

From ignorance to enlightenment: wheatley's obbaa



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West African autochthon Phillis Wheatley employs her tactful methods of writing to convey a subtle but powerful message in her poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America" (1773). At a very young age, about 7 or 8, Phillis was enslaved and brought to America as chattel, with the inability to read and write. Four years later, Phillis was able to read and write in English and Latin, demonstrating how intellectually precocious she was. She soon began writing poems on various topics such as religion, morals, and death. Phillis was inspired by Neoclassical writers, such as Alexander Pope, and often referenced stories of that time. In her poem OBBA, she expresses her gratitude for being taken to America from Africa, but she does so in a sardonic tone, thus addressing racial inequality, and religion.

The opening of OBBA finds Phillis Wheatley showing gratitude and describing the circumstances of her metamorphosis: "Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land; /Taught my benighted soul to understand" (143; 1-2). Wheatley uses the term "Pagan land," to describe her native land of Africa, and she uses the word pagan, because her native land was devoid of Christianity. This is the reason she says that it was "mercy" that permitted her to be enslaved, because in it that enslavement she became acquainted with Christianity. The word "benighted" is used in the second line, which means to be overtaken in darkness in a state of pitiful or contemptible intellectual or moral ignorance. This word draws a parallel between Phillis's race which was black, and her ignorance of the religion of Christianity. Although the use of the word benighted seems to infer that those of the African race were inferior to whites, what Phillis actually meant is that they were ignorant of the wonders of Christianity, not of everything. Later on in

the poem Phillis is seen continuing to explain why being in bondage in America was in a sense, better than being in Africa: " Taught my benighted soul to understand/ That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too/ Once I redemption neither sought nor knew" (2-4). In these lines Wheatley juxtaposes the words " benighted soul," and " Saviour," in order to show how even herself, an ignorant black person, was saved. Once again Wheatley emphasizes how christianity gave her a newfound chance at redemption, from the " benighted" situation that she was in. She does this in line 4, when she says that at a certain juncture in time, she " neither sought nor knew" redemption. Although subtle, the message that she was trying to send to slaves in this line, was that through Christianity anyone can be saved.

Phillis Wheatley clearly describes how some people view blacks, which was in a disdainful way: " Some view our sable race with scornful eye/ ' Their colour is a diabolic die'" (5-6). In these lines Wheatley accurately shows how negro life was perceived by white slave owners, and whites in general. The last main point of this poem is begun in these lines, where Wheatley brilliantly juxtaposes the words " our sable race," which means black, and " diabolic die." She uses this juxtaposition to show even though white people visually see the black race as a diabolic dye, she still is unified with them, as seen by the words " our sable race." The visual darkness on black people that Wheatley says the white people call a diabolic dye, is also compared to the moral and intellectual darkness that Wheatley talks about, when she calls her soul," benighted." The poem is making a swing back around to connect its main ideas.

Although OBBAA was written to convey a message, the most potent section in it comes with the last two lines: "Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain/ May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train." Wheatley's positioning of the words "Christians," and "Negros," is extremely important to her point. By positioning those words right beside each other, and right after the imperative "Remember," Wheatley put Negros and white Christians on an equal playing field. She subtly pointed out that Negros weren't perfect, but also that neither were those white-enslaving christians. She even makes an allusion to the bible, saying that even those who are as bad as Cain, the first person to ever commit a murder, can be "refin'd and join th' angelic train."

Although Phillis Wheatley did not blatantly and directly criticize white-enslaving Christians, her method of subtly calling them out might have been the best course of action for an african-american during her time. Phillis Wheatley was the first African-American to write a book of poems, and get them published. She had no predecessors' works to look back and improve upon. Considering this fact, Phillis Wheatley made a brilliant move to use subtle methods and get her point across in OBBAA. This poem is just one of the multitude of masterpieces that have made Wheatley a great contributor to African-American progress.

Works Cited

Phillis, Wheatley " On Being Brought from Africa to America." The Norton Anthology of African American

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