

Edward Taylor and Phyllis Wheatley compared essay sample

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



Edward Taylor's "Our Insufficiency to Praise God Suitably, for His Mercy" and Phyllis Wheatley's "An Hymn to Humanity" illustrate distinct differences in the poetry of the Puritans and the Age of Reason. While the former embraces a negative view of humanity and emphasizes mankind's subordination to God, the latter shows humanity's optimism, celebrates its intellectual abilities, exalts human possibility, and makes an appeal for recognition of blacks' abilities.

Edward Taylor (1642?-1729), an English-born Puritan pastor and physician, conveys typically Puritan attitudes. His poem embraces the Puritan view of man's inferiority before an all-powerful God whom the Puritans could never satisfy. Using somewhat ungainly language and belaboring his metaphor of the infinite voices as atoms and motes, Taylor writes that even if an infinite number of voices sang God's praises, "Our Musick would the World of Worlds out ring/Yet be unfit within thine Eares to ting" (*Puritan Sermons*). In other words, even an unimaginably, impossibly large amount of praise would be insufficient, making human effort eternally lacking and humans forever inferior.

The final two stanzas deem humanity unfit for its own creator, "worse than mould we tread upon," yet the narrator says to God, "We pray/Accept thereof. We have no better pay" (*Puritan Sermons*). Scholar Karl Keller comments that "[Taylor's] poetry . . . takes the form of prayers desiring to be appreciated on high. . . . His is a poetry of humility and hope" (Keller, 1975, p. 7). For the Puritans, all human endeavors existed for the glorification of God, and this is certainly the purpose of Puritan literature. Poetry exists not

for art's sake, but for God's glorification. The poem also presents a rather low opinion of humanity, as a flawed, sinful creature unworthy of its own creator and thus bound to seek redemption by devoting itself to redemption. Also, nature is considered terrifying, evidence of God's magnitude and potential to punish mankind for its transgressions.

Writing a few generations later, Phyllis Wheatley (1753-1784), born in Africa and brought to Boston as a slave, conveys the Age of Reason's optimism and positive logic, and her poems reveal a more questioning tone, but without being militant or negative toward America's racial situation. In "An Hymn to Humanity," Wheatley produces a deeply religious poem without terror of God; instead, an unnamed "prince of heav'nly birth" (obviously Jesus) arrives on earth to build an empire, but, in contrast to the Puritans' unworthy planet, he finds "bosoms of the great and good" and is commanded by God to "act in bounties unconfined/Enlarge the close contracted mind, /And fill it with thy fire" (Boss). In addition, nature is infused with God's potential to do good; the natural is not depicted as harmful, but a source of inspiration.

Wheatley's narrator adds that divine forces "deign'd to shine, /And deign'd to string my lyre" (Boss), meaning that both God and nature have given everyone intellectual and artistic abilities, even blacks (who occupied the lowest rung of eighteenth-century American society). In the final stanza, the narrator appeals to the reader to accept her ("Afric's muse," a reference to her birthplace and racial identity), attesting to the era's sense of possibilities and justice and to Wheatley's own desire for recognition and acceptance.

Her view of humanity is also much kinder than Taylor's; while he sees

unworthiness, she sees innate potential for good and celebrates the human mind's potential, reminding the reader that God and nature have made African Americans equally capable. For her, the purpose of literature is to use and celebrate the innate fire and intelligence which she argues all people possess.

The two poems attest to vastly different attitudes. While Taylor uses literature as a means of supplication before a stern God and potentially cruel nature, Wheatley celebrates God and nature as agents of goodness and uses her poetry to exalt intellect and creativity while also reminding a racist America that blacks share that natural enlightenment as well.

REFERENCES

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