

# Literature review of Cambridge by Caryl Phillips essay sample

[Sociology](#), [Slavery](#)



For my Internal Assessment I have chosen to do a review of Caryl Phillips' post-colonial work of fiction, " Cambridge". This novel published in the year 1991, explores the interlocking of a variety of forms of marginalization, displacement and dispossession that emerge from the experience of cross-cultural encounters. It persistently raises questions of home, identity and belonging. Phillips' novel is set in an unnamed small Caribbean island during a transitional period, sometime between the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and the emancipation of slaves in 1834. Phillips raises the consciousness of the readers by highlighting the brutality and horrors of slavery through perfected use of narrative techniques such as imagery, irony, symbols etc. He most wonderfully uses these techniques to address the thematic concerns of the novel such as, Racial Prejudice, Women Subjugation, Loss of Identity and Cultural Erasure.

This work of fiction constitute self-conscious fiction: to a greater extent, it is a pastiche of other narratives and deliberately calls attention to its intertextuality. Cambridge's exploration of slavery comprises the juxtaposition of three main narratives framed by an epilogue and prologue. The first two of the three narratives are written in first-person voice: those of Emily Cartwright, the mistress of the plantation and Cambridge, a slave on the same plantation. The third narrative seems to be a reproduction of an unsigned report in a contemporary newspaper sympathetic to slave owners detailing the events leading up to Cambridge's death.

Emily's " fictional" journal which recalls as Evelyn O'Callaghan has observed " real" travel journals by nineteenth century women travellers such as Lady

Nugent and Mrs. Carmichael. It describes her movement away from her home in England into “ a dark tropical unknown”, where she intends to reside for no longer than three months. There seems to be doubt at the beginning of Emily’s journal as to where she belongs. Emily is sad to leave a country which “ beers the title of (her) home”, and she quotes the following lines to emphasize her sorrow: “ O my country, I have no pride but that I belong to thee, and can write my name in the muster-roll of mankind, an Englishman”. The trouble is that she is in fact unable to “ write (her) name in the muster-roll of mankind” as “ an Englishman”. She is a woman.

As early as the prologue we already can see that Emily is an “ uncanny stranger”, she simultaneously belongs and does not belong. As the author of the prologue puts it: “ the truth was that she was fleeing the lonely regime which fastened her into backboards, corsets and stays to improve her posture. The same friendliness regime which advertised her as an ambassadress of grace”. This patriarchal “ regime” of gender, which inscribes its rigidity on the female body and sees women as no more than “ children of larger growth”, also dictates that she be married on her return from the West Indian plantation to a fifty-year old prosperous widower with three children to ensure her profligate father’s future. The Prologue equates marriage with “ the rude mechanics of horse-trading”. To Emily, her arranged marriage is nothing less than “ a mode of transportation through life”.

“ Transportation” evokes the forced movement of slaves across the “ middle passage”. To an extent, therefore, Emily’s position within the strict regime of

gender - being an object of the future, profitable exchange between two men - is uncannily similar to the predicament of the black slaves she will soon encounter on the island. It comes as no surprise that Emily starts her "adventuring" as an abolitionist, condemning the " iniquity of slavery". In fact she begins to set down her observations in a journal precisely in order to instruct her father as to the " pains" endured " by those whose labour enables him to continue to indulge himself in the heavy pocketed manner to which he has become accustomed".

Emily's position as visitor and woman means that her title as mistress is at times nominal. Her early protests against the brutality of some of the more common objectionable practices of the slave regime carry very little weight with the estate overseer and manager, Mr. Brown. Furthermore, Emily's marginality in planter society is reinforced as much by her relative innocence as newcomer as by her own vague and unspecified liberal beliefs. In the early days, she sees herself as ' set apart" from planter society; she sides with the abolitionist campaigns and is disapproving of her father's cavalier ignorance of the " pains and pleasures.... endured by those whose labour enables him to indulge himself in the heavy-pocketed manner to which he has become accustomed". She sees herself as on a moral crusade of sorts and hopes to convert her father to the abolitionist cause through her first-hand knowledge and account of the " inquiry of slavery." Yet her condemnation of her compatriots' abstract support for the abolitionists and convert real support of " old prejudices," will increasingly apply to her.

Emily's account of her initial encounters with "negroes" on the island is testament to the strength and depth of European racial prejudices. She finds it difficult to disguise her revulsion at the appearance, dress, manners and language of the black peoples of the island. She repeatedly associates them with the animal kingdom, mistaking slave children for monkeys, describing slave homes as "lair and nests" and the noises of the slave village as a distant "braying." Emily objects to her black slave housekeeper's use of Creole English, informing Stella that she "had no desire to hear (English) mocked by the curious thick utterance of the negro language". Furthermore she reproduces without comment her companions' use of whiteness as an index of civilization. As time passes, her character seems to warm to the racism of plantation life. The slaves on the plantation are represented as subhuman species of people and she upholds the familiar stereotypes about their animal and childlike nature, their petty thieving and their wanton sexual behavior. In describing the songs and festivities of the slave village, Emily remarks, "Such a vulgar, yet dexterous, set of antics never came into the brain or out of the limbs of anything but a son of Ham enjoying his jubilee".

In an interview cited by Gail Low, Phillips remarks that "Cambridge's narrative serves as a necessary corrective to Emily's racial prejudices. Cambridge is lettered, articulate, educated and a Christian, the antithesis of Emily's sons of Ham." His life's testimony is a painful chronicle of the Middle Passage and the "social death" he undergoes in his transformation from free man to slave. Cambridge's narrative of his transportation and capture also

reverses some of the Eurocentric bias of Emily's account and inverts some of its stereotypes. Formerly called Olumide he had assumed that his white captors would eat him, a reversal of the stereotype of the African as cannibal. To Olumide's ears, the English languages he hears "resembled nothing more civilized than the manic clatter of baboons."

More important, his description of the Middle Passage is a harrowing account of how uncivilized European men can be. The slave ship is described as a nightmarish place of "perpetual night," with "human flesh merchants" as overseers. In Olumide's account, the purportedly uncivilized men indulge in acts of 'savage and brutal cruelty' and "malice" never witnessed in peoples previously encountered. Olumide's accession to the status of free man, his education and literacy should render him equal to any free-born Englishman; that he plays by the rules and is still "ostracized" according to Gail Low, labeled savage and then sold back into slavery is a tragic indictment of the very civilization he aspires towards.

Cambridge alias Olumide alias Thomas alias David Henderson speaks of his "extraordinary circumstances" in a way that recalls Othello. He presents himself as a "black Christian". He also sees himself as a "virtual Englishman" who proudly owns a "superior English mind". He is "unworthy of fleshy exploration". Thus, he successfully questions the interdependence of whiteness, Christian religion, proper use of English and English sexual restraint: an interdependence that is central to the process of construction and redefinition of culturally hegemonic colonial identities.

Only in fiction does Cambridge get a chance to have a riposte, if not revenge. It is because he has a sound command of English and is acquainted with the culture and psychology of the whites. Because he has read the Scriptures and adopted the Western ways and because he is clever enough to discriminate between individuals, black or white, he makes his case quite convincingly and wins us, the readers over.

The Epilogue raises questions of home and belonging. To an extent, Emily begins to learn to dwell in hybridity as home. Her stay on the island is no longer a detour or a domestication of the gap between home and home: "Are there no ships that might take me away? But take me away from what and whom?" Her stay becomes a site of transit in which her setting out and hopes for arrival are subject to equal interrogation. To Mr. Mc Donald's question: "And when will you return to our country?" she replies with another question: "Our country?" Emily underlines that, as far as she is concerned, there is a loosening of the cultural constraints of the gendered regime of Englishness.

The ultimate irony of the novel is that both Emily and Cambridge die at the end of the novel, both die alone, as if their destinies were welded. Do these deaths spell the defeat of lucidity and the triumph of imperialist ideology, corroborated by the eviction of the liberal overseer, Mr. Wilson? Even though Emily's image wavers (she is far from being a paragon of tolerance), her death, which represents her maladaptation to this new world, foreshadows the end of the slave system (her father decides to sell the plantation).

Cambridge's hanging insinuates that a single person could not combat

ignorance. Neither Emily nor Cambridge could escape the trap of the repressive colonial system.