Frederickson, p. 1

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