

Imagination and liberation



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Phillis Wheatley is one of the most influential poets in American history, notably for paving the way from African American poets as well as female poets. Her rare, and arguably liberated, upbringing allowed her to relay her messages of freedom, reform, and religion to a wide audience of intellectuals. Though her messages appear, at times, to be sardonic, she uses her knowledge of Greek mythology, African American social issues, and political undertones in order to express her uninhibited cry for freedom. Phillis Wheatley's *On Imagination* uses the metaphysical plane as a way to spiritually transcend the bonds of slavery and create a realm where all of humankind, more specifically slaves, have the ability to be free from the oppressive nature of the physical world through the guise of imagination.

Wheatley uses height, audio cues, and light in order to describe the powerful exodus of slaves toward metaphorical freedom and to exemplify the notion that the escape is spiritual rather than bodily. Wheatley describes the blissful escape as a heavenly plane, one that is high above the earthly world. She writes that one must be, " Soaring through the air to find the bright abode/ Th' empyreal palace of the thund'ring God" (223), in order to eclipse the earth and reach something that is beyond mere existence. Additionally, Wheatley emphasizes words such as bright, gold, and light in order to focus concretely on visual images that make the empyreal plane transcend all the negative attributions of the dull physical world. According to these notions, imagination is perfection because it surpasses all the turmoil of the mortal plane and thus cannot be controlled or stopped. Imagination, to her and the other slaves, is the exact opposite of their outlook on life because it cannot be contained and it is the one thing they

are able to have agency over. By questioning, in regards to imagination, “Who can sing thy force?” (223), Wheatley creates a parallel between Imagination and god, as in the Christian faith hymns and spirituals are create a strong connection between the higher being and the individual. In this poem, it is evident that Imagination is not a communal god, one who asserts and accesses power through the collective recognition from man but Imagination is a god that cannot be described, worshiped, or quantified by any means. Wheatley uses nouns such as flying, illumination, freedom to describe imagination because these words are indescribable themselves. The significance of light, sound, and heights suggests that imagination has the power to bring an individual to a higher plane of life and illuminate their existence in the same way that god would. These specific points of reference further indicate the accessibility of these far away lands and conceptualizes freedom, of the mind, for all people.

Fancy and Imagination are separate but equal forces that are tangible modes of escape and are readily accessible to all who believe and adhere to their power. By focusing on power as the key to escape, Wheatley was able to give slaves something they so desperately desired. She writes, “Such is thy pow’r, nor are thine orders vain/ O thou the leader of the mental train” (223). By constructing deities that are both powerful and created by a black woman, slaves were able to identify with the belief rather than reject the idea of a free man’s paradise that was preached by white men. The imagery of a train, is vital to American narratives as it, most notably, represents a pathway to a better life and more specifically a path towards freedom. Imagination seems to have a muse like power, inspiring artists to

continuously work, while Fancy appears to represent a being that acts and transports people out of the harsh world. Fancy may be a figure of Wheatley's imagination or she may be the physical embodiment of this powerful deity, as she herself is inspiring the souls of slaves. Wheatley concedes, " But I reluctant leave the pleasing views/ Which Fancy dresses to delight the Muse" (223). By painting Phillis Wheatley, as the inspirer, she thus becomes a Christ-like figure, or one who sacrifices, in this case the freedom of the heavenly plain, in order to generate awe in others despite the physical restrictions of political, social, and economic oppression.

On Imagination captivates the audience by examining the true nature of oppression and more specifically the white oppressors that limit the freedom of slaves. Like all poignant narratives, Wheatley creates a dichotomy of good and evil that is rooted in racial inequalities. Fancy is equality embodied, as she opens her arms and welcomes all of mankind, while Winter represents the ideals of white oppressors. Wheatley explains, " Though Winter frowns to Fancy's raptur'd eyes/ The fields may flourish, and gay scenes arise" (223). Winter is stoic, dark, and the catalyst of death while spring, or in this case Fancy, represents life and change. Wheatley pits these two forces against one another though it is clear that there is no true winner, because just like spring will always emerge from the desolation of winter, there is always a certainty that there will be darkness again.

On Imagination is a poem that focuses on notions of spiritual liberation though the message is rooted in Wheatley's patented politically charged ideology surrounding inequality and religion. Phillis Wheatley captures the audience with her notoriously mythological narrative on the construction of <https://assignbuster.com/imagination-and-liberation/>

an entire world beyond all of humanity, where freedom is a luxury affordable to all who are willing to believe. Wheatley appeases her, prominently white audience, by displaying imagination as a valuable escape but beneath all the metaphors she is exhibiting radical views on racial liberation and is vying for human rights.