Instructor Stewart

ENG1200:03

8 February 2018

# Literary Analysis of Irony

In the poem “On Being Brought from Africa to America” the speaker is expressing her feelings of slavery through her diction and ironic critique of Christian hypocrisy.

To critique the poem in a broader sense through the theme, we can look at the religious motif of the poem. Phillis Wheatley refers to God, the Saviour, Christians and the “angelic train”. Wheatley is using these terms to exaggerate the irony of slaveholders being selfproclaimed Christians even though they do ungodly acts. For example, the lines, “’Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land, /Taught my benighted soul to understand” (Wheatley 143). In the first line, Wheatley is referring to being forcibly taken from her Pagan land. In the second line, she refers to being forcibly taken because, according to slaveholders, her “broken, poisonous” soul needed to understand the Christian religion. The irony arrives by her not seeing herself as poisonous and not having the desire to be redeemed by the slaveholders, but they see the opposite.

The diction she uses in these lines, such as benighted, mercy, and Pagan, have the reader think about what she means and adds to the ironic nature of the poem. In this sense, Wheatley uses the word mercy instead of saying that she was forcibly taken from her land. The word mercy is more thought-provoking than saying they used force because it adds to the irony that the slaveholders were doing something good for her. She knows that they were forcing her to go, but in the slaveholder’s mind they were doing her a favor. Furthermore, the term benighted was used to describe that, in the slaveholder’s minds, she has a benighted, or broken/poisonous soul. They think they are helping her soul because they are Christians and she needs to be saved by them. She uses the term Pagan, which is defined as, “a person holding religious beliefs other than those of the main world religions”. Slaveholders felt that people from her land were ungodly and did not have religious beliefs. It is ironic that she uses this word because the slaveholders were the ones who were being ungodly.

Moreover, the example of irony in those lines continues throughout the rest of the poem. The next lines are, “That there’s a God, that there’s a Saviour too: Once /I redemption neither sought nor knew” (143). The religious theme continues in these lines. Wheatley sees that the so-called Christians want her to see that there is a God and that they are saving her through redemption. She differentiates the words God and Saviour because when she says Saviour, she is talking about the slaveholders. This is another ironic form of diction because although Saviour could be talking about God, she adds “too” after Saviour to separate the two. It adds to the notion that the slaveholders think they are saving her and redeeming her soul because they are Christians. In addition to the first line, she explains through the second line that she was not even looking to be saved in the first place.

Furthermore, the next two lines carry over to talk about the race itself. For example, “Some view our sable race with scornful eye, /Their color is a diabolic die…” (143). The diction in these lines, such as die, is another form of irony used. Although it is clear she is referring to the word dye, as in color, she chooses to write the word as die. When she says “Their color is a diabolic die,” (143) it is ironic because the sentence is talking about color, but the word is referring to death. Death is a big part of the Christian religion because of what they believe happens after death.

The poem finishes by saying “…Remember, /Christians, Negros, black as Cain. May be /refin’d, and join th’ angelic train” (143). In these lines, she is stating that no matter who you are, by the impression slaveholders gave her, there is a chance for you to go to Heaven or to die as a Christian. The diction she uses in these lines is Christians, Cain, and angelic train. When she says Christians, she is referring to whites. The reader can infer this by the location of Christians in the list she writes, because she was listing out everyone. She also includes in the list people “black as Cain”. Cain is a religious reference that she is using to describe that even evil people can be saved by the Christian religion, according to the slaveholders. The reader can infer that Wheatley used “angelic train” to describe being saved or going to Heaven.

All in all, Wheatley’s “On Being Brought from Africa to America” uses ironic language in telling her story about how her journey through slavery began. She emphasizes the ironic language with diction throughout the poem. There has been controversy about this poem being written from the perspective of a slaveholder. It makes more sense for the poem to have been written from Wheatley’s perspective because of the pronouns used in the poem, such as “…our sable race” (143). Being able to see both perspectives makes the irony she brings out even stronger. Even though the slaveholders felt that they were doing good for the world, Wheatley knew all along that Christianity was not an excuse for what they did. It can also be argued that the poem was sincere instead of ironic. Sincerity does come through parts of the poem, but it is in support of ironic thoughts. For example, “Some view our sable race with scornful eye,” is a sincere thought of the speaker. Although, right before that she talks about not wanting to be saved in the first place, even though people see her race negatively. All in all, the poem is set up in a way that gives it an ironic tone. Wheatley’s poem can be seen in different perspectives, but her diction proves to be ironic.

# Works Cited

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

Edition. Vol. 1. New York: W. W. Norton, 2014. 143. Paper.