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ENGL 1200:03

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Poem Analysis

In Phyllis Wheatley’s *On Being brought from Africa to America*, she describes her voyage and her thoughts on being taken from Africa to be put into slavery in America. This poem is a very interesting piece of literature because at first glance it looks as though Wheatley may be talking down upon herself and her race. But, upon further inspection, the lines are a little more complicated than they seem. Phyllis Wheatley may be talking from mostly a sarcastic perspective in her poem to bring alive a differing of perspectives, she uses words that are usually condescending like “Pagan”, “Diabolic”, and “Benighted” to describe herself and her people (Wheatley 143).

In the first line of the poem, Wheatley states, “Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land” (143). At the beginning of the sentence, the word mercy seems to be a good notion of the reason she was sent to the United States. But, looking at this hypothesis closer, it doesn’t seem that Wheatley would be using these simpathetic terms given her circumstance. Why use such language to describe her being torn out of Africa to be held in the grasp of slavery. Words like mercy have positive connotations yet we know that the voyage from Africa to America was anything but a gift from God. Here it seems that she may be quoting what the slaves were told as they were forced to leave their homes, lives, and families for slavery in a new land. Later in the sentence, she uses the word “pagan” to describe her home (143). “Pagan”, usually a term that references older religions with many different gods (143). It is not necessarily a harmful word by itself, but coming from white Christians in the 19th century and maybe still even today, it definitely has a negative meaning. In this example, those from Africa sometimes came from backgrounds with these types of religions. Calling the Africans who were being forced to America “pagan”, was just another way of insulting them (143). From this first sentence, we have evidence that that maybe Wheatley is writing this with a very sarcastic tone.

In the second, third, and fourth lines, Wheatley states that they “Taught my benighted sole to understand / That there’s a God, that there’s a *Saviour* too: / Once I redemption neither sought nor knew” (143). “Benighted”, a word that isn’t used too often in everyday conversation, a common factor it shares with most of the words in this poem (143). In this context, we may think of “benighted” as meaning damaged or stained (143). Wheatley is stating that her poisoned sole can be fixed by understanding “That there’s a God” (143). In the second half of the third line the speaker states “that there’s a Saviour too:” (143). This might be referring to the fact that the slaveholders think they are saving these “Pagan” people from Africa and bringing them to salvation as slaves in America (143). The fourth line is a little bit more straight forward than the rest. This line means that she didn’t want “redemption” or to be saved, and she didn’t know about “redemption” or in other words the Christian religion according to the slaveholders (143). Suddenly, the speaker has taken a much less sarcastic tone in the poem during the fourth line. This trend continues in the fifth and sixth lines as the speaker pauses to assess her situation.

In these following lines, the speaker continues on her assessment of her and her races’ predicament. She declares that “Some view our sable race with scornful eye, / “Their colour is a diabolic die”” (143). The first sentence is a very forward view into Wheatley’s own mind, and may not be sarcastic at all. “Sable” means dark brown in this context which draws into race, and “scornful eye” is the way that the slave holders look down upon their slaves or slaves soon to be. In the next sentence, Wheatley quotes someone that she’s either heard, or she is quoting the general idea of what the slaveholders think of African Americans when the poem says,

“Their colour is a diabolic die” (143). The last two lines, “Remember, *Christians*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*, / May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train” is a return to the more sarcastic side of the poem through the use of short, broken language. These lines reflect that anyone can be “fixed” under God even if they are “black as Cain” according to the slaveholders. Cain was an evil character in the Bible who killed his brother, so this is yet another stab at the African race.

This poem, being a powerful piece of literature, depicts a window into thoughts of both slaveholders, and the future slaves on their journey northwest to America. Wheatley’s sarcastic tone throughout the poem is key to understanding her true tone and demeanor and allows her form of complex writing to be of the interest of scholars for years.

**Bibliography**

Wheatley, Phyllis. “On Being Brought from Africa to America.” *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature.* Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Valerie A. Smith. Third

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