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Clever Subversion

Some readers of Phillis Wheatley's *On Being Brought from Africa to America* may believe that what she says is literal. They may think she was thrilled to have been taken from Africa as it seemed she considered it a "*Pagan* land" (Wheatley 1), from which she was saved by the mercy of God. This, however, is incorrect. According to Loving, "it is beneath the surface of the work that Wheatley inscribes subversive intent" (70). A quick reading of this short poem could prompt a reader to easily overlook this aspect, while a more careful reading reveals the subversive tactics that Wheatley uses. In Wheatley's poem, *On Being Brought from Africa to America*, she uses subversion to reveal both the hypocrisy of Christians and her hatred of slavery.

Phillis Wheatley was an African American poet who lived during the second half of the 1700s. She lived a short but extraordinary life as a woman who published beautifully thought-out poems still analyzed today that caused people to question the morals of their society. When she was still a child, Phillis Wheatley was kidnapped from West Africa and from her family and sold to the Wheatley family in New England. Phillis was what was known as a "refuse slave" (Carretta 1). This meant that, due to her age, she was not worth much in the slave market. The Wheatleys still purchased her, but this purchase is what solidified her place as a commodity in the eyes of slaveholders. Even though Phillis Wheatley was a slave, the Wheatley family educated her and gave her time to write. This treatment of Phillis allowed the Wheatleys' "to publicize their status, piety, and charity. They also used her to display their commitment to evangelical Christianity" (Carretta 23). Though the Wheatleys treated Phillis well, it seems they may have had some ulterior motive for doing so. They wanted to make themselves look like

good and pious Christians, so they treated Phillis well, even though she was still their slave. This is extremely contradictory, and it reveals the hypocrisy of Christians that Wheatley describes in her poetry. Christians believe that all people are children of God, and as people, they should be respected. However, most slaveowners did not respect their slaves because they did not see their slaves as humans. If the Wheatleys' were good and pious Christians, they would have given Phillis her freedom and treated her as an equal. It seems this may be where Phillis gets some of her inspiration for her poetry. Even though she had a decent relationship with the Wheatleys and they treated her well for her status, she still noticed the hypocrisy of her owners and this hypocrisy may have helped fuel her hatred for slavery.

There are several places in Wheatley's poem *On Being Brought from Africa to America* where she addresses the hypocrisy of Christians. One example of this occurs in line 3, where she writes, "That there's a God, that there's a *Saviour* too" (Wheatley). In this line, Wheatley is describing that her soul was taught by her captors that there is a God and a Saviour. There is more meaning to this line, however. The fact that "*Saviour*" is italicized and "God" is not indicates that Wheatley most likely does not see these two entities as the same thing. She may believe that there is a God, but she may not believe that this God is her savior due to her position as a slave. Loving continues to elaborate on the importance of the italicization of "*Saviour*" by stating, "Italicization and capitalization of "*Saviour*" continues the practice Wheatley began in the opening couplet and links "Pagan" in line one to "*Saviour*" in line three, serving as a bold rebuke of Christianity, despite Wheatley's baptism as an adolescent" (71). In line 1, the word "Pagan" was italicized like the word "*Saviour*" in line 3. The fact that both of these words are italicized in Wheatley's poem most likely means that they are meant to be connected. Suppose Wheatley is using the word "*Saviour*" to describe her captors. If this were the case, by

connecting the words “Pagan” and “Saviour” Wheatley is basically saying that her Christian captors are pagans. She is plainly describing the hypocrisy of slave-owning Christians by calling them pagans. The Christians who captured Wheatley from her homeland considered Wheatley and her people to be pagans, and in this line, Wheatley is firing the insult right back at the Christians. The Christians, however, do not realize she is doing so.

Another passage that Wheatley uses to exemplify the hypocrisy of Christians is in line 7, which states, “Remember, *Christians, Negros*, black as *Cain*” (Wheatley). This line can be hard to understand the meaning of. Some readers may believe that Wheatley is saying that Christians need to remember that Negros are “black as *Cain*” (Wheatley). This is exactly the view that is taken in the article *Overview: “On Being Brought from Africa to America”*, which says, “Why, then, does she seem to destroy her argument and admit that the African race is black like Cain, the first murderer in the Bible?” (1). The author of this article believes that Wheatley contradicts her argument with this line, however, other believe this is not the case. In his essay, *Style as Protest in the Poetry of Phillis Wheatley*, Levernier explains, “Like Cain who was punished for killing his brother Abel, so too, states Wheatley, can Christian slaveholders expect a similar fate for enslaving others on the basis of color and race” (183). Wheatley is not equating Negros to Cain, but rather equating Christian slaveholders to Cain. Here Wheatley is saying that Christians are contradicting themselves because they are acting as badly as Cain did when he murdered his brother. While the Christians believe they are helping their African slaves reach redemption, Wheatley believes that the Christians are evil for what they have done to her and her people. Wheatley believes that like Cain, Christian slaveholders will one day be punished for their evil actions against Africans.

Along with describing the hypocrisy of Christians in her poem *On Being Brought from Africa to America*, Wheatley also makes clear her hatred of slavery in general. As Levernier states in his essay, “Stylistic ambiguities throughout this poem nonetheless reveal Wheatley's absolute abhorrence of colonial American racism. Prohibited by a racist society from publishing her true thoughts in a more direct way, she managed to publish them indirectly through the incorporation of ambiguity and irony into the stylistics of her poem” (181). This implies that Wheatley knew that she could not declare outright her hatred of slavery. If she were to do that, her poem never would have been published. Instead, she cleverly weaves her true feelings into the poem without actually stating them in a clear manner. One example of this occurs in line 2, which says, “Taught my benighted soul to understand” (Wheatley). Wheatley does not believe that her soul was benighted before she was captured, but after she was captured. As Loving states, ““Benighted”, i.e., to be surrounded and preyed upon by darkness, describes not the child’s existence before slavery, rather the word records her abduction by slave traders” (71). Before Wheatley was captured from her homeland, her soul was white. When her captors came and took her away, the evilness of them engulfed her soul and made it black. The blackness of her soul was not of her doing, but of her captors’ doing. This shows her hatred of slavery because she believes that the slaveholders who captured her and all other slaveholders are evil. She does not specifically state that her use of the word “benighted” is meant to describe the darkness of the slaveholders encapsulating her soul, however, this is what it is believed she means by it. Since Wheatley is indeed saying that her slaveholders are dark and black, this can be equated to mean that she believes that they are evil, and since her slaveholders are evil, slavery itself is evil.

Wheatley again describes her abhorrence of slavery in line 4, which says, “Once I redemption neither sought nor knew” (Wheatley). Some readers believe that this line means that

Wheatley unknowingly needed redemption, and did not realize this until she was brought to America. In the article, *Overview: "On Being Brought from Africa to America"*, the author states, "Line 4 goes on to further illustrate how ignorant Wheatley was before coming to America: she did not even know enough to seek the redemption of her soul. She did not know that she was in a sinful state" (1). This is a great example of reading Wheatley's poem too literally. She does not believe that being captured and brought to America has redeemed her in any way, and she does not believe that she was in a sinful state before being brought to America. As Loving states in her essay, "From her place in memory, Wheatley makes a proclamation of her preferred existence—an existence before abduction" (72). Wheatley was never looking for redemption because she did not believe she needed to be redeemed. Wheatley was brought to America as a young girl and she almost died along the way. When she was still that young girl and she was in the process of being transferred to America, she probably wanted nothing more than to go back home to her family. With her family in Africa was the place she wanted to be. She wanted to be in a place before she was enslaved because she hated slavery. It is what stole her from her family and her home.

Wheatley's poem can easily be misread to the point where readers believe that what she is saying is literal. However, she actually uses many tactics to reveal the hypocrisy of Christians and her hatred of slavery. As a young girl, Wheatley was stolen from her home and her family, and was forced to grow up in a new and unfamiliar place where she was treated poorly. Even though she was forced to live in these circumstances, she still managed to write beautiful poetry that is not only extremely intelligent but also has deeper meaning than what appears on the surface. She was able to use subversion to declare the faults of Christian slaveowners and also make clear her hatred of slavery without writing it literally. Even though Phillis Wheatley was

enslaved and therefore in a poor position, she still managed to get her thoughts on paper and out for the rest of the world to see. She fought the system, and because of that, her poetry is still read and widely appreciated today.

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