

Phillis Wheatley: Simple Imitator or Cunning Abolitionist?

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Abstract

Phillis Wheatley was the first female African American to have her work published in America. Some view her work as simple imitation of the greats of her time as her poems lack the traditional elements of slave identity. Others think she knew her audience and fought the system of slavery through subversive means in her work. This paper seeks to explore the many facets of her life and poetry to find the truth.

Keywords

Poet, slave, freedwoman, mimic, abolitionist, African American, colonial history, author, Phillis Wheatley

Introduction

During the Enlightenment Era, the face of the world changed. Many developments occurred in the field of literature as countless innovative works were published. Slave narratives and African American authorship were brought to the forefront of American and Western European society.

Phillis Wheatley's Journey

One such renowned writer was Phillis Wheatley. Phillis Wheatley was born in Africa. Shortly thereafter she was “brought to Boston, Massachusetts, on an enslaved person ship in 1761 and was purchased by John Wheatley as a personal servant to his wife (Biography.com, 2014). Phillis was a sickly child, but it was soon discovered that she was a fast learner. Susanna Wheatley soon “relieved the child of most domestic duties and educated her, with assistance from her own daughter, Mary, in reading, writing, religion, language, literature, and history” (Sheridan,

2014). As she grew older and became educated, Phillis began to write poetry and published her first poems at the age of twelve. At the age of eighteen, Phillis Wheatley began to search with little luck for subscribers to publish her first book of poems. In Boston, she was put on trial to confirm that she was indeed the original author of her manuscript of poems as many doubted an African slave could write poetry of such a high caliber. However, this was only a minor setback. In 1772, “she convinced the panel that she had authored the poems and they later wrote an attestation to her abilities” (National Park Service, 2022).

After searching the colonies and finding that they were “unwilling to support literature by an African, she and the Wheatleys turned in frustration to London for a publisher” (O’Neale, 2018). In England, Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon became the financial benefactor for Wheatley’s work. In 1773, her first volume of poems titled *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* was published and circulated. It is extremely important to note that this book was “the first volume of poetry by an African American published in modern times” (O’Neale, 2018). After returning to Boston, Wheatley was emancipated by her masters. She would go on to marry a free Black grocer named John Peters. Peters was soon imprisoned for debt, and Wheatley “struggled with poverty and poor living conditions for the remainder of her life” (National Park Service, 2022). While she continued to write, none of her future works were ever published, and she died at the end of 1784. at the age of thirty-one

As Author

During the Enlightenment Era, Wheatley’s work was seen by her peers as a testament to the capacity for learning within the enslaved black population. Her works were seen as an “encouragement to the work of other black writers” and noted as “a landmark in black literary achievement” (Fiero, 158). Her poems typically employed classical themes or biblical references, which imitated the fervent evangelical style of Alexander Pope. Additionally, her preferred prose style was elegies, as “more than one-third of her canon is composed of elegies, poems on the deaths of noted persons, friends, or even strangers whose loved ones

employed the poet” (O’Neale, 2018). Some notable elegies she created were about George Whitefield and George Washington. Washington even wrote a letter in response to her poem stating that within her elegy “the style and manner exhibit a striking proof of your great poetical Talents” (Washington, 1776). Many other figures praised Wheatley’s poetry such as Thomas Hutchinson, John Hancock, Andrew Oliver, James Bowdoin, Reverend Mather Byles, and Dr. Benjamin Rush (O’Neale, 2018). While many of the people of her time viewed her works as great poetry, contemporary critics have differing opinions on the value of her literary works.

Critical Analysis

While most agree that her works contain great skill and excellence in technique, current literary reviewers are divided on the merit of her subject matter and whether her works advocate for the black community. The most common criticism of Wheatley’s poems is that they lack the influence of her African identity and are mere imitations of popular poetry of the time. For example, William J. Long decried her work when he wrote:

Here is no Zulu, but drawing-room English; not the wild, barbaric strain of march and camp and singing fire that stirs a man’s instincts, but pious platitudes, colorless imitations of Pope, and some murmurs of a terrible theology... she sings like a canary in a cage, a bird that forgets its native melody and imitates only what it hears? (Robinson, 1982)

Because her poems did not center on slavery and the hardships that black people faced during this period in history in which she lived, detractors of her work claim that her works have no tangible worth within black literature. This type of opposition to her work came about because of shifts in literary analyses of African American writing that occurred around the 1960s as a part of the Black Aesthetic movement.

These new standards for reviewing black literature altered the view of Wheatley's work from being an achievement worth celebrating to something to condemn and avoid in future works "because advocates of the Black Aesthetic could not read Wheatley as inspiring black identity or pride" (Flanzbaum, 1993). Challengers of her writing claim that her works do not represent the emotions and viewpoint of being a slave and are oriented to glean admiration from the members of white society.

It should be noted that certain moderates who criticize her work concede that her upbringing may be the reason why she does not write from an enslaved person's perspective and instead focuses on topics and references that are considered to be influenced by white society. Although Phillis was not a free person, at a young age she was separated from the rest of the slaves and treated differently. She was educated in the Wheatley's home by their daughter. During her education, she was exposed to white writers and taught to think through the methods of classical thought promoted by Western white society.

These external influences shaped what kind of writer she would become. Furthermore, it may be due to "the strong development of this white mind and a commitment to white orientation, Phillis Wheatley was not sensitive enough to the needs of her own people to demonstrate a kinship to Blacks in her life or writings" (Smith, 1974). Therefore, while her works may contain white themes and allusions, the poems still express her personal thoughts and ideas. When considering all factors, it would be illogical to assume that she consciously wrote to satisfy members of the white society and intentionally neglected her black heritage.

Phillis' Poems & Letters

On the other hand, proponents of her work claim her African roots were evident in her works, even though she did not write poems directly about the horrors of slavery. They claim that she used literary methods to condemn slavery as well as acknowledge her African heritage. In many of her poems, such as in, *To Maecenas*, she references her African heritage through words like "Afric," "Ethiop," or "sable race." Another example is in her poem *On Being Brought From Africa to America*, where

she confronts Christians on the hypocrisy of slavery from a Christian perspective:

’Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there’s a God, that there’s a Saviour too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
’Their colour is a diabolic die.’
Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain,
May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train. (Fiero, 158)

This poem clearly demonstrates that Wheatley was acutely aware of the racial disparities between blacks and whites. She employs the Christian perspective to persuade her readers that blacks are not a lesser race. By understanding her audience, “she manipulates her pen to antagonize their prejudices without stifling an opportunity to be heard by the broader public” (Woods, 2020). Though her poetry does not display hatred or outward negativity towards members of white society, she used her writing to expose her readers to her point of view in a way that they would be sure to listen.

It is also asserted that Wheatley used delicate methods to express her views in other ways. For example, in *To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth*, the poem at first glance seems to be about American liberty in general. However, she subtly brings in her African roots, and the last line of the third stanza expresses her desire that no one will feel the “tyrannic sway” of lost freedom. Other research asserts that the “narrative, references to sun worship, and elegies express Wheatley’s cultural and racial pride” (Walker, 2011). These slight references to her culture and her feelings towards slavery are present in many of her poems. Many of her personal letters to clergymen and other leaders of the time also indicate that she attempted to enact change in regards to slavery in America during this time (O’Neale, 2018).

Lastly, a widely overlooked fact is that her works had to be edited and proofread by a white man before they were published. One scholar named R. Lynn Matson delved into the historical files of Wheatley's manuscript versions of her poems versus the ones that were actually published. The results of this study illustrated that many of her poems were toned down and rewritten (Matson, 1972). These findings may contribute to the fact that her works may not have fully represented a slave's perspective and raw sentiments as the editor would be looking for material to sell to the aristocratic white society.

Conclusion

After looking at all the facts and opinions surrounding Phillis Wheatley's work, it is understandable why there is great controversy regarding the merits of her poetry. Was she simply an imitator of neoclassical literature? Perhaps she was a clever abolitionist using her voice to surreptitiously vilify slavery instead. Only Phillis Wheatley herself could prove her initial intentions and motivations behind each piece. However, poetry, and even literature in general, is subjective; every reader can come away with a different interpretation of the author's meaning. Nevertheless, her works are a testament to the versatility of the written word. Her poems are not beautiful because of complex notions and hidden meanings. They are visionary because they transcend race and time. Regardless of race or status, readers can relate to her sophisticated compositions centered on themes of grace, virtue, and freedom. Few people have the gift to move another's soul with the tip of their pen. It is this basic humanistic aspect of Phillis Wheatley's poetry that should never be washed away amidst the tumultuous, ever-changing sea of opinions about her life's work.

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