The abolition of the Atlantic slave trade was a long struggle in British Parliament between the slave trade defenders and the abolitionists. The Act of 1807 officially abolished the Atlantic slave trade, eighteen years after the initial abolition proposal to Parliament. William Wilberforce was a member of a committee that worked towards the abolition of the slave trade and the eventual emancipation of slavery. He also was a member of Parliament. Indeed, Wilberforce is most remembered for his committed perseverance on behalf of abolition.

A literature review will describe the existing scholarship pertaining to the British antislavery movement and William Wilberforce. The literature review will also reveal that current scholarship does not specifically rhetorically analyze the first official proposal for abolition, presented by William Wilberforce on May 12, 1789.

The analysis presented will identify how Wilberforce foregrounded the cultural norms of eighteenth century British culture and how he used refutative ironies to break apart the opposition's arguments against total abolition of the slave trade. Finally, evaluation of the analysis will support the hypotheses that William Wilberforce's May 12, 1789 proposal for the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade was the inception of debate and discussion on the abolition of the slave trade in Parliament.
A Rhetorical Analysis of William Wilberforce's First Official Proposal For the Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade

by

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A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies

Completed June 5, 1992
Commencement June 1993
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A Rhetorical Analysis of William Wilberforce's First Official Proposal for the Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade

CHAPTER ONE

Literature Review

The debates in the British Parliament concerning the Atlantic slave trade between 1789-1807 consistently have been characterized as conflicts between the humanitarian and moral concerns of the abolitionists and the economic concerns of the trade defenders. Scholars since then have conducted much research attempting to describe the issues involved and the individuals who had significant influences on the campaign to abolish or defend the Atlantic slave trade. The abolitionists viewed the trade in human slaves as an imperfection in their existing society and based their arguments on the inhumanity of the trade. The defenders of the slave trade argued that abolishing the trade would ruin the British economy.¹

While some scholars continue to make the case that the trade ended because of abolitionists' persistence and success in arguing humanitarian reasons, others contend that it was because of economic reasons and circumstances that the trade was eventually abolished. Regardless of why abolition eventually occurred, people on both sides of the issue acknowledge William Wilberforce as a significant voice in the eventual abolition of the slave trade. Despite this recognition, no one has yet rhetorically analyzed Wilberforce's abolition discourse.² More specifically, no one has analyzed the proposal by Wilberforce that initiated the slave trade debates in British Parliament.³
Historically the majority of the credit is given to the efforts of the abolitionists. The abolitionists grounded their arguments in the inhumanity of the trade and the moral wrong of the institution of slavery. In *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760-1810*, Roger Anstey explains the nature and composition of the abolition movement in the country and in Parliament. Anstey's research carefully documents facts, statistics, and details involved in the Atlantic slave trade. He considers many aspects of the slave trade: its origins, its profitability, and its impact on Africa. Anstey also characterizes the thoughts and attitudes of eighteenth century society. This treatment lends to a better understanding of the state of mind that existed and the change that was occurring. Anstey recognizes the influences of Quakers and Evangelicals as significant factors in the change of eighteenth century thought. He concludes that eighteenth century English society began to see the moral and legal injustice of slavery.4

The values of liberty, benevolence, and happiness were ideals that were developed and strived for in eighteenth century British culture.5 To the British, liberty was associated with particular human rights. They valued the right of freedom and the right to choose. The British defined benevolence as the inclination to want to treat others good and kind. They felt that it was their duty to perform kind acts towards and for each other. By practicing benevolence, the British believed that they would attain happiness. These people equated happiness with joy, contentment, and peace. These specific values held dear by the British nation were incompatible with those of slavery.6 Through one of the greatest propaganda campaigns in history, the abolitionists bombarded British society with anti-slavery rhetoric through pamphlets, literature, public speeches and sermons, and petitions to Parliament.
Reginald Coupland describes in more detail exactly who made up the first Abolition Committee. Granville Sharp chaired this influential committee and the other original members included William Dillwyn, George Harrison, Sammuel Hoare, John Lloyd, Joseph Woods, and Thomas Clarkson. Each member had dynamic characteristics and strengths that he contributed to the campaign. Soon after their formation as an official committee, they realized that they needed a member of Parliament among them in order to make a difference in the House and in the law. They needed a voice on the inside of Parliament if they were to make gains towards official abolition of the slave trade. The committee thought that this person must possess and practice special characteristics. He must be strong enough to face opposition and ridicule, he must continually and persistently put the cause of abolition at the attention of Parliament, he must be intelligent, have clarity of mind, have the natural ability of eloquence, and must have a certain "delicacy" of feeling. William Wilberforce was the person who suited their purposes: "It was Wilberforce's parliamentary talents that . . . made it possible to open the great attack on the slave trade." The abolitionists knew that the opposition would present strong arguments against abolition and put up a rigorous fight.

Dale Porter outlines the case against abolition as the opposition viewed it. To Porter, the central issue for the trade defenders was whether or not the British economy and commerce would be damaged. He argues that the opposition viewed the institution of slavery as natural. They believed that slavery had always existed as a condition of nature. Porter claims that the trade merchants perceived the slaves as born for slavery and that they saw the trade in slaves as the only trade advantageous to Africa. Porter describes the logic behind the arguments of the opposition, even though he claims that
economic concerns are what caused the trade eventually to be abolished. Porter acknowledges that abolition has historically been viewed as a moral issue and victory, but he argues that there are certain political and economic circumstances that have been overlooked.\textsuperscript{13}

Eric Williams details the point of view and arguments of the slave traders and merchants. He lends insight into why the opponents of abolition thought, felt, and acted the way they did. Although historically the opposition thought that abolition would destroy British economy, Williams argues in \textit{Capitalism and Slavery}, that the opposition’s own economic motivations were primarily responsible for the abolition of the slave trade. He argues that it was the slave trade that set all the rest of British trade into motion.\textsuperscript{14} He explains that the profits generated from these goods and trade fostered the rich development of British industry. Williams concludes that the slave trade was eventually abolished because it was no longer as profitable as the British Industrial Revolution.

Although Williams does not entirely dismiss the humanitarian movement, he does believe that too much attention and significance has been attributed to it. Williams argues that the abolitionist’s reports on the slave trade horrors and the treatment of the slaves have been greatly exaggerated.\textsuperscript{15} He gives credit to the abolitionists as “a brilliant band,” but overall his opinion of these men does not seem to be very positive.\textsuperscript{16} He is especially critical of Wilberforce, though he acknowledges him as an eloquent speaker with a good reputation.\textsuperscript{17}

Barbara Solow agrees with Williams in "Capitalism and Slavery in the Exceedingly Long Run."\textsuperscript{18} She concludes that Britain’s economy had moved more towards industrialization and that the slave trade was no longer
profitable. She claims that industrialization promoted less dependence on slave labor and prompted the abolition of the slave trade.

These studies are significant in demonstrating the concerns and arguments of the opponents to abolition. They show that the trade defenders viewed abolition as the potential financial ruin of Britain and the end of British capitalism and power. These studies lend insight into how the trade defenders reasoned the justification of the trade. It is critical to understand this side of the debate in order to have a better understanding of the constraints facing the abolitionists.

In "The Rhetorical Situation," Lloyd Bitzer inquires into the nature and contexts in which rhetorical discourse is created. In order to better understand the meaning of rhetoric, it is critical to understand the context in which the rhetoric occurs. Rhetoric gains its character from the situation that generates it. Speech becomes rhetorical because it is a response to a situation of a certain kind. A rhetorical situation is a dynamic set of circumstances dealing with a perceived exigence, which may be modified by discourse. Bitzer defines a situation as ripe for rhetorical discourse when there are three elements: an exigence, an audience, and particular constraints. Bitzer defines exigence as a need or a defect that is capable of being influenced or modified by rhetoric. A rhetorical audience is people capable of responding to the discourse of the rhetor. Constraints are circumstances that have the ability to restrict decision and action needed to influence and change the exigence. The rhetor and his or her discourse become constituents when the situation invites them. Bitzer also describes several characteristics of a rhetorical situation. One is that rhetorical opportunities may come into existence, and either mature or decay. Not all rhetorical
situations are characterized by rhetoric. If there is no rhetor to respond to the rhetorical situation, it will decay.

The issue of abolition was, in Bitzer's terms, a mature rhetorical situation. There was a perceived exigence by some members of British society. There were constraints that restricted modification of the exigence. There was a rhetorical audience capable of responding to the need. Most significantly, William Wilberforce, a rhetor was invited into the situation to speak.

The abolitionists viewed the trade of human slaves as an imperfection in their existing culture. They saw a need for this imperfection to be abolished. The way to abolish the slave trade was to change the laws regulating the trade. Discourse and debates were needed to influence members of Parliament in order to abolish the trade.

There were certain constraints that were factors to consider in this rhetorical situation. George III was a trade defender, and was firmly opposed to abolition. He viewed abolition as a financial and political threat to the kingdom. A majority of the members of Parliament were trade defenders and did not believe that abolishing the slave trade was a wise thing to do. These members were able to constrain and deter the decision and action that may have modified the laws regulating the trade of slaves. In this sense the members of Parliament were the rhetorical audience. The Parliament consisted of members who could be influenced by the discourse and could vote to modify the laws regulating the slave trade if they chose to. They were an audience who were capable of making change.

William Wilberforce stepped in to take advantage of this mature rhetorical situation. His rhetoric was carefully planned and had a purpose. Wilberforce came to Parliament on May 12, 1789, presented twelve
resolutions against the Atlantic slave trade and proposed total abolition. His discourse proposed to solve what he and other abolitionists saw as a problem. He presented this proposal to an audience educated on the topic and capable of making decisions that could change and influence the outcome of the motion. The proposal eloquently attempted to provoke a particular action from the House of Commons, to vote in favor of abolishing the Atlantic slave trade. However, many members were concerned with the effect of abolition on the British economy and power. These concerns and beliefs posed immediate constraints to abolition. Even though this particular proposal was defeated in the end, the course for abolition of the slave trade was finally cleared.

The majority of existing literature on the abolition of the slave trade discusses the Parliament debates that led up to the Act of 1807, which officially abolished the Atlantic slave trade. What the literature fails to do is analyze in detail the rhetorical dimensions of this first official proposal to Parliament in 1789. Abraham Kriegal claims that Wilberforce's proposal was "... the inception of the [abolition] debate in 1789." Although some references to this proposal appear in the existing literature and scholarship, the speech is not considered in detail. No one has treated this proposal as a rhetorical document with a rhetorical purpose. It has not been shown how Wilberforce managed the exigence, the constraints, and the audience through this proposal. It has not been explained how this eloquent proposal managed the available means of persuasion. Given that Wilberforce's rhetoric is historically and rhetorically significant, it is critical to analyze this discourse.
Method

This speech will be analyzed from David Kaufer and Christine Neuwirth's perspective on ironic communication and foregrounded norms. The paradoxical nature of Britain's Atlantic slave trade created many ironical instances readily available as means of proof and persuasion. A culture that held the values of liberty, benevolence, and happiness, yet was the leading nation in the number of slaves that were traded was in itself an ironical situation. Given the nature of the slave trade it is interesting to examine how irony was played out and utilized in Wilberforce's first proposal for its abolition. The dominant tone of Wilberforce's speech was ironic. Wilberforce employed irony as a means of convicting his audience, using real-life ironies as means for persuasion. Britain claimed to be a nation of humanity with values of liberty, benevolence, and happiness; therefore how could they possibly be a part of such an inhumane practice? The point of Wilberforce's use of irony was to have his audience condemn their part in the inhumane slave trade.

Norman Knox discusses the meaning of irony and how it was used in the context of the given time period. Critical to this analysis is Knox's thorough treatment of the concept of irony in the context of the eighteenth century. Irony was widely used in literature, public lectures, sermons, and letters. For centuries people thought of the concept of irony as an effective and purposeful way of affecting and persuading an audience. As an educated man of eighteenth century English society, Wilberforce would have been familiar with the concept of irony. He was noted as a clever and witty man. Wilberforce had established his reputation in Parliament with his "darting repartee and devastating sarcasm." Given the context of the
concept of irony in the eighteenth century, the ironic nature of the Atlantic
slave trade in Britain, and Wilberforce's natural sarcasm and wit, examining
how Wilberforce employed irony as a means of managing and persuading his
audience is the most appropriate way to analyze Wilberforce's speech.
Furthermore, given that the majority of Parliament and the king were against
abolition, Wilberforce had to be careful not to offend the opposition.
Wilberforce considered situational constraints such as these which invited
irony as the most effective technique by which to condemn the slave trade.

The shared element among different theories of irony is the function
of the audience in the ironic situation. Irony is a figure of speech in which
the speaker's intended meaning is opposite of what is actually said and the
speaker's intent for employing irony is to have the audience indict
themselves. The audience is the critical element to the ironic rhetorical
situation. The speaker assumes that the audience is familiar with certain
information or shared values and norms. The audience must have some
prior knowledge of the speaker's character in order for irony to be shared.
Ironic interpretation requires that the audience know their values and norms
and the values and norms of the speaker. When a speaker employs irony,
he or she attempts to disturb what is perceived as right or normal and create
dissonance in the audience.

Aristotle's treatment of irony in the Rhetoric is confined to three
references: as a method of concluding, a type of style, and as an alternative
"better than buffoonery". He does not develop these functions any further,
yet in mentioning irony as a stylistic device he points to an area that suggests
the function of an audience. In "Toward a Theory of Rhetorical Irony," Allan
Karstetter briefly discusses the history of the concept of irony, from the
ancient times to present day. According to Karstetter, Cicero seems to be the
first to distinguish between irony as a mere trope and irony as a rhetorical strategy in discourse. Cicero asserts that irony is saying one thing while meaning another and that this has a "great influence" on the minds of the audience. Quintilian develops this concept further. The audience understands that an expression is meant to be ironic either by "delivery of the speaker, the character of the speaker, or the nature of the subject." If any of these elements are incongruent with the words, it immediately becomes clear that the intention of the speaker is other than what he or she actually says. Quintilian goes on to argue that irony exists when the speaker concedes to the audience's values which they do not acknowledge to possess. He claims that this is especially effective when the speaker has these qualities.

Between the time of Quintilian and seventeenth century England, the word irony and its meaning changed little. In the seventeenth century, educated Englishmen used irony more frequently than ever before. The function of the audience indicting themselves in the ironic situation became more common. By the end of the seventeenth and into the eighteenth century, irony became common in literary and general discourse and more familiar to readers of popular literature. This was when authors began to use irony in the works that they wrote, orators used irony as a device in their lectures and speeches, and it was not uncommon for eighteenth century English people to employ irony in letters to one another. Irony as a device was regularly used in magazines, newspapers, and pamphlets for the first time. Irony became more familiar to English society because of its increased use.

Borrowing Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, The Gentleman's Magazine singled out a specific instance where the speaker indict the audience by praising them in order to really blame. This specific instance was
at the Senate of Lilliput, when a member arose to address the other members and attack the government's method for the "sale and consumption of gin".\textsuperscript{52}

My Lords,

Though the noble Lord who has been pleased to incite us to an unanimous Concurrence with himself and his Associates of the Ministry in passing this excellent and wonder-working Bill, this Bill which is to lessen the Consumption of Spirits, without lessening the Quantity which is distilled, which is to restrain Drunkards from drinking, by setting their favourite Liquor always before their Eyes, to conquer Habits by continuing them, and correct Vice by indulging it according to the lowest Reckoning, for at least another Year . . .

Thus, my Lords, they conceived, that they had reformed the common People without infringing the Pleasures of others, and applauded the happy Contrivance by which Spirits were to be made dear only to the poor, while every Man who could afford to purchase two Gallons was at Liberty to riot at his Ease, and over a full flowing Bumper look down with Contempt upon his former Companions, now ruthlessly condemned to disconsolate Sobriety, or obliged to regale upon their Cares, but held them for many tedious Hours in a languishing Possession of their Senses and their Limbs.

The member of Lilliput indicts the audience through irony by having them realize how paradoxical their proposal was.

Also, in Swift's "A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of poor People in Ireland, from being a Burden to their Parents or Country; and for making them beneficial to the Publick," a cruel picture is developed.\textsuperscript{53}
Swift realizes that the audience will agree that the present state of these beggarly children in Ireland needs to be addressed.

"I think it is agreed by all Parties, that this prodigious Number of Children in the Arms, or on the Backs, or at the Heels of their Mothers, and frequently of their Fathers, is in the present deplorable State of the Kingdom, a very great additional Grievance; and therefore, whoever could find out a fair, cheap, and easy Method of making these Children sound and useful Members of the Commonwealth would deserve so well of the Publick, as to have his Statue set up for a Preserver of the Nation. I shall now humbly propose my own thoughts. . . . a young healthy Child, well nursed, is, at a Year old, a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome Food; whether Stewed, Roasted, Baked, or Broiled. . . ."

Through the use of irony Swift causes the audience to feel guilty because they were ready to hear any proposal that may have solved this problem. The audience recognizes how absurd it was to readily accept just any proposal; cannibalism was unacceptable and not the solution for this situation.

In "Will Rogers: Ironist as Persuader," William Brown explores how Rogers helped his audience achieve a sense of advantage in the face of economic hardship by explaining Rogers' success in creating irony in which his audience realized their values and responsibilities as citizens of American. For example, Brown demonstrates how Rogers reinforces and intensifies the audience's commitment to the value of "progress" by creating an ironic story about "Eastern chauvinists unconsciously (and ironically) impeding the same progress they professed to espouse." Brown points out that Rogers foregrounded such values and norms as "progress," "fairplay,"
"defense of the underdog," "social leveling," and "equality." By foregrounding these norms, Rogers' audience should have been able to understand the irony and take their commitment to these values more seriously. Rogers influenced the value choices of his audience.

How can a listener recognize that the speaker has meant to be ironic? Wayne C. Booth answers this question in *A Rhetoric of Irony*. The audience is alerted to irony if they notice an unmistakable conflict between the beliefs expressed by the speaker, the beliefs that the audience suspects the speaker holds, and the beliefs they hold. Irony is most clear and persuasive when there is an ironic statement in the midst of straightforward and literal speech.

According to Tindale and Gough, the answer in recognizing irony lies in the "tone" of the expression. The "tone" recognizes the background of information, attitudes, and values that the speaker assumes the audience to have. This adds to the impact of the speaker's message beyond the literal content by appealing to certain norms, given the context of the speech. Like Booth, Tindale and Gough say that an audience is alerted to irony when any statement appears to contradict the speaker's beliefs and values.

Once it has been decided that the speaker is indeed using irony, one can analyze how effectively the irony has functioned. In *The Compass of Irony*, Douglous Muecke argues that irony has three principal functions. First, irony may be used as a device to "enforce one's meaning." Next, irony may be used as a strategy to attack another's point of view or expose hypocrisy in the audience or listener. Third, irony may be used to lead the audience to see things as not so simple or complex as they might appear.

David Kaufer and Christine Neuwirth develop Muecke's argument further and discuss how ironically intended speech can be used to reinforce,
ridicule, or refute cultural norms in an audience as a rhetorical strategy.\textsuperscript{66} Again, conviction or self-indictment in the audience is a function of irony when employed as a rhetorical strategy. Kaufer and Neuwirth define norms as the accepted social attitudes, practices, behaviors, and values shared by a culture or society.\textsuperscript{67} Booth also discusses the role of values and norms in the ironical situation. He argues that there are five "handicaps" that could influence the way value judgments are interpreted by the audience in irony.\textsuperscript{68}

First, Kaufer and Neuwirth discuss the process of "foregrounding," which plays a part in ironic communication. When a speaker utilizes irony he or she uses the foregrounding strategy.\textsuperscript{69} The speaker foregrounds norms by violating and or straightforwardly asserting them. A speaker straightforwardly asserts a norm when he or she makes an evaluative statement. For example, if two friends have come from an art show and one person states, "Those were lovely works of art," the speaker has foregrounded norms of what he or she believes to be lovely art. Or, the person could state "Those were ugly works of art." Again, foregrounding norms of lovely art by suggesting that the present art does not meet standards of lovely art.

Also, a speaker can foreground a norm by violating the accepted norm. Suppose a restaurant host notices a patron smoking in the non-smoking restaurant. The patron's violation of smoking foregrounds the norm of non-smoking when the host has to correct the patron's behavior. Or, suppose that a teacher is reprimanding a classroom of first graders that had insensitively mocked a new student. The teacher might say to the class, "Thank you for welcoming our new student so kindly." The students know full well that their actions have not measured up to their teachers' standard of kindness and recognize that the teacher has violated the value of what is considered kind with this statement.
A norm is foregrounded if the speaker can assume that the audience has that norm actively in mind. To understand the irony, the audience must discover the inferential link between what the speaker says and what is foregrounded. Why does foregrounding norms work? It involves the audience by asking them to acknowledge the cultural norm and recognize the intended irony. By making this leap the audience is drawn into agreement with the speaker about the foregrounded norms.

Kaufer and Neuwirth distinguish between reinforcing, ridiculing, and refutative ironies that utilize the foregrounding strategy. The reinforcing ironist expresses a statement and relies on the audience's prior knowledge of the truth to contradict it. This contradiction is the speaker's intended meaning. For example, suppose that both the speaker and the listener do not want it to rain on a particular day and each is aware of the others preference. It rains on that certain day and the speaker says to the listener "What a beautiful day!" The listener recognizes the speakers expression as a violation of norms. This recognition has foregrounded the norm, 'lovely weather,' that was violated.

The ridiculing ironies are directed to listeners who support commonly held norms but fail to conform to these cultural norms. Speakers use this type of irony to ridicule correctively, as a way of correcting in-group members whose behavior does not conform to cultural norms and values. Consider the speaker and the listener riding in a car. Suppose that the driver was driving carelessly and nearly caused an accident. The passenger sarcastically says "Nice move!" This expression has foregrounded the value of 'good driving habits.' Assuming that the passenger and the driver share the same value of good driving, the passenger has ridiculed the driver for acting like a person who does not value good driving.
The refutative ironist foregrounds norms and values which he or she believes to prevail over the norms of the opponents. The refutative ironist foregrounds formal norms. He or she will try to represent the views of a system as sympathetically as possible, only to show that the views in question reveal incongruities. The purpose of using refutative ironies is to have the intended audience self-indict and reevaluate their stand on the given issue. Kaufer and Neuwirth use the abortion issue as an example. Suppose a refutative ironist was speaking among pro-abortionists. The ironist would mimic their concerns by expressing a "fear" that the anti-abortionists have not shown enough concern for "human life." The speaker might then list specifics on the insensitivities of anti-abortionists toward the lives of women and the lives of unwanted children. Yet, in doing this the speaker's purpose was to foreground the norm of "protection of human life" as the main point from which to assess the issue. By foregrounding this value, it is the speaker's attempt to demonstrate to the audience the curious position into which they fall when prompted to defend abortion under the ideal of "protection of human life." This strategy is designed to provoke people to think and critically rethink their position. These refutative ironies are meant to open minds and deepen understanding.

After Wilberforce's first official proposal for the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade, Edmund Burke stated: "... the House, the nation, and all Europe [are] under very great and serious obligation to the hon. gentleman, for having brought the subject forward in a manner the most masterly, impressive, and eloquent..." Abraham Kriegal claims that it was Wilberforce's proposal to Parliament that was the inception of the abolition debate. Wilberforce demonstrates the ironic nature of Britain's involvement in the Atlantic slave trade in his proposal. The remaining
chapters of this thesis will identify and analyze how Wilberforce managed the rhetorical situation through the use of foregrounding cultural norms and refutative ironies.
Works Cited


3. On May 12, 1789, William Wilberforce presented twelve proposals to the British Parliament against the Atlantic slave trade and for the first time officially proposed the abolition of this trade. For the text of this speech, see T.C. Hansard's, *The Parliamentary History of England* 58 (Petersborough: 1816) 41-67.


7. Reginald Coupland, *The British Anti-Slavery Movement* (New York: Barnes and Noble Inc., 1964) 68. Also see: Anstey 45. Although Wilberforce is the most "famous" abolitionist, Sharp is noted as the first active abolitionist.

6. Coupland, Anti-Slavery 81


12Steve Rupert, "Torn From Their Homes," Oregon State University History Association address, Corvallis, 5 Feb. 1992. This is an issue that is heatedly debated in academia. Professor Steve Rupert argues that it is the Atlantic slave trade that made Africa dependent on the trade of humans. Since the beginning of the seventeenth century, Africa had become more and more dependent on human slaves as commodities to trade for other goods that they wanted. He also states that when Britain abolished the slave trade Africa no longer had commodities to trade. Therefore Africa was forced to keep slavery alive in its own country to produce the goods that Europe wanted on African plantations.

13Porter 69.


15Williams 34.

16Williams 179.

17Williams 181.


20Bitzer 249.

21Bitzer 252.

22Bitzer 252-253.
In fact prior to 1789, there were specific times in Parliament when the rhetorical situation could have matured. In 1776, MP David Hartly proposed a motion against the slave trade and the House threw it out immediately without consideration or debate. See: Coupland 64. In 1778, Parliament appointed a committee to investigate the state of the slave trade. Nothing came of it. See: David Brion Davis, The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823 (London: Cornell University Press, 1975) 25. In 1783, the House rejected a Quaker petition requesting Parliament to consider the slave trade. See: Williams 46. These rhetorical situations decayed because no rhetor was willing to take up the cause of abolition or able to manage the exigence, the constraints, or the audience.

Although Wilberforce's proposal to Parliament in 1789 was the first official motion for abolition, actual voting on the proposal did not take place until 1791 when Parliament resumed. In regards to the abolition issue, Drescher analyzes how each Member of Parliament voted over the course of the entire slave trade debates, 1791-1833. Drescher's research considers how each MP voted over the course of the years in proportion to the types of reasoning behind the arguments of both the abolitionists and the opposition.

The members of Parliament had been presented with a report of the Privy Council Committee for Trade and Plantations in April of 1789, which had inquired into British commercial relations with Africa and considered all aspects of the slave trade. It was a very detailed account of the existing slave trade. The report covered the following areas: the civilization of West Africa and how slaves are made, the
manner in which slaves were carried to the West Indies, the treatment of the slaves on
the plantations, the extent of the trade and population of the slaves, and the state of slave
trade and slavery as practiced by other nations. This report was intended to be an
objective account of the trade.

30Kriegal 441.

31Anstey 313; Coupland, Antislavery 91; Davis 27; Hansard's 68;
Klingberg 84-85; Kreigal 441, 448; Lean 27, 52-56; London Times, 13 May
1789: 1-3; London Times, 15 May 1789: 2; Francis McConnell, Evangelicals,
Revolutionists, and Idealists (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1972) 168, 172;
"Parliamentary Proceedings of the Lords and Commons," Gentlemen's Magazine and
Historical Chronicle 59 (1789) 1173-1174; Porter 72-74.

32David S. Kaufer and Christine M. Neuworth, "Foregrounding Norms and Ironic

33Norman Knox, The Word Irony and Its Context, 1500-1755, (Durham: Duke

34Knox 141-186.

35Kaufer, "Strategy" 93-94.

36Lean 17, 20, 21. Lean describes "The Foinsters," which was a group of close
friends that included Wilberforce, Pitt, Eliot, Arden, and Genl. Their favorite pastime
when all together was "foining," which was "jesting and ragging and exchanging witty
repartees." Lean states that Wilberforce's "effervescent wit" was readily employed.
Also see: Furneaux 21.

37David S. Kaufer, "Irony and Rhetorical Strategy," Philosophy and Rhetoric
Spring 1977: 90. Also see: Christopher W. Tindale, and James Gough, "The Use of

Kaufer, "Strategy" 94.

Tindale and Gough 3.

Aristotle 1430b 7, 1408b 20, 1419b 7.


Karstetter 165.

Cicero, De Oratore III, 203.


Quintilian 9.44-45.

Knox 6.

Knox 7.

Knox 8.

Karstetter 168.

Knox 7-8.

Knox 123-124, 129-130. I have borrowed this example from Knox, who researched the example in Gentleman's Magazine 14 (January 1744): 8, 11.

Booth 106-123. I have borrowed Booth's citation of Swift.


Brown 184.

Brown 184,190.

Brown 190.

Brown 191.
Booth 73.

Booth 73.

Tindale and Gough 6.

Tindale and Gough 9.

Tindale and Gough 6.

Tindale and Gough 13.


Kaufer and Neuwirth distinguish between substantive norms and formal norms. These authors define substantive norms as cultural values and beliefs that offer positive direction, such as brushing your teeth everyday, exercising four times a week, and voting. Also see: Tindale and Gough 10.

Booth 221-229. These 'handicaps' are ignorance, inability to pay attention, prejudice, lack of practice, and emotional inadequacy.

Kaufer and Neuwirth 30.

Kaufer and Neuwirth 29.

Booth 41. Also see: Tindale and Gough 9-10.

Kaufer and Neuwirth 32.

Kaufer and Neuwirth 33.

Kaufer and Neuwirth 33.

Kaufer and Neuwirth 33.

Kaufer and Neuwirth 35.

Kaufer and Neuwirth 35.

Kaufer and Neuwirth 35.
79Hansard's 68.

80Kriegal 441.
CHAPTER TWO
Background

William Wilberforce served in the House of Commons for forty-one years, between the years of 1784 and 1825. He is most remembered for his campaign against the Atlantic slave trade in Great Britain. Particular circumstances and events shaped the character of Wilberforce that made him the ideal agitator for abolition.

Wilberforce came from a well-established family in the port of Hull, England. His father died when he was young, leaving Wilberforce in comfortable financial circumstances. After his father died, Wilberforce was sent to live with his uncle and aunt, William and Hannah Wilberforce in Wimbledon. Hannah used to take young Wilberforce to hear the Evangelical sermons at the local church. It is here that Wilberforce was first exposed to the evangelical movement, which later would be a significant factor in his life. Wilberforce's mother heard of his interest and tendencies towards Evangelism. Alarmed, she brought Wilberforce home to Hull immediately. His mother was "religious" in the formal sense, but she had the fashionable dislike of "enthusiasm." Young Wilberforce finished his grammar school in Prodlington, a boarding school about thirty miles from Hull.

At the age of seventeen, in 1776, Wilberforce entered St. John's College, Cambridge. Later in life, Wilberforce regretted not having taken full advantage of his college years. Although he passed his courses, he was not self-disciplined in his studies. Wilberforce was more interested in the social life and became very popular. At Cambridge, Wilberforce made the acquaintance of William Pitt, who would later become the youngest prime minister of Great Britain and a dear friend of Wilberforce. After Cambridge,
Wilberforce's financial comfort allowed the opportunity to pursue a political career.

On March 25, 1784, Wilberforce was elected to the House of Commons as a member from Yorkshire, the largest, most influential, and most coveted county seat. That same year, William Pitt was made the youngest Prime Minister in British History. Members of the House of Commons were elected by popular vote for seven years or until the death of a monarch. Eighteenth century "election" was different than what is presently considered "election." The people (men) who were allowed to vote were those with a property right, not the human right as is today. Actually only 234 of the 558 seats in the Commons were determined by what we would call election by modern standards. 192 seats were influenced by borough patrons and 32 seats were under direct patronage of the monarch. When Wilberforce entered Parliament, during the reign of King George III, it was nearly impossible to pass a measure to which the King was opposed. He had the power to veto what he did not support. Moreover, the House of Lords, in which seats were inherited or appointed, could propose measures and veto what was passed in Commons, and thus had great influence. Ultimately, the monarch and the House of Lords had the most functional power in the government.

Wilberforce was respected and well liked in the political and social circles. He was described by colleagues as witty, clever, and entertaining. Wilberforce was a welcomed member at many British social clubs, of which the majority of patrons were members of parliament. Political success often depended on acceptance at these clubs which served as political societies, social meeting places, and casinos. Wilberforce belonged to both the Tory and the Whig clubs, since he was an independent. Many evenings after sessions of Parliament adjourned, members would retreat to these clubs to
continue discussions, to have dinner, and to engage in some form of entertainment. Wilberforce and his friends enjoyed many late evenings of attending theater and then adjourning to these clubs to play cards. His personal journals are filled with entries describing evenings at these clubs with other members of Parliament. Goosetrees was the favorite club of Wilberforce and Pitt. Their's was a close friendship, developed through the enormity of time the two spent together, the things that they did, and the discussions that they had. Pitt retreated often to the Wimbledon home of Wilberforce.

In the fall of 1785, Wilberforce underwent an experience that changed his life. What began as an intellectual pursuit into Biblical Christianity with his friend Isaac Milner, developed into inner conviction. Wilberforce recommitted his life to Christianity. Wilberforce struggled trying to align his new philosophy of life with his prior way of living. Initially, Wilberforce thought he would have to leave the political scene. He did not see how he could actively practice his faith while still involved in the social expectations and lifestyle to which he was accustomed, such as card playing, attending the theater, and drinking in the clubs. Wilberforce thought the solution was to leave his political career, even though he passionately loved the political challenge. Wilberforce feared Pitt's reaction to his conversion. However, Pitt respected and supported Wilberforce's new faith. Although Pitt did not share Wilberforce's faith, he did not discourage it. Pitt regarded Wilberforce as an asset to the House. He respected Wilberforce as a friend and politician and encouraged Wilberforce to stay in Parliament.

Wilberforce eventually achieved a mature balance between his private and public life. It was personally critical for Wilberforce to find a way to apply his Christian principles to his politics. Adherence to Christian
principles directed the rest of Wilberforce's life and career. He believed that people were called by God to do certain things and that they have an inescapable commitment to do them no matter what the discouragement, dangers, or disappointments.

Most British who considered themselves practicing Christians expressed their religion without fear of persecution. The intolerance of the seventeenth century had disappeared. However, it was not fashionable to show any "enthusiasm" for one's religion. People who eagerly enjoyed living a Christian lifestyle and had an intense interest in the Christian faith were associated with enthusiasm.19 This type of enthusiasm was suspect and linked with the Evangelical movement.20 Two distinct characteristics of Evangelism were its belief in Divine Providence and strict adherence to keeping Sunday free from work and pleasure. Evangelism was more of an attitude towards religion than a certain faith with a particular doctrine. It drew followers from many different religions in England.21

The major impact of the Evangelical movement on English society was not felt until the 1790's.22 Towards the end of the eighteenth century this type of worship had become more accepted. Evangelicals began to be perceived as a major revolutionary force.23 Evangelism had also acquired a voice in certain political groups. These people viewed the movement as the "ultimate solution" of social distress.24 The efforts of the Evangelicals were initially directed towards the abolition of the slave trade and slavery.25

Wilberforce became part of a group known as the Clapham Sect.26 This group was associated with the Evangelical movement and consisted of a few men and women who were profoundly religious. They were committed to making changes for the good of people within English society and worked toward improving human conditions. The Clapham Sect was moved by
The members of the Clapham community were deeply committed to living as Christians. The Clapham Sect was politically influential because many of the group were also members of Parliament. Many members of the Clapham community were passionately involved in the fight for abolition of the slave trade and slavery. This fight is often viewed as their greatest and most successful crusade. Wilberforce's membership in the Sect fostered his deep religious conviction and encouraged his commitment to the abolition of the slave trade.

As early as his teens, Wilberforce had been concerned about the state of slavery in the world. At the age of fourteen he had written a letter to a York newspaper condemning the slave trade. In 1786, Wilberforce was exposed to the Abolition Committee, a group of people dedicated to the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. William Pitt, the Clapham Sect, and the Abolition Committee all fostered Wilberforce's commitment to abolition. Wilberforce had found his political destiny: "God Almighty has set before me two great objects: the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners." From this point forward, Wilberforce was deeply committed to the Abolition movement.

The values of liberty, benevolence, and happiness were developed in eighteenth century English life and thought. Philosophically, as well as theologically this ideology was developed and reflected in the values of British culture. Contemporary philosophers generally praised the value of liberty, asserted benevolence as a "duty", and acclaimed happiness as useful. Inherent in these assertions, these same influential thinkers also condemned the slave trade and slavery. Liberty was a value to people on both sides of the slave trade issue. Benevolence was the norm at the heart of every theological message. The general belief was that happiness was the result of
practicing benevolence. Benevolence and happiness were the major elements of the eighteenth century definition of "goodness."

These values of liberty, benevolence, and happiness were reflected in the literature of the time also. In fact visitors to England during the eighteenth century were quoted as stating, "Liberty is echoed in all their assemblies." In Richard Savage's "Epistle to Sir Robert Walpole," he gives attention to the value of liberty. In a lengthy poem "Ode to Liberty," James Thomson traced the history of liberty. Samuel Johnson, literary master at this time, was extremely outspoken on the subject of the injustice of the slave trade. In one of his many pamphlets "Taxation No Tyranny," he writes "How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?"

The value of benevolence was also referred to in Thomson's "Ode to Liberty." Henry Fielding develops the presence of benevolence in Tom Jones. There is a sense of the value happiness that was derived from benevolence in the authors of the time. Happiness was thought to be the result of practicing goodness. Lord Shaftbury wrote in Characteristicks, an appealing picture of virtue and benevolence.

The anti-slavery message needed to reach the British public. The abolitionists needed to shock British society with the reality of the state of the slave trade. There were three main arguments that the abolitionist propaganda embraced: The slave trade was a denial of human rights, the slave trade was an insult to Christian feelings, and that the slave trade was of economic irrelevance. Both the spoken and the printed word were critical in influencing the conscience of the people. The result of this influence was public pressure on Parliament in the form of petitions against the slave trade, which was instrumental in eventually changing minds in Parliament.
The spoken word in the form of lectures and public addresses were able to reach every part of the nation. This was critical for the abolitionist cause. In 1787, Thomas Clarkson began a nation-wide lecture tour and he drew immense crowds to hear him speak on the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. A group of abolitionists formed the Agency Committee, which was responsible for 'reaching the public and arousing the national conscience about slavery' through lecture and public address. The anti-slavery lectures often lasted for hours at a time and were always attended by capacity crowds.

The Abolition Committee arranged for the production and distribution of pamphlets and books with the theme of anti-slavery, of notices in the Press, and even of Wedgewood china as part of the propaganda movement against the slave trade. Thomas Clarkson had written an award winning essay at Cambridge "Slavery and Commerce in the Human Species," that answered the question, "Is it right to make men slaves against their will?" The first pamphlet to be distributed was a shorter version of Clarkson's essay. Other pamphlets included letters by Rev. R. B. Nicholls and John Newton in which they attacked the slave trade and descriptions of the horrors of the trade. John Wesley's book Thoughts Upon Slavery, was distributed widely by the Abolition Committee in 1787. The newspapers, General Evening Post and Lloyd's Evening Post published many items favourable to abolition. The editors of the Edinburgh Review and the Westminster Review were sympathetic to the cause of abolition, therefore antislavery writing was able to pervade the pages. The famous china maker, Josiah Wedgewood produced a cameo of a negro in chains, with the Abolition Committee's seal, "Am I not a Man and a Brother?" He set the cameo into snuff boxes, bracelets, and ornamental pins and distributed them liberally.
Prose and verse helped raise the conscience and develop an anti-slavery conviction in British society. Besides the appeal to the values of liberty, benevolence, and happiness in literature, anti-slavery themes were also reflected in literature. The expression of these themes in literature lent to a heightened awareness of slavery.

Contemporary prose, poetry, and drama made it possible for people to imagine what it was like to be a slave. James Ramsey, a formal naval surgeon was the first to write a book about the conditions of the Middle Passage. There were also written accounts by slaves describing the middle passage and even a popular song that the slaves sung;

Oh my good friend Mr. Wilberforce make we free
God Almighty thank ye! God Almighty Thank ye!
God Almighty, make we free.

A passionate poet and abolitionist, William Cowper wrote a popular and moving poem titled 'The Negro's Complaint', which the abolitionists were quick to circulate. James Scott depicts the anti-slavery sentiment in his 'Odes on Several Subjects', in which he shows a contrast between an ideal primitive state and the state of slavery. Isaac Bickerstaffe's 'The Padlock', became an extremely popular play in which a black servant Mungo, condemned the slave trade and slavery.

The opposition was also busy during this flood of anti-slavery propaganda. In their attempt to agitate against abolition, the trade defenders did not even attempt to morally justify the slave trade. Rather they embraced three central arguments: that the slave trade was of economic importance to the nation, that abolition of the slave trade would ruin the British marine, and that the slave trade was in the nation's best interest to continue it.
opposition was able to commit more money to the campaign, but had less
talent and less powerful arguments than the abolitionists.66

James Boswell was one who argued that slavery had always existed and
was a condition of mankind. He argued that to abolish the trade would be
cruel to the "African Savages" because slavery saves them from massacre and
bondage in their own country.67 Boswell contributed often to the opposition
campaign. In a contribution to The Gentleman's Magazine, Boswell
compares the condition of English laborers with the condition of the slaves.
In the poem Boswell makes the life of the Englishmen to appear miserable
and struggling. He compares this to the existence to the slaves which are
represented as happy, healthy, provided for, and peaceful.68

The West India Committee was a group of merchants and planters that
united to counter-attack the abolitionists.69 This committee organized the
print campaign for the opposition. The trade defenders held many meetings;
they put together newspapers and pamphlets daily that warned the public of
impending ruin if the slave trade was abolished.70 The opposition also
sought favorable publicity in newspapers such as the Public Ledger, Star,
Whitehall, and Argus, by providing material for the papers and writing many
letters to the editors.71 Many pamphlets were distributed to the public and
Members of Parliament refuting the arguments of the abolitionists; most
notable was the pamphlet entitled "An Abstract of the Evidence favourable to
the Africa trade."72 Also distributed to Members of Parliament was a
pamphlet by Jesse Foot, "A Defence of the Planters in the West Indies."73 The
opposition was able to present some pro-slavery petitions to Parliament, but
very few compared to the number of anti-slavery petitions.74

It is interesting to see that even the opposition perceived Wilberforce
and his rhetoric as a threat to the slave trade. "A Descriptive Poem of the
Town and Trade of Liverpool," was a verse written by trade defender, J. Walker:

Let none too rash condemn the Afric trade,
Till once the subject they have duly weighed;
The Moors are purchased from their native shore,
And sold for slaves, were they not as before?
'Tis proved their state is better'd - not made worse,
Then slav'ry is a blessing, not a curse.
Oh, might the Muse, her suffrages subjoin,
To those who've thank'd Lord Penrhyn and Gascoyne,
Who stood to staunch to prop the Afric trade,
When Wilberforce its condemnation read.75

Although the opposition put up a good battle, the trade defenders lost the propaganda campaign.76 The opposition propaganda lacked the intensity and the volume of that of the abolitionists' propaganda.77

The issue of the slave trade had unsuccessfully been proposed to Parliament before and had never passed the opportunity to be debated. Those who opposed the trade of slaves dared not take up the fight for abolition. In fact, Edmund Burke had considered taking up the cause of abolition in Parliament, but found the qualifications too daunting.78 Perhaps it was viewed as a hopeless cause, given that it was common knowledge that the majority of the House and King George III were against the idea of abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. Eventually Prime Minister Pitt assigned a Privy Council committee to collect evidence considering the slave trade. This Privy Council Report was published and presented to Parliament in April of 1789. It contained printed facts taken on the trade and drew no conclusions or made no opinions on the trade. During the April 1788 session of Parliament Pitt
introduced and had passed a motion, that bound the House to consider and inquire into the issue of the slave trade. The abolitionists now needed a Member of Parliament to speak on their behalf on the issue of slave trade.

The qualifications for parliamentary leader of the abolitionists were daunting. The Abolition Committee knew that, politically, such a leader ought to be an Independent of reputation important enough to secure the ear and sympathy of the great. He needed to be an orator able to arouse pity, anger, and disgust and capable of speaking often on the subject of abolition without boring the House. He needed to have the ability of mind to master a complicated and detailed subject on both sides of the issue. He needed to be prepared to devote himself, his time, and his money to the cause of abolition. Wilberforce fulfilled all these requirements.

Oratory was a highly regarded art in Parliament and Members expected to be impressed as well as convinced when another Member spoke. The style, the grace of diction and phrases, the ability to make classical allusions to illustrate the theme were just as important as the soundness of an orator's arguments. Wilberforce was noted and respected throughout England as an eloquent and dynamic orator. As early as grammar school when Wilberforce was a young boy in Hull, his skill as a speaker did not go unnoticed. According to his school master, Isaac Milner,

> Even then his elocution was so remarkable that we used to set him on a table, and make him read aloud as an example to the other boys. . . . his mind was vigorous . . . he had a voice of unusual range and beauty, and his head master would stand him on a table to read to the rest of the class . . . because of his clarity of diction.
His natural ability as an orator owed much to the exceptional sweetness and range of tone in his voice. A Parliamentary reporter described Wilberforce's oratory as "so distinct and melodious that the most hostile ears hung on them delighted". Prime Minister Pitt said that Wilberforce possessed, "the greatest natural eloquence of all men I ever knew."

When Wilberforce was debating for the Yorkshire county seat in 1784, a newspaper reported,

Mr. Wilberforce made a most argumentative and eloquent speech, which was listened to with most eager attention . . . there was such an exquisite choice of expression, and pronounced with such rapidity. . . .

James Boswell MP, present at the debate was quoted as stating, "I saw a little fellow on a table speaking, a perfect shrimp. But presently the shrimp swelled into a whale." After Wilberforce's first proposal for abolition to Parliament, Edmund Burke was quoted as stating,

. . . he thought the House, the nation, and all Europe, under very great and serious obligation to the hon. gentleman, for having brought the subject forward in a manner the most masterly, impressive, and eloquent, Principles so admirable, laid down with so much order and force, were equal to anything he had ever heard in modern oratory; and perhaps were not excelled by anything to be met with since Demosthenes.

Wilberforce's training, his religious and moral interests, his humanitarianism, and his genius as an orator had become obvious to the abolitionists of England.

Wilberforce carefully studied the Privy Council Report and devoted time to gathering and mastering the facts and evidence on the slave trade.
Clarkson and Wilberforce constantly gathered and analyzed their evidence against the slave trade, while also checking and analyzing the opposition's evidence. Wilberforce had a gift for exploring both sides of the issue. As the debate neared, he devoted all his time to the slave trade. He even worked on Sundays, which was the ultimate sacrifice for Wilberforce.

On May 12, 1789 William Wilberforce made the first official proposal for the abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade. Wilberforce came with no other intention than to persuade the majority to take action-to vote for abolition. He held the attention of the House for three hours. After the speech he received enthusiastic applause and the support of Pitt, Burke, and Fox. Wilberforce had made an impact on his audience and swayed members on both sides of the issue, even though most of the House were still uneasy.

Although the proposal was tabled until the next Parliament resumed, it was noteworthy that the issue was finally heard and debated. Klingberg claims that if eloquence could have abolished the slave trade, this first debate would have done it. The newspapers and quarterlies covered this monumental event. This proposal was eventually defeated but Wilberforce continued to propose abolition for the next eighteen years until it was finally abolished in 1807. There had never been a more devastating attack on the conventional arguments for the slave trade than Wilberforce's speeches.
Works Cited


2 Lean 10-11.

3 Lean 13.

4 Lean 22.


6 McGee 101.

7 McGee 115.

8 Furneaux 21.

9 Lean 18.


11 Lean 18. Wilberforce and Pitt were regulars at this club and usually at the center of lively discussions and entertainment.


13 Lean 20. Wilberforce had inherited Lauriston House, the Wimbledon villa of his Uncle and Aunt, William and Hannah Wilberforce. He resided there while Parliament was in session.

14 Lean 34.

accompanied Wilberforce and his sister and mother on vacation the year of Wilberforce's conversion. Owen identifies Milner as one of the most prominent Evangelical clergy during this time.

16 Wilberforce and Wilberforce 89.
17 Lean 35.
18 Lean 40.
19 McConnell 163.
20 Owen 323.
21 Furneaux 44.
22 Owen 324.
23 Owen 324.
24 Furneaux 44.
26 Francis John McConnell, Evangelicals, Revolutionists, and Idealists (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1972): 158-159. Clapham was a country district not far from London. Many of the members lived here. This is where members of the group most often met.

27 McConnell 163.
28 Plumb 159.
29 J. H. Plumb, England in the Eighteenth Century, 1714-1814 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, Ltd., 1968): 159-161. Besides the abolition of the slave trade and slavery, education and missionary work abroad were the other major concerns of the Clapham Sect. The Clapham group set up schools for the poor, both academic and Sunday schools.

30 Anstey 250.
Hutcheson, Montesquieu, Burke, Ferguson, Beattie, Wallace, Blackstone, Paley, and Adam Smith were the contemporary European philosophers that Anstey included in his review. Also see: Kriegal 444-445. Kriegal discusses Hutcheson, Burke, Smith and also includes Hume in his discussion.

Anstey 119. Also see: Klingberg 34-35.

Kriegal 437.

Kreigal 432, 444.

Anstey 139, 144.

Anstey 144.

Anstey 142.

Anstey 142.

Klingberg 42-44.

Anstey 143.

Anstey 143.

Anstey 144.

Anstey 144.

Lean 1. The extent of the slave trade and the estimated number of slaves traded is a matter of debate among historians. But clearly, England had become the leading trader of slaves by the early 1700's. Bristol, London, and especially Liverpool were the major slaving ports in England.

Walvin, Propaganda 64.
From 1788-1838 the flow of abolitionist petitions was ceaseless and could not be ignored.

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49 Walvin, *Propaganda* 51. Also see: Drescher, *Public Opinion* 25. From 1788-1838 the flow of abolitionist petitions was ceaseless and could not be ignored.

50 Walvin, *Propaganda* 51.


52 Walvin, *Propaganda* 55.


54 Furneaux 70.

55 Coupland, *Anti-Slavery* 93.


57 Furneaux 95.

58 Anstey 152.

59 Anstey 142.

60 Klingberg 60-66. Also see: Lean 6.


62 Furneaux 94. This is the last stanza from Cowper's poem.

Deem our nation brutes no longer,

Till some reason ye shall find

Worthier of regard and stronger

Than the colour of our kind.

Slaves of gold, whose sordid dealings

Tarnish all your boasted powers,

Prove that you have human feelings,

Ere you proudly question ours!

63 Anstey 149.
Anstey 149-150.

Anstey 293.


Klingberg 43.


Turley 53.

Wilberforce and Wilberforce 219.

Anstey 292.

Anstey 293-294.

Anstey 294.

Turley 53.

Anstey 295.

Anstey 295. Also see: Furneaux 94.

Anstey 295.

Furneaux 71.

Owen 255.

Furneaux 71.

Furneaux 12.

Wilberforce and Wilberforce 4.

Pollock 31.

Pollock 31.

Lean 32.

Lean 27-28.

Lean 28.

Hansard's 68.
89McConnell 167.
90Furneaux 93.
91Pollock 31.
92Furneaux 97.
93Pollock 89.
94Pollock 91.

96Klingberg 61.

98McConnell 173.
CHAPTER THREE
Analysis

When Wilberforce challenged his audience to only take slaves that have been "fairly, honestly, and uprightly enslaved," they should have recognized the ironic implications of Wilberforce's proposal. His audience knew that Wilberforce was just the sort of agitator that the abolition cause needed. The abolitionists and the opposition both suspected Wilberforce and his rhetoric to be the beginning of the end of the Atlantic slave trade. To understand why this was true, this analysis will demonstrate that irony was essential to Wilberforce's speech as proof that the Atlantic slave trade was at odds with the cultural norms that Britain claimed to value and that abolition of the slave trade was the only humane answer for Britain.

The nature of the slave trade was rich in real-life irony that provided Wilberforce with the means to persuade his audience. The existence of the slave trade in a nation that claimed the norms of liberty, benevolence, and happiness embodied an ironic situation. Out of this irony grew many real-life ironies. The nature of the slave trade created opportunities for Wilberforce to utilize these ironies in his speech to Parliament.

I will analyze Wilberforce's speech using Kuafer and Neuwirth's perspective on foregrounding cultural norms and ironic communication. Foregrounding is a strategy that activates norms that already exist in a culture. The following analysis identifies the norms that Wilberforce foregrounded and how he activated these norms. Wilberforce foregrounded the cultural norms of liberty, benevolence, and happiness which he believed to prevail over any other norms. He did this by straightforwardly asserting and violating these norms. Wilberforce used this foregrounding strategy in two
ways. First, by straightforwardly asserting and violating norms followed by the irony. Secondly, by foregrounding the norm and violating the norm in the irony he uses itself. The audience understood the ironies that Wilberforce utilized because they accepted and agreed with the norms that he foregrounded.5

Liberty

Liberty was a norm that was valued by British society and it was reflected in many aspects of their culture. To eighteenth century Britain, liberty embodied the rights of freedom and justice.6 Wilberforce foregrounded the norm of liberty by using the word itself, by showing how the practice of the slave trade stripped both negroes and British marine of their liberty, and by using words that violated what liberty implied.

As a means of foregrounding liberty, Wilberforce provided a petition that had been written to Captain Parry from a group of British sea captains. The captured sea masters were being held for ransom by an African chief for the release of the chief's own relations. The sea masters wanted their freedom so in the petition, they begged for the release of those relations that had been enslaved. Wilberforce referred to the petition in which the sea masters described how they "... carried off from Africa thirty of the king's children and relations... who retaliated by seizing five English captains."7 The document even used the word liberty to ask for their freedom: "We... [do] endeavour to regain our liberty..."8 The petition continues:

These princes and chiefs, who, by captain Bibby's imprudence, had lost all their families and children, propose, however, to satisfy every demand, and to give these captains their liberty.9

By using these instances Wilberforce foregrounded the norm of liberty
by referring to a situation that asserts what liberty implies. Wilberforce asked the audience to notice the "equitable spirit in which this trade is carried on."\textsuperscript{10} By actually using the words liberty and freedom and describing a situation that implies the characteristics of liberty, Wilberforce strategically foregrounded the norm of liberty for his audience.

Exposing the high mortality rate of the slaves and of the British marine that worked the slave ships was another means by which Wilberforce foregrounded the value of liberty.\textsuperscript{11} He employed mortality rates among slaves to demonstrate the ultimate violation of liberty: "Death, at least, is a sure ground of evidence, and the proportion of death will not only confirm, but if possible will even aggravate our suspicion. . . ."\textsuperscript{12} Wilberforce argued that the slave trade had been the cause of a mortality rate of 50 per cent in the negroes.\textsuperscript{13} Moreover, how could liberty prevail when even the British marine had experienced an increased mortality rate as a direct cause of the slave trade: "The influence of the trade on our marine . . . instead of being a benefit to our sailors as some have ignorantly argued, I do assert it is their grave."\textsuperscript{14} Wilberforce foregrounded the norm of liberty by revealing these higher rates of death, which ultimately took away one's rights of liberty.

Wilberforce purposely used words such as "oppressed" and "force" which violated the norm of liberty and freedom.\textsuperscript{15} This violation foregrounded the characteristics associated with liberty, because these words implied that the state of the slaves did not conform to this norm. Wilberforce used these words to describe the state of the slaves. They are "oppressed with disease . . . forced to dance by the terror of the lash . . . force[d] . . . to eat."\textsuperscript{16} These words violate what the value of liberty implied. By using these words to describe the slave trade, Wilberforce applied the norm of liberty by
suggesting that the present state of the slave trade failed to meet with the accepted standards of Britain's concept of liberty.

**Benevolence**

Besides the value of liberty, benevolence was a value that guided many of the actions of British people. An inclination to perform acts of kindness and goodness toward others was seen as a virtue. Some even believed that by doing charitable acts one could earn one's soul into heaven.\(^{17}\) Wilberforce foregrounded the norm of benevolence throughout the speech. He did this by discussing the practice of the slave trade, discussing the treatment of the slaves and British marine, and by addressing the humanity of men and women.

Wilberforce repeatedly described the slave trade as wicked and evil which applied a norm of kindness and goodness by suggesting that the slave trade failed to meet these norms. This strategy foregrounded the value of benevolence by using words that violated what benevolence meant to the British people. Wilberforce provided evidence that showed the slave trade to be evil, unkind, and inhumane. Wilberforce argued that the slave trade carried "violence and desolation" and "depopulation and devastation" wherever it was practiced.\(^{18}\) "A trade founded in iniquity, and carried on as this was, must be abolished..."\(^{19}\) When Wilberforce asserted that the slave trade was detrimental to the British marine, at one point he referred to the trade as ". . . shameful practices . . . unwarrantable practices . . . the nefarious practices of the African trade . . ."\(^{20}\) By consistently referring to the trade in this manner throughout the speech, Wilberforce kept the norm of benevolence foregrounded in the minds of his audience.
Furthermore, Wilberforce used the word 'treatment' throughout the speech which also kept the norm of benevolence foregrounded. Benevolence embodied kind and humane treatment toward other people. Given Britain's ideal of benevolence, how the slaves were treated should have been a concern of their nation. He asked his audience if they thought "that there is no hard treatment of the slaves in the West Indies?" Wilberforce provided a variety of evidence to show the "savage treatment" of the slaves. He also claimed that some of the arguments of the opposition failed "with respect to the treatment of slaves in the West Indies. Wilberforce argued that "an improvement in the system of treating them" must be implemented and that the health and multiplication of slaves depended on their "good treatment." Given their value of benevolence, how the slaves were treated should have been a concern to British people.

Wilberforce knew that the norm of benevolence was so embedded in British ideals that he ended his proposal to Parliament by activating this norm one final time: "Wherever the sun shines, let us go round the world with him, diffusing our beneficence." By asserting a form of the word benevolence, Wilberforce has foregrounded the duty of performing kind and good acts for people. Wilberforce left the characteristics of benevolence that were conventionally applied to this norm at the forefront of his audience's mind, by concluding with this statement.

Happiness

Happiness could be attained by actively assuring liberty and living a benevolent life. By performing acts of kindness and goodness toward each other, the British attained a state of pleasure and joy. They actively strived for the ideal of happiness. To activate this norm of happiness in his audience,
Wilberforce used such words as horrid, wretched, and misery to describe the nature and condition of the slave trade and frequently used the word "happiness" as foregrounding strategies in his speech to Parliament.

By using the words 'misery' and 'wretched' throughout the proposal, Wilberforce foregrounded the norm of happiness by implying that the present state of some people did not measure up to the nation's standards of happiness. When Wilberforce discussed the transit of the slaves he began, "This I confess, in my own opinion, is the most wretched part of the whole subject. So much misery condensed in so little room . . ."26 He claimed that the slaves struggled under every kind of "wretchedness!"27 As Wilberforce described the Middle Passage he asserted that the slaves were "so wrung with misery at leaving their country," that they sang "songs of lamentation upon their departure. . . ."28 He also argued that the trade had reduced Africa to a "wretched situation" and it was Britain's fault that Africa had resorted to "wretched brutishness and barbarity."29 Wilberforce strategically used these adjectives to apply the norm of happiness.

By using the word 'happiness' Wilberforce applied the conventional qualities associated with the norm of happiness. This strategy foregrounded the norm of happiness. He argued that the "happiness of [Africa's] millions of inhabitants" was influenced by the interference of Britain. Later in the speech he claimed that while "all other countries have for some centuries past been advancing in happiness and civilization,"30 while Africa had been stunted by the influence of the slave trade. At the end of the speech Wilberforce argued that "abolition is the only possible stimulus whereby a regard to population, and consequently to happiness of the negroes, can be effectually excited. . . ."31
Wilberforce's rhetorical situation on May 12, 1789, was a foregrounding strategy in and of itself. Because the abolitionists perceived the Atlantic slave trade as a problem in their nation, Wilberforce's proposal to Parliament was an action to correct the nation's behavior. Therefore, Wilberforce's speech for abolition foregrounded the conventional norms of moral and humane behavior. He invoked liberty, benevolence, and happiness when he took action to correct the nation's behavior with this proposal for total abolition. This suggested that the existing state of the nation, specifically the practice of the slave trade, did not measure up to the nation's norms that they claimed to embrace.

Instances of Irony

This analysis also identifies Wilberforce's use of irony as a rhetorical strategy to demonstrate to his audience that the slave trade directly conflicted with Britain's allegiance to certain cultural values. He employed real-life instances of irony that contradicted the norms that he foregrounded throughout the speech. He also used sarcastic ironies as a foregrounding strategy of certain norms. Wilberforce's rhetorical use of irony was fundamental in preserving what were the accepted norms in English society.

The nature and practice of the slave trade created in itself ironic instances that served as evidence for Wilberforce. Wilberforce engaged refutative ironies as a rhetorical strategy in this proposal to abolish the Atlantic slave trade. To understand and appreciate the irony, the audience must agree with the ironist about the foregrounded norms. His ironic statements were understood by his audience because he foregrounded the norms of liberty, benevolence, and happiness which he knew to be the overriding norms of British culture. By foregrounding these norms, it
allowed the audience to interpret and understand the ironies that Wilberforce engaged.

The most ironic, real-life situation that Wilberforce employed as evidence was governor Parry's petitions to lord Sydney about the "monstrous abuses" that Captain Bibby and his men had committed. Governor Parry had written to lord Sydney claiming that Parliament intervention was needed in the slave trade because of the evil practices taking place. In particular he mentioned the case of Captain Bibby and his men, in which Bibby had kidnapped an African king's relations. In retaliation the African king's men had captured five English sea masters and the following petition was presented to governor Parry:

I James M'Gauty, I William Willoughby, &c. being on shore on the execution of our business, were seized by a body of armed natives, who lay in ambush in order to take us. This they effected, and dragged us to their town, where they treated us in a most savage and barbarous manner, and loaded us with irons.

These same men claimed that it was Captain Bibby's "imprudence" at having carried off thirty of the king's families and children, as the reason they were being held captive. Wilberforce capitalized on the irony of this particular situation.

When Wilberforce used this petition as evidence in his speech, his most blatant example of irony was played out in the speech. Wilberforce's ironic comments follow in bold print:

I James M'Gauty, I William Willoughby, &c. being on shore on the execution of our business, were seized by a body of armed natives, who lay in ambush in order to take us. "What villains
must these Africans be, to seize so designedly such friends as the British subjects, and this merely with a view to get back their children!" This they effected, and dragged us to their town, where they treated us in a most savage and barbarous manner, and loaded us with irons. "Observe, Sir, the indignant spirit of these captains: British freemen to be loaded with irons! White men in custody of these barbarous negroes? ... Here, then we have a picture of the equitable spirit in which this trade is carried on."36

Given the norms that Wilberforce had foregrounded the audience should have understood and seen the hypocrisy that this slave trade had created. This particular situation violated every ideal that British culture embodied; the value of one's liberty, the duty of kindness and benevolence, and the state of happiness. Wilberforce intended to have the audience feel convicted through their part in this business that ripped away from other human beings the very norms they valued.

Wilberforce also employed the testimony of Liverpool delegate, Mr Norris, as ironic evidence. Mr. Norris had testified in front of the privy council about the state of slaves during the Middle Passage. Mr. Norris' report led one to believe that the slaves were thankful to have been taken away from their families and country and that they enjoyed the trip away from their homeland. "They have several meals a day... their apartments are perfumed with frankincense and limejuice... The song and dance are promoted."37 Wilberforce provided documented evidence that argued otherwise:

... the scantiness, both of water and provision ... Mr Norris talks of frankincense and limejuice; when the surgeons tell
you the slaves are stowed so close, that there is not room to
tread among them. . . . the stench was intolerable. The song and
dance says, Mr. Norris, are promoted. The truth is, that for the
sake of exercise, these miserable wretches, loaded with
chains, oppressed with disease and wretchedness, are forced to
dance by the terror of the lash. As to their singing . . . their
songs are songs of lamentation upon their departure, which,
while they sing, are always in tears. . . .

Wilberforce capitalized on the ironic nature of the slave trade. Its practice and
existence contradicted British values they claimed to embrace. To take part in
a business that kidnapped other humans, carried them away from their
homeland, severely treated them, which caused misery and mournfulness in
these enslaved humans was completely absurd and hypocritical given the
nation's values. Wilberforce argued that he found it unbelievable that
providence "... should so have constituted the world, as to make one part of
it depend for its existence on the depopulation and devastation of another." Again, Wilberforce intended his audience to indict themselves for their part
in the Atlantic slave trade, through the strategy of irony.

Certainly it was not Wilberforce's intention that France adopt the trade,
but as France was the 'natural enemy' of Britain he knew his audience would
have understood the ironic nature of cursing France to adopt the slave trade:

If the trade be such as I have described it, and if the House is
also convinced of this - if it be both wicked and impolitic, we
cannot wish a greater mischief to France than that she adopt
it.40

Wilberforce had just vividly described the nature of the slave trade as wicked
and wretched which took away the liberty of those people immediately
involved. Clearly, such a trade violated the norms of liberty, benevolence, and happiness. Therefore, to suggest that France would take up such a "nefarious" practice would only be an embarrassment to France, since Britain had been enlightened enough to abolish the trade.

While Wilberforce discussed the transit of the slaves and painted an unhappy and unappealing picture, he used the testimony from Admiral Barrington that posed a curious situation to consider: "Admiral Barrington tells you, he has seen them look so happy that he has sometimes wished himself one of them." Wilberforce had already foregrounded the norm of happiness, as a state that British people desired. Therefore, the audience recognized this ironic testimony to be at odds with their nation's values and beliefs. After Wilberforce described the slave trade as wretched and miserable, it was ironic that Admiral Barrington should wish to be a slave.

Furthermore, in the midst of describing the real-life ironies of the slave trade, Wilberforce often interjected his own sarcastic ironies. Using Booth's "steps of reconstruction" as an analytical tool, Wilberforce's audience surely recognized and understood his ironic intent. Booth argues that irony is most clear and persuasive when there is an ironic statement in the middle of literal and straightforward discussion. In the midst of his proposal Wilberforce interjected certain statements that the audience realized to be incongruent with what they and Wilberforce believed. Therefore, they rejected the literal meaning of his words and tried out various new meanings. Finally deciding that Wilberforce was being ironic.

Wilberforce was working at the height of irony when he referred to the trade merchants as "men of humanity." Men and women of humanity performed benevolent acts; they treated other human beings kindly and caringly. Wilberforce repeatedly referred to the slave merchants, of which
there were many in his audience, as men of humanity: "I will allow them, nay, I will believe them to be men of humanity." Wilberforce's audience recognized that the slave merchants, as described, did not measure up to his or Britain's standard of humanity, therefore violating his own norm of humanity. This sarcastic violation foregrounded the norm of benevolence.

When Wilberforce described Admiral Barrington's claim that he wished to be a slave because they seem so happy, Wilberforce stated:

The admiral's wish to be one of these slaves himself, proves perhaps that he was in an odd humour at the moment, or perhaps it might mean (for all the world knows his humanity) that he could wish to alleviate their sufferings by taking a share upon himself. . . .

Wilberforce also used as evidence a sea captain that had threatened one slave with the whip because her mourning and tears at leaving her country were too much for him to bear:

One captain (more humane as I should conceive him, therefore than the rest) threatened one of the women with a flogging, because the mournfulness of her song was too painful for his feelings.

Wilberforce intended for his audience to see the curious position these captains and merchants fell into when they were praised for their humanity, yet took part in unbenevolent practices. By praising these men for their humanity, Wilberforce indicted all those directly and indirectly involved in the slave trade.

One theme of ironic expressions that Wilberforce maintained throughout the speech was that of not wanting to accuse or blame people in the audience. Again, using Booth's "steps of reconstruction," Wilberforce's
audience comprehended his ironic intent, with these expressions. At the start of the proposal when Wilberforce described the wicked practices of the slave trade, he referred the audience back to the privy council’s report:

This, their policy, was soon put in practice, and the scene of carnage which followed was such, that it is better to refer gentlemen to the privy council’s report, than to agitate their minds by dwelling on it.

It certainly was Wilberforce’s intention to agitate the audience’s minds to have them rethink and reevaluate their feelings about the slave trade. Wilberforce also asserted, "I mean not to accuse any one . . . by throwing the blame on others. . . ." He maintained this line of irony: "Here I must make one observation, which I hope may be done without offence to any one. . . . I mean not to suspect their credibility . . ." "I will not accuse the Liverpool merchants . . ." "I do not accuse . . ." and "I mean not to blame the West Indians. . . ." Having foregrounded the norms of liberty, benevolence, and happiness Wilberforce intended to agitate his audience into blaming, accusing, and indicting themselves.

Conclusion

Wilberforce’s strategy of foregrounding norms put the prevailing cultural values actively in the audience’s mind. Therefore, his rhetorical use of irony should have indicted the audience for their nation’s part in the Atlantic slave trade. When the existence and practice of the slave trade was scrutinized under these norms and ironies, the opposition’s arguments against abolition fell apart. In the final chapter, I will evaluate how Wilberforce’s foregrounding strategy and use of refutative ironies broke down the opposition’s arguments.
Works Cited

1Hansard's 62.
2Kriegal 441. Williams 181.
3Kaufer and Neuwirth 30. A norm can be foregrounded by either violating or straightforwardly asserting the norm.
4See: Chapter One for a complete explanation of how a norm is foregrounded through straightforwardly asserting or violating it.
5Kaufer and Neuwirth 35. Had the audience not accepted and agreed with the foregrounded norms, they would not have understood the ironies that Wilberforce utilized.
6See: Chapter Two for a more thorough discussion of liberty, as represented in British culture.
7Hansard's 57.
8Hansard's 58
9Hansard's 58.
10Hansard's 57.
11Hansard's 49-52, 55-56.
12Hansard's 47.
13Hansard's 48.
14Hansard's 55.
15Hansard's 47.
16Hansard's 47.
17See: Chapter Two for a more thorough discussion of benevolence in eighteenth century British culture.
Booth 10-14. To be able to decide if the speaker has meant to be ironic and what the meaning is, Booth provides the four steps of reconstruction. First, the audience
must reject the literal meaning because they recognize some incongruity among the words and something else that they know. Next, alternative interpretations of the words are tried out. Third, the audience must make a decision about the speaker's knowledge and beliefs. Finally, the audience must choose a new meaning for the speaker's words that they feel secure about. These four steps may be used in the most simple or most complex of cases as an analytical device.

43Booth 73.
44Hansard's 45.
45Hansard's 52.
46Hansard's 47.
47Booth 10-14.
48Hansard's 59.
49Hansard's 42.
50Hansard's 44.
51Hansard's 45.
52Hansard's 50.
CHAPTER FOUR
Evaluation

Summary of Irony Analysis

This analysis identifies how Wilberforce used irony to manage the situational constraints in the most effective manner without directly offending the king and Parliament. By using refutative ironies in his May 12, 1789 proposal, Wilberforce was able to indict the audience at least enough to insure further debate in Parliament. This analysis identifies how Wilberforce used the foregrounding strategy in order to employ refutative ironies. By identifying these norms and ironies that Wilberforce's audience accepted and understood, one can see how the arguments that the opposition embraced fell into a curious position once they comprehended Wilberforce's techniques. This caused Wilberforce's audience to at least want to rethink and deepen their understanding of the slave trade issue further instead of immediately rejecting the proposal for abolition. Therefore, Parliament moved to resume debate on the Atlantic slave trade issue at the next session.

As refutative ironist, Wilberforce foregrounded norms that he was certain the audience believed to be the overriding norms of British culture. Wilberforce represented the issues of the opponents as sensitively as possible, only to show that their arguments and issues betrayed incongruities. He addressed the concerns of the trade defenders by conceding to their fears that the abolitionists had not considered the economic ruin that abolition would cause, that the slave trade provided many seamen with their livelihood, and that France might gain economic and powerful advantage by Britain's loss. He then provided specific words and phrases, instances, and evidence to refute the opposition's concerns. Wilberforce's purpose in each case was to
foreground the norms of liberty, benevolence, and happiness as the main ideals from which to assess the issue of the slave trade. By foregrounding these norms, the audience was able to understand the ironies that Wilberforce employed. This strategy reflects Wilberforce's gamble that the audience would not fail to recognize and understand the curious position they fell into when asked to defend the slave trade under the norms of liberty, benevolence, and happiness. The refutative ironies caused the audience to indict themselves for their part in the Atlantic slave trade. When the opposition's arguments were scrutinized under these norms and ironies, their arguments fell apart. Wilberforce shook the ground that the opposition stood on enough to have Parliament want to continue to debate the issue of abolition at the next session, something that had never happened prior to this speech.3

This use of irony exposed the hypocrisy of the opposition's arguments when they agreed to assess the arguments by the accepted cultural norms. The opposition arguments that Wilberforce identified and addressed were that abolition would financially devastate Britain's economy, that abolition would ruin the British marine, and that France would take up the trade if Britain abolished the slave trade, the same arguments identified in the opposition propaganda.4 Each of these arguments failed, through Wilberforce's strategic use of foregrounding cultural norms and refutative ironies.

The Economic Argument

The opposition had reasons to be economically concerned. The mortality rate of the slaves was about fifty per cent and the slave merchants and owners argued that they needed a continual fresh import of slaves to
replace the diseased and dying slaves each year. Wilberforce agreed with their argument. The disproportion of the sexes did not allow the slaves to naturally reproduce. The disorders and diseases that the slaves contracted during their transit claimed the lives of many of the slaves. The excessive labor and malnutrition of the slaves contributed to the need for more slaves. The immoral manner in which the slaves were left to live was also a factor in their mortality rate. Wilberforce provided evidence that proved the opposition's concerns. His purpose was to represent the opposition's argument as sympathetically as possible. But in doing so, Wilberforce foregrounded the norms of liberty, benevolence, and happiness from which to assess the economic issue. When the slaves were taken captive and shipped to an unfamiliar home against their will, many contracted diseases and died. This foregrounded the cultural norms. The slaves were taken captive, they were not free and entitled to liberty. The slaves were overworked and underfed, they were not treated well or happy. By foregrounding these norms the opposition should have recognized the refutative irony in assessing the slave trade under these norms.

Wilberforce reviewed the opponents' position that if the slave merchants and owners would provide better living conditions for the slaves, treat the slaves more kindly and more humanely, and provide the slaves with the rights of marriage and church worship, that the slaves would naturally reproduce, would be healthier, and would be happier. Therefore the mortality rate would decrease and there would not be the need for fresh import of slaves, thus decreasing the risk of financial ruin to the economy. The very reasons that the mortality rate of the slaves was so high, were the very practices that violated the norms that the English people held dear. But through the use of refutative ironies, Wilberforce revealed that the
economic concerns of the opposition conflicted with the accepted values of liberty, benevolence, and happiness. The best solution would be to abolish the trade and give the slaves their liberty. Abolition could actually prove to be profitable for the merchants. When the slave owners realized that there would not be the new import of slaves to replace those lost, humanity would have to be introduced into the system.

Improvement in the system of treating [the slaves] will infallibly be effected, an assiduous care of their health and of their morals, marriage institutions, and many other things will take place; because they will be absolutely necessary. Births will thus be increased naturally. Each generation will then improve upon the former, and thus the West Indies themselves eventually profit by the abolition of the slave trade.

Wilberforce argued that better treatment of the slaves would cause the population of the slaves to naturally increase. Better treatment and kindness towards the slaves would allow them to have a more pleasant and happy existence. It was ironic that the opposition should have been economically concerned at the expense of the mistreated and miserable slaves.

The Argument of the Ruin of the British Marine

The opposition argued that destruction of the British marine would occur along with abolition. They claimed that the slave trade was a benefit to the sailors and provided many men with jobs. In this speech, Wilberforce assented and confirmed this fact and he verified that initially the slave ships would leave home 'strong handed' with British seamen. Supposedly by providing many seamen with jobs, homes, and means for supporting
themselves, this gave seamen the freedom to live how they chose and to have the freedom to do what made them happy.\textsuperscript{14} Again, Wilberforce's purpose was to foreground the norms of liberty, benevolence, and happiness as the vantages from which to assess this argument.

But Wilberforce proceeded to provide specific evidence to show that on these slave voyages the seamen were treated cruelly by the sea captains which often resulted in death or being put off the ship at the next sight of land.\textsuperscript{15} Midway through the slaving voyages sea captains would discharge many seamen because of the expense of their wages. These British men were turned out on the first shore that they reached. These seamen were not seasoned to the "foreign" climate and no longer did they have means to support themselves. Many died or tried to gain employment wherever they were discharged off the ship, therefore all these men were lost to the British nation.\textsuperscript{16} Wilberforce provided evidence to show that more British seamen died in one year of the slave trade than in two years of all the other trades combined. He argued that the slave trade for these men was their "grave."\textsuperscript{17}

Wilberforce's goal was to show the irony of claiming that the slave trade was a benefit to the British seamen given the accepted cultural norms. He was demonstrating the irony that the opposition should even be concerned about the British seamens' ruin and misery. Destruction of the British marine would not have occurred with the abolition of the slave trade. Wilberforce argued that the slave trade was already destructive to the seamen. When given their liberty in a foreign land, the seamen usually died. The treatment of the seamen by their masters resulted in unhappiness and even death. The opposition should have understood the irony of the situation when prompted to defend the benefit of the slave trade to the British marine. It was ironic that the opposition should be concerned about the ruin of the
British marine, since the trade itself was already the ruin of British seamen by taking away their liberty, treating them cruelly, and inhibiting their happiness.

The Argument that France Would Take up the Trade

The opposition argued that France would take up the Atlantic slave trade if Britain were to abolish it. Britain did not want France to become more powerful and economically successful than them, especially at the expense of Britain. As refutative ironist, Wilberforce sympathized with the opposition on this point. He did not want France achieve economic or worldly advantage. He reminded his audience of the evils of the slave trade and that the trade was 'wicked and impolitic,' with the purpose of foregrounding liberty, benevolence, and happiness. Wilberforce's principle goal was to foreground these norms as the vantage by which to assess this argument.

By assessing this argument by these norms, the opposition understood the refutative irony that Wilberforce employed. Therefore, as France was the 'natural enemy' of Britain, Wilberforce asserted that if the slave trade existed as he had just described and proved it to be, that Britain should hope that France would take up the trade. Certainly Wilberforce did not wish France, or any other nation, to take up the slave trade. France was too "enlightened" a nation to take up such an evil trade, especially if Britain 'sees her folly' and resolves to give it up. It was ironic that the opposition should be concerned that France would gain economic and worldly advantage at the expense of the inhumane and immoral slave trade.

If one applies Kaufer and Neuwirth's perspective of refutative irony, one is able to see how the opposition's concerns and arguments are at odds
with the ideals they claim to value. This realization should have caused the people of Britain to think and rethink their stand on abolition. Wilberforce was sensitive to the opposition's arguments, yet in doing so, he specifically foregrounded the norms liberty, benevolence, and happiness by which to assess their arguments. The ironies that he used posed curious positions for the opposition when asked to consider the trade under these norms, therefore, proving that their arguments truly fell apart. Wilberforce's purpose for employing refutative ironies was to deepen the audience's understanding of the real issues at hand; not economics or pride, but the rights of liberty, benevolence, and happiness of all people. Wilberforce knew it was not likely that he could persuade the opposition to recant their views overnight. By way of ironic refutation, he meant to have the audience indict their part in the trade and to eventually condemn their nation's participation in the Atlantic slave trade.

Conclusion

Prior to May 12, 1789 there had been specific times in Parliament when abolition had been brought to the members attention, but it had never been considered. The House had either thrown out any motion immediately or rejected any petitions that asked for Parliament to consider the trade. Never had there been any official proposal for abolition or debate on the issue. Thus, Wilberforce's May 12, 1789 proposal to Parliament was the first official proposal for the abolition of the slave trade and the inception of the movement to officially abolish the Atlantic slave trade.

This thesis demonstrates how Wilberforce, as refutative ironist, was able to eloquently persuade his audience to further explore and reevaluate their stand on the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. By identifying and
foregrounding cultural norms that Wilberforce was certain prevailed over any other norms, he was able to successfully utilize refutative ironies to prove that the existence and the practice of the slave trade was at odds with these accepted norms of liberty, benevolence, and happiness. Wilberforce's use of refutative irony was essential in crumbling the opposition's arguments and pointing toward abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. His strategy was fundamental in the preservation of that which was valued in British life and human nature.

**Implications for Further Research**

This study paves other avenues for further research into Wilberforce's abolition rhetoric, abolition literature, and the use of ironic strategies in social movements. Further research into these areas could be a point of departure from which to assess these issues in more depth. Future studies in rhetoric, literature, and irony may want to focus on some the following issues.

Wilberforce's abolition rhetoric needs to be examined in more depth. Critical studies of all his Parliament rhetoric would be a revealing study given the claim that his rhetoric on May 12, 1789 was the inception of the campaign for the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade and eventually the emancipation of the slaves in 1833. Were foregrounding cultural norms and refutative ironies a rhetorical strategy that Wilberforce continued to use in his other abolition debates?

An in depth study of the anti-slavery theme in contemporary literature of the time would lend to interesting research. My research revealed that Wilberforce and other key figures in the campaign for abolition were referenced in the literature of the time. What other key elements of the abolition campaign were reflected in the literature? How did this theme
change, adjust, adapt itself as the campaign for abolition and emancipation progressed? How is this theme reflected in the different genres of literature?

Foregrounding cultural norms and the strategic use of irony in social movements would be a useful study. As seen in this analysis, irony can be particularly effective in indicting the opposition and deepening understanding of the issues in question. What role has irony played in past non-agitative social movements? How could this type of analysis be applied to the rhetoric of contemporary controversies of certain social movements? Are there identifiable cultural norms that can be foregrounded in order to have reinforcing, ridiculing, and refutative ironies work? How effective is this strategy in causing people to rethink and reevaluate their stands on the issues in question?

Each of these ideas and questions would foster an educational and informative study. Further research into any of the above issues would lend to a better understanding of rhetoric, literature, and irony.
Works Cited

1Hansard's 67.

2Hansard's 100. Debate respecting the slave trade was resumed on June 23, 1789.

3Coupland, Anti-Slavery 64. Davis 25. Williams 46.

4Hansard's 49-60. These were the main reasons that the trade defenders opposed abolition of the slave trade. The opposition highlighted these main arguments in their propaganda against abolition.

5Hansard's 49, 54.

6Hansard's 49.

7Hansard's 49.

8Hansard's 50-51. Dr Adair testified that he thought the slaves did not receive enough food, especially at crop time when their work load was heavier and harder.

9Hansard's 51-52. Slaves were left without instruction and left without means of civilization. "Until attempts are made to raise [the slaves] above their present situation, this source of mortality will remain."

10Hansard's 55. In the speech, Wilberforce used Liverpool as an example of a major slaving port that would not be ruined by abolition. He provided evidence to show that only 1/15 of the tonnage out of Liverpool was slaves. He also claimed that the slave trade had actually been suspended during some years of the war and calamity had not followed. Although Liverpool merchants claimed that if less than two slaves to a ton were to be allowed, the trade would be ruined. Wilberforce pointed out that of the twenty ships that left Liverpool the year previous, thirteen of those ships carried that 'ruinous proportion' and Liverpool continued to thrive.

11Hansard's 58.
In fact, Wilberforce proceeded to provide testimony from a French minister in support of abolition efforts and the king of France who supported particular abolition societies. France was too liberated to take up such an inhumane practice and trade.

In 1777, MP David Hartly proposed a motion against the slave trade and the House threw it out immediately without any consideration or debate. Also see: Davis 25. In 1778, Parliament appointed a committee to investigate the state of the slave trade. Nothing came of it. Also see: Williams 46. In 1783, the House rejected a Quaker petition to consider the trade.

With this initial proposal, Wilberforce paved the way for further debate on this issue in Parliament. The course of abolition took many years. The people dedicated and committed to the cause persevered. The lectures, the propaganda, and the debates in Parliament continued. It was not until the Act of 1807 that the Atlantic slave trade was officially abolished. Also see: Lean 178. Wilberforce also lived to hear of the Emancipation Act of 1833 victory, in which slavery was officially abolished. Wilberforce died on July 29, 1833, only two days after the Emancipation Act was passed.
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