On Being Brought from Africa to America

POEM TEXT

'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.

SUMMARY

The speaker describes being taken from her non-Christian homeland as an act of kindness and compassion. This experience gave her the opportunity to learn about Christianity and redemption through Jesus, something that had been unknown to her and as such that she would never have sought out otherwise. The speaker then addresses the fact that many people look down on African Americans and interpret their dark skin tone as a sign of the devil. The speaker reminds fellow Christians that African Americans, with their skin as dark as that of the biblical figure of Cain, also have access to redemption and salvation through Christianity.

THEMES

CHRISTIANITY AND RACIAL EQUALITY

In "On Being Brought from Africa to America," the speaker argues that Christian teachings have led her to reject racism on the grounds that all people are equal in the eyes of God. She directly rejects the belief that African Americans are not capable of redemption, a prevalent idea among the white Christian community in the 18th century, and insists that black people, too, may "join th' angelic train" of God.

After establishing her gratitude for her conversion to Christianity in the first half of the poem, the speaker turns her attention towards those who view dark skin as something untrustworthy and even demonic—views that unfortunately were commonplace in the 18th century and beyond. She then uses a Biblical allusion to advance her assertion that Christianity supports racial equality, bringing up the story of Cain and Abel.

According to the Bible, the first homicide was committed by Cain when he killed his brother, Abel. After Cain was punished by God for this offense, God then showed mercy by offering Cain protection from his own untimely death. God placed a "mark" on Cain that would serve as a warning to other people who might be motivated to harm Cain. Many Protestant Christians during this time period believed that the mark of Cain was dark skin, hence the speaker's reference to being "black as Cain." By drawing this comparison between Africans and Cain, however, the speaker suggests that people from Africa are worthy of the same mercy and forgiveness that God granted the first murderer. The speaker thus raises an important question to her Christian audience: if Cain deserved God's mercy, shouldn't *everyone* be offered mercy, regardless of race?

What's more, the speaker's phrasing here—"Remember, *Christians*, Negros, black as Cain"—effectively places the words (and concepts) of "Christians" and "Negros" side-by-side. This creates an association between Christianity and African Americans in the reader's mind, reinforcing the speaker's point that these traits—being Christian and being black—are not mutually exclusive.

The notion of mercy established here also relates back to the first line of the poem, in which the speaker characterizes her migration from Africa to America as merciful—that is, marked by kindness and compassion. The allusion to Cain thus allows the poem to come full circle, and further implies that the same mercy must be extended to all people who haven't had access to a Christian education.

The speaker finishes up by saying that people of African descent "May be refined and join the angelic train." In 1773, this was a powerful statement, especially from a slave. Here the speaker firmly insists that redemption is possible for everyone if they are given the opportunity to learn about the existence of God and the teachings of Jesus. Therefore, the poem presents animosity towards African people as not only misguided, but as antithetical to the Christian philosophy of universal redemption and salvation.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-1
- Lines 5-8

REDEMPTION AND SALVATION

The speaker describes her experience as a young African girl who was enslaved and sold to the Wheatley family in 1761. While living with the Wheatleys in Boston, the speaker learned about Christianity. In addition to

specifically arguing for racial equality on the basis of Christian teachings, the poem also captures Wheatley's general appreciation for her life in America and, most importantly, for her discovery of redemption and salvation through Christianity in the first place. The speaker insists that redemption is possible for everyone if they are given the opportunity to learn about the existence of God and the teachings of Jesus.

The speaker first expresses gratitude for her conversion to Christianity when she states that it was "mercy" that brought her from Africa to America. By describing her entrance into the slave trade as an act of mercy, the speaker immediately establishes her belief that leaving Africa was essential to her long-term happiness and well-being. She goes on to say that it allowed her "benighted soul" to learn that "there's a God, that there's a Saviour too." Wheatley's use of the term "benighted" has special significance here due to its double meaning: it refers to her moral and intellectual ignorance before learning about Christianity while also implying that her soul was overtaken by darkness when she was still in Africa. In the poem, then, Christianity is directly associated with light and freedom from ignorance.

She explains that she has since embraced Christianity wholeheartedly, but emphasizes that this was only possible because of her immersion into American culture. This sentiment is depicted in the fourth line when the speaker suggests that she would have never sought out redemption if she was never educated about it. In this sense, redemption and salvation becomes a matter of education and opportunity, one that would've never been provided to the speaker were she not sent to America.

The speaker supports this assertion in the final line of the poem, which maintains that African Americans can become good Christians if they are given the chance to do so. Her argument appears to come from a place of benevolence: she is aware of the beneficial role that Christianity has played in her life, and she wants to extend that benefit to other people, regardless of race. She recognizes her privilege as an enslaved person who had access to a Christian education and firmly believes that the path to redemption and salvation should be made accessible to everyone.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 7-8

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-1

'Twas mercy brought me from my
Pagan
land,

The opening line of the poem establishes its central theme. It is immediately clear that Wheatley is grateful for her departure from Africa, framing it as an act of mercy. She emphasizes the widespread paganism in African culture by italicizing the word "Pagan," thereby bringing it to the reader's attention. From the beginning of the poem, then, it is evident that Wheatley has abandoned paganism in favor of Christianity and recognizes that this probably wouldn't have happened had she remained in the "Pagan land" of Africa.

The first line also makes great use of personification. The speaker describes "mercy" as the force that brought her from Africa to America, which obscures the reality of slave traders tearing her away from her home and selling her off for their own profit. Obviously, there was nothing noble or merciful about the slave traders' intentions, but Wheatley has removed the element of human participation from her account. Instead, her description transcends these social systems and focuses entirely on God's mercy.

The next instance of personification, when Wheatley describes Africa as a "Pagan land," completes Wheatley's positive portrayal of her departure. For her, the move to America gave her an unprecedented opportunity to learn about worldviews that differed from the African paganism she was originally taught. Wheatley implies that her departure from Africa was the result of divine interference that eventually led her on a path to religious conversion.

In addition to establishing the poem's main theme, this line also sets the poem's meter and rhyme scheme. The use of iambic pentameter and rhyming couplets remains consistent throughout the poem, creating a strong sense of cohesion and structure. Recall that an iamb is a poetic foot with an unstressed-stressed syllable patter, and pentameter means there are five of these iambs (and thus ten syllables) per line:

'Twas mer- | cy brought | me from | my *Pa-* |*gan* land,

LINES 2-4

Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a
Saviour
too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.

Wheatley uses enjambment to continue the personification of mercy into the next two lines of the poem. She claims this mercy not only brought her to America, but that it also gave her access to spiritual enlightenment. She describes her soul as "benighted" prior to her conversion, which invokes the double meaning of moral ignorance and being overtaken by darkness. While this ignorance once shrouded Wheatley's soul in darkness, her introduction to monotheism—to learning about

the "God"—brought with it a newfound knowledge of spirituality that elevated her soul into the "light" (or salvation) of Christianity.

The use of caesura and asyndeton in the third line (" ... a God, that there's ...") emphasizes that her conversion to Christianity was multi-step process, starting with the acceptance of a singular god and culminating into a particular belief in the Christian god and the Christian path to salvation. The phrase "Saviour" (which refers to Jesus) is italicized in order to stress its important role in the Christian religion as well as in the speaker's own conversion. Thus, Wheatley characterizes her departure from Africa as a merciful act strictly because it gave her the opportunity to become Christian.

In fact, as she explains in the fourth line, she would have never known to seek redemption in Christianity had she remained in her native land of Africa. Wheatley acknowledges that her conversion to Christianity was a matter of chance because her migration to America was, in itself, a matter of chance. In this sense, Wheatley views herself as fortunate and recognizes that she would have never discovered redemption had she never been enslaved. As she will make it clear later on in the poem, however, her positive regard for this transition in her life has nothing to do with her attitudes towards the institution of slavery itself.

LINES 5-6

Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic die."

In the second half of the poem, the speaker brings more nuance and complexity into her portrayal of slavery. Now that she has properly expressed gratitude for the role of Christianity in her life, she can focus on the negative aspects of her life in America.

The speaker once again draws on imagery of darkness when she describes African Americans as a "sable" (meaning "black") race, whose skin color is viewed as "a diabolic"—or devilish, wicked—"die" by many white Christians during this time in history. The image of the "scornful eye" reinforces the hatred and harsh judgment that African Americans have to endure on a daily basis. The sibilance of line 5 adds a hissing quality to this moment as well, evoking the judgmental whispers and cruelty of white Christians:

> Some view our sable race with scornful eye,

This sense of judgment is epitomized in the description of a dark skin tone as "a diabolic die," in which Wheatley uses alliteration and assonance to stress the significance and impact of this social attitude towards African Americans. (Note that "die" would now be spelled as "dye.")

By referring to the skin color of African people as a "diabolic die," these Christians believe that their outward appearance somehow reflects the state of their spirituality. Not only do such Christians make this assumption, but they take it a step further by attributing their physical appearance to the devil, suggesting that a dark skin tone is representative of wickedness, sinfulness, and other demonic traits.

Wheatley invites the reader to sympathize with African Americans and consider how this sentiment would be experienced from their perspective. By highlighting her devotion to Christianity in the beginning of the poem, the speaker exposes the superficiality of Christians who automatically assume the darkness of her skin tone somehow translates to the condition of her soul. Wheatley sets up a contrast between outer darkness and inner lightness that strikes at the underlying irrationality of racism and calls out the Christians who continue to subscribe to it. This is a particularly powerful criticism given the emphasis on non-judgment, acceptance, and forgiveness within the Christian tradition.

LINES 7-8

Remember,
Christians
,
Negros
, black as
Cain
,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

In the poem's final couplet, the speaker explicitly addresses the Christian community, particularly those who still have prejudices against African Americans. In the penultimate line, the speaker heavily uses caesura, which forces the reader to slow down and take in every part of her statement. This is Wheatley's way of signalling that the final lines contain the main lesson of the poem and therefore warrant special attention.

Interestingly, she italicizes the terms "Christians" and "Negroes," implying that the two concepts can go hand-in-hand and need not be mutually exclusive. The division between the two terms is nothing more than a comma (there's not even a conjunction between them, another instance of asyndeton), suggesting that the gap between being African American and being Christian is narrower than many white Christians might think.

In this line, the speaker also makes an allusion to the Biblical figure of Cain, adding another layer of complexity to her analysis. In the Bible, after Cain was punished by God for murdering his brother Abel (and becoming the first murderer in the process), God then offered Cain protection from his own untimely death by placing a "mark" on him that would serve as a warning to other people who might be motivated to harm Cain.

Like many Protestant Christians in the 18th-century, the speaker seems to believed that the mark of Cain is dark skin, hence the simile "black as Cain." The comparison between

African Americans and Cain invokes Christian notions of mercy and forgiveness while suggesting that these same concepts should be applied to all people, regardless of ethnicity. If God did not exempt the first murderer from mercy, then followers of God should model their own behavior and attitudes after this example.

The speaker brings her point home in the final line of the poem when she asserts the capacity of African Americans to become educated in Christianity and reach salvation. She uses the image of the "angelic train" to suggest that the path to redemption and heaven is available to everyone who is willing to accept the teaching of Christianity. The train conjures the image of collective salvation that should be accessible to anybody with the spiritual will and desire to be redeemed. The speaker therefore advises Christians to set aside their prejudicial views and embrace the values of tolerance and acceptance.

SYMBOLS

CAIN

Although the figure of Cain has a specific role in the Bible, this poem uses Cain as a broader symbol of the human condition. In the Bible, Cain is infamous for becoming the first murderer when he kills his brother, Abel. God punishes Cain for his sin by banishing him from Eden and condemning him to a life of wandering. Despite this punishment, God places a mark on Cain to prevent anyone from harming or killing him once he's banned from paradise. Wheatley uses Cain's notorious status to illustrate a larger point about the state of humanity through the lens of Christianity: we are all sinners, and we are all worthy of mercy and forgiveness.

From this perspective, it stands to reason that African Americans should be granted the same mercy and given the opportunity to redeem themselves through Christianity. If God was willing to show mercy to the first murderer, then Christians have no justification for denying mercy to anyone, especially people who have not had the opportunity to learn about Christianity and its teachings. In a brilliant move, Wheatley uses scripture to gently expose the hypocrisy of many 18th-century Christians and encourage them to rethink their harsh attitudes towards African Americans.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "Cain"

POETIC DEVICES

IMAGERY

The first half of the poem draws on imagery to vividly represent the speaker's conversion from paganism to Christianity. She frames the conversion process as a spiritual awakening that allowed her "benighted soul" to grasp the existence of God and Jesus Christ. By describing the soul as "benighted," she invokes the image of her soul being shrouded in darkness prior to her conversion.

This imagery centered around darkness continues through the second half of the poem when Wheatley addresses white people's attitudes towards the "sable race" or those of African descent. She then contrasts outer darkness with inner darkness, arguing that African people are equally capable of reaching salvation and accessing the "angelic train." The term "angelic" is strongly associated with heaven, of course, creating an effective contrast with the imagery of darkness.

Through this skillful use of imagery, Wheatley subtly points out the inherent superficiality of racism. She contends that the condition of the soul supersedes one's skin color, making salvation possible for anyone who is willing to keep an open mind. Her once "benighted soul" has now been enlightened by the teachings of Christianity, thereby making her skin color irrelevant. Wheatley extends this logic to all people and suggests that anyone can experience the same spiritual transformation under the right circumstances.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "benighted soul"
- **Line 5:** "sable race with ," "scornful eye"
- **Line 6:** "diabolic die"
- **Line 8:** "join th' angelic train."

METAPHOR

There are two major instances of metaphor in this poem. When describing the attitudes of white Christians towards African Americans, the speaker uses the metaphor of the "scornful eye" to capture the hateful and prejudicial nature of their perspective. This might also be thought of as an instance of metonymy; by representing their racist beliefs in the form of a "scornful eye," the speaker highlights the superficial and shallow nature of their prejudice. According to the poem, these Christians are judging African Americans based merely on what they can see on the surface, and nothing more. The contempt and mistrust of these Christians are based in their own preconceived notions and assumptions, rather than the true nature of the people they're passing judgment on.

In the subsequent line, the speaker uses another metaphor when the dark skin tone of African Americans is described,

from the white Christian's perspective, as a "diabolic die." The use of alliteration in this phrase (on the /d/ sound) draws particular attention to it within the poem. "Die" here is likely used in the sense of "dye." This metaphor indicates the obstinacy of Christians who hold hateful views towards African Americans. They see dark skin color, which is simply a part of African Americans' outward physical appearance, as the direct embodiment of their inner evil spirit.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "scornful eye"
- **Line 6:** ""Their colour is a diabolic die.""

ALLUSION

The Biblical allusion to Cain plays a central role in the message of Wheatley's poem. In the Bible, Cain becomes the first murderer when he kills his brother, Abel. God banishes Cain for his misdeeds, but places a "mark" on him that effectively prevented other people from harming him. Thus, God treats Cain mercifully by not dooming him to the same fate that he inflicted on Abel.

The speaker sets up a comparison between Cain and African Americans in order to advance her argument that all people deserve a chance at redemption, regardless of race. Posed in the form of a simile, the speaker invokes a common Protestant belief in the 18th-century that the mark of Cain was black skin.

By mentioning this interpretation and relating it to the Christian concepts of mercy and forgiveness, the speaker encourages her white, Christian audience to reevaluate their perspective and treatment of African Americans. Surely, the speaker asserts, if God could manage to grant mercy to the first murderer who slayed his own brother, then white Christians could extend a modicum of mercy to African Americans who come from non-Christian backgrounds. The speaker uses the extreme example of Abel to suggest that Christians should give African Americans the opportunity for redemption and growth before passing judgment on them. Embedding this social argument into a Biblical allusion would have made it more persuasive to Wheatley's predominantly Christian audience.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "Cain"

PERSONIFICATION

The main example of personification takes place in the first three lines of the poem. "Mercy" is personified as both the force that brought the speaker to America and which gave her access to the knowledge and salvation of Christianity. The speaker depicts "mercy" as a bringer of good fortune and as a teacher of religious truth. She credits mercy with her newfound knowledge of both God and the Savior (otherwise known as the figure of Jesus) and expresses gratitude for her conversion to Christianity. Mercy is further portrayed as casting out the darkness of the speaker's "benighted soul," which refers to her state of ignorance prior to her introduction to Christianity.

The concept of mercy remains important throughout the poem, culminating when the speaker advocates that white Christians extend mercy towards African Americans—following in the spirit of God when he granted mercy to the first murderer, Cain. Because the notion of mercy proves to be the lifeblood of this poem and its central message, the ongoing personification of mercy seems especially fitting. Mercy almost becomes a character in itself, playing through the poem from the opening line until the final verse.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "'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:"

CAESURA

Caesura becomes one of the primary poetic devices in the final couplet of this poem. There are three instances of it in the penultimate line, which has the effect of slowing down the pace and flow of the line. This, in turn, causes the reader to focus closely on each of the speaker's words and take them into consideration one by one. The use of caesura, combined with asydenton, also allows the speaker to place the terms "Christians" and "Negroes" side-by-side, without any conjunctions separating them. This suggests that these concepts can work together and need not be considered radically separate from each other.

This slower pace continues into the final line of the poem, which also uses caesura, though not to the same degree as the previous line. In this line the speaker completes her message to Christians by making a two-fold argument about the capacities of African Americans. Not only are African Americans capable of becoming "refined" and learning the beliefs and practices of cultured society, but they can also gain salvation (or "join the angelic train") by making an authentic conversion to Christianity. The heavy use of caesura in this final set of lines gives the speaker's message the weight and emphasis that it deserves.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "God, that"
- **Lines 7-7:** "Remember, / Christians / , / Negros / , black"
- **Line 8:** "refin'd, and"

CONSONANCE

Broadly speaking, the poem's use of consonance (including more specific instances of alliteration and assonance) makes its message all the more memorable. Shared consonant sounds contribute to the poem's sense of rhythm and musicality, and help certain phrases and concepts ring out to the reader's ear, and connect various words. For instance, the alliteration of the /m/ sound in lines 1 and 2 connects "mercy" to the speaker herself (as she is the "me"/"my" mentioned here).

Another striking moment of consonance comes with the repetition of the /n/ sound in line 4:

> Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.

The insistence on this sound mirrors the speaker's insistence that she simply never would have known Christianity existed were it not for being brought to America. The next line, in turn, is characterized by clear sibilance:

> Some view our sable race with scornful eye,

The /s/ sound suggests a hissing, evoking the cruel treatment of African Americans by white people. In the next line, the clear alliteration of "diabolic die" helps this phrase ring out to the reader, again underscoring the shallow and cruel views of many white Christians in the poem. Finally, consonance of the hard /k/ sound in the last two lines ends the poem on a firm, bold sonic note:

> Remember, *Christians*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*,
> May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

On the one hand, the combination of /k/ and /n/ sounds here sonically bind white "Christians" and those "Negros, black as Cain." Additionally, the /k/ sound rings out with particular clarity, implying the force and confidence of the speaker as she delivers her argument that African Americans are just as capable and worthy of Christian redemption as anyone else.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "mercy," "me," "my"
- **Line 2:** "my," "soul," "understand"
- **Line 4:** "Once," "redemption," "neither," "nor knew"
- **Line 5:** "Some," "sable," "race," "scornful"
- **Line 6:** "colour," "diabolic die"
- **Line 7:** "Christians," "black," "Cain"
- **Line 8:** "angelic," "train"

ASSONANCE

Assonance essentially does the same work as the poem's use of consonance and alliteration—that is, it adds to the poem's rhythm and musicality, binds various words and concepts together, and overall makes the poem, and the speaker's argument, all the more memorable for the reader.

Assonance is, of course, essential to the poem's rhyme scheme, which consists of four rhyming couplets (more on that in the Rhyme Scheme section of this guide). But it works within lines as well. Take the shared /a/ sounds of "Pagan land" in line 1, which sonically connects paganism (here meaning the lack of Christianity) closely to the speaker's homeland (that is, to Africa). A similar thing happens with "my benighted soul" in line 2, linking the speaker herself ("my") to being covered with darkness ("benighted"). This happens once again with "sable race" in line 5, linking the speaker's skin color ("race") to blackness ("sable"). Finally, the long /i/ of diabolic die, combined with the clear alliteration on the /d/ sound, makes this phrase ring out powerfully to the reader, drawing attention to the racism of many white Christians.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "mercy," "me"
- **Lines 1-1:** "Pagan / land"
- **Line 2:** "my benighted," "understand"
- **Line 3:** "too"
- **Line 4:** "knew"
- **Line 5:** "sable race," "eye"
- **Line 6:** "diabolic die"
- **Line 7:** "black as," "Cain"
- **Line 8:** "May," "train"

VOCABULARY

'Twas (Line 1) - A contraction of "it" and "was" that has fallen out of common use.

Pagan (Line 1) - A broad term for someone who practices polytheism, or the belief in multiple gods/deities. This term was created by early Christians to distinguish themselves from people who did not subscribe to monotheism, or belief in one god. In this poem, the speaker uses the term to describe her native land of West Africa.

Benighted (Line 2) - In a state of pitiful intellectual or moral ignorance, typically owing to a lack of opportunity. This word can also refer to being overtaken by darkness. In the poem, the speaker uses the dual effect of both definitions to portray the nature of her ignorance prior to being introduced to Christianity.

Redemption (Line 4) - The action of being saved from sin. In the context of Christianity, redemption is possible once a believer accepts Jesus Christ as their Savior, which is referenced in the preceding line.

Sable (Line 5) - Black. In this context, "our sable race" is a

reference to people of African descent.

Diabolic (Line 6) - Characteristic of the devil; so evil as to be suggestive of the Devil. In the poem, the speaker uses this phrase to capture the hatred and suspicion that many white people felt towards Africans in the 18th-century.

Die (Line 6) - An unusual spelling of the word "dye," which is a substance used to change the color of something. In the poem, this phrase is used to reference the dark skin of African people.

Cain (Line 7) - In the Bible, Cain is famous for killing his brother Abel and becoming the first murderer.

Refined (Line 8) - Elegant or cultured in manner, appearance, and taste. In this context, the speaker argues that African-Americans are fully capable of learning and applying the lessons of Christianity and becoming upstanding members of society.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The verse form of this poem is an octave, or a stanza consisting of eight lines. It is also a rhymed stanza that is entirely made up of heroic couplets, which is another term for rhymed couplets that are written in iambic pentameter (more on this in the Meter section of this guide). The first four lines of the poem focus on the speaker's gratitude for being brought to America and taught about Christianity, while the second half of the poem focuses on the speaker's argument against racism based on the idea that all people are able to find redemption through God.

Wheatley's tightly-controlled form reflects her confidence in her argument. The poem is clear and straightforward, without formal deviations to detract from its message. Wheatley's use of heroic couplets also pays homage to traditional techniques of English poetry. This mirrors Wheatley's position as the first African-American woman to publish a book of poetry; she toes the line between appealing to her mostly white readership and establishing her unique vantage point as an educated African American woman living in colonial America.

METER

This poem is written in iambic pentameter. This means that each line is written with five metrical feet that alternate between one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable, creating a familiar da DUM rhythm. Here's a look at lines 1-4:

> 'Twas mer- | cy brought | me from | my *Pa-* | *gan* land,
> Taught my | benight- | ed soul | to un | derstand
> That there's | a God, | that there's | a *Sa-* | *viour* too:
> Once I | redemp- | tion nei- | ther sought | nor knew.

The meter is almost perfect; arguably line 2 opens with a trochee (stressed-unstressed), fittingly reducing the emphasis on the "my," or the speaker's self, perhaps in an act of humility. Even this might be scanned differently by different readers, however. And even Shakespeare, the most famous user of iambic pentameter, included many variations and substitutions in his verse. Broadly speaking, the meter in Wheatley's poem is thus quite strict.

This type of meter is the standard in traditional English poetry, suggesting that Wheatley might have chosen this meter to appeal to her predominantly white and well-to-do audience. In 1773, literature and poetry was mainly accessible to those who had the education to comprehend it and the resources to consume it, so Wheatley was acutely aware that her poetry would be read by a narrow demographic. Wheatley's adherence to the favored meter of her time promotes the image of the "refined" and cultured African-American that she describes here, lending credence to her central argument.

RHYME SCHEME

This poem is completely comprised of rhyming couplets. As a result, it has a traditional rhyme scheme of:

AABBCCDD

The rhyme scheme consists solely of these end rhymes, all of which are perfect; there are no slant rhymes to be found. The consistent rhyme scheme produces a melodious effect and creates a sense of cohesion, of the poem being tightly controlled and its arguments thoughtfully considered.

SPEAKER

In this particular poem, the poet and the speaker are interchangeable. Because this is the Phillis Wheatley's personal narrative of an actual life experience, the reader can view the poet and the speaker as the same person.

Wheatley's tone evolves throughout the poem, starting out as grateful before ending on a somewhat bitter and critical note. In the first half of the poem, Wheatley expresses appreciation for the influence of Christianity in her life. She acknowledges that if she had never been enslaved and brought to America, she probably never would have had the opportunity to convert to Christianity. In the second half of the poem, however, she criticizes the racist beliefs harbored by many white people in the Christian community. There is an undercurrent of disappointment in white people who fail to embrace African Americans as fellow Christians. On this note, Wheatley encourages her Christian audience to reconsider their viewpoint and embrace the Biblical principle that salvation is possible for all people.

SETTING

The setting is conveniently portrayed in the title of this poem. Phillis Wheatley describes her experience of being sold into the slave trade when she was a young child. In 1753, she traveled from West Africa to the American colonies, where she was eventually bought by the Wheatleys in Boston and assumed their surname. As a young adult, Wheatley reflects on this formative experience and its implications for religion, racial equality, and society.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Phillis Wheatley made her literary debut when she published *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* in 1773. "On Being Brought from Africa to America" is featured in this collection and remains one of Wheatley's most well-known and critically acclaimed poems. As the first African-American woman to publish a collection of poetry, Wheatley made literary history and accomplished something that was truly unprecedented for her time.

Although she was enslaved and purchased by the Wheatley family at a young age, she benefited from the relatively progressive views of the Wheatleys, who taught her to read and write. When she exhibited a knack for writing and poetry, the Wheatleys actively encouraged her talent, leading to the publication of *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* when she was 20 years old.

While "On Being Brought from Africa to America" was part of a larger collection, it sets itself apart from the majority of Wheatley's poetry in its exploration of her personal life. It is one of the few poems where Wheatley reflects on her status as a slave and how the institution of slavery has impacted her life. This firsthand account of slavery continues to be recognized as a notable contribution to literature during a time when the vast majority of slaves were illiterate and did not have access to the education or resources necessary to produce such an account.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This poem (and the larger collection) was published during the colonial revolts that would ultimately culminate into the Revolutionary War and American independence. This is echoed in a variety of Wheatley's poems where she endorsed revolutionary ideas and supported the rebellion. As the colonies sought to form a new national identity, Wheatley had an opportunity to influence the conversation surrounding slavery and suggest that the same progressive attitudes driving the revolution should be extended to African Americans.

Despite the revolutionary ideas that were proliferating throughout American culture, the institution of slavery was still deeply entrenched in the structure and consciousness of American society. In fact, Phillis Wheatley had to defend her authorship of *On Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* in court before it was published. Many colonists simply didn't believe that an African American was capable of Wheatley's literary prowess.

Fortunately, the court determined that Wheatley was the rightful author and included an attestation in the preface of her collection that verified the originality of her work. Boston publishers still refused to publish her work, but she was eventually able to secure publication through the support of wealthy patrons based in London, particularly Selina, Countess of Huntingdon and the Earl of Dartmouth. Without the support of these patrons, it is possible that Wheatley's poetry would have never been published.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Biography of Phillis Wheatley — An overview of Wheatley's life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/phillis-wheatley)
- Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral — An online version of Wheatley's poetry collection, including "On Being Brought from Africa to America." (http://www.gutenberg.org/files/409/409-h/409-h.htm)
- "The Privileged and Impoverished Life of Phillis Wheatley" — A discussion of Phillis Wheatley's controversial status within the African American community. (https://daily.jstor.org/the-privileged-and-impoverished-life-of-phillis-wheatley/)
- Illustrated Works — More on Wheatley's work from PBS, including illustrations of her poems and a portrait of the poet herself. (https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2p12.html)
- Wheatley and Women's History — Additional information about Wheatley's life, upbringing, and education, including resources for further research. (https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/phillis-wheatley)

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