Religious Themes In Phillis Wheatley’s To The University Of Cambridge, In New England

Phillis Wheatley’s “To the University of Cambridge, in New England”, is a daunting address to students at Cambridge University about the importance of God’s mercy, and abandonment of sin. Wheatley’s address is delivered in three stanzas that speak to her intentions for writing, the errors of the education the students are receiving, and God’s enduring mercy that will save the students from condemnation. While it appears to be a poem detailing the importance of religion, its significance exists in the fact that it’s a daunting warning for the students to give their life to Jesus and abandon the pattern of slavery. Ultimately, Wheatley’s humble approach to incorporate Christian doctrine and metaphorical reference through free verse was the most effective way to suggest a subtle parallel between sin, and slavery—urging the students to change the “master-slave” mindset.

Wheatley’s incorporation of religion in this poem serves as the moral compass pertinent to her argument against enslavement. As she understands that a group of affluent, Cambridge students can’t relate to her experience as a slave, she strategically relies on Christian ideology—which is the religion of their ancestors—to compel the students to reform their way of thinking. In her three stanzas, Wheatley displays her profound education and understanding of the Bible in relation to righteous living. But she divides her letter into three stanzas as a strategy to provide the students with a clearer understanding of her argument. In her first stanza, she introduces her address by explaining the reasoning for writing:

WHILE an intrinsic ardor prompts to write,

The muses promise to assist my pen;

’Twas not long since I left my native shore

The land of errors, and Egyptian gloom:

Father of mercy, ’twas thy gracious hand

Brought me in safety from those dark abodes.

In my opinion, her effort to explain her passion for writing in the first place was necessary because it suggests that she’s not some scorned slave. Her interest in the welfare of their souls, proves that she has a sincere interest in them individually as opposed to just trying to persuade them that slavery is evil. For one of the students reading her letter, this probably made them more likely to read her letter as it’s relative and engaging. Also, her reference to her homeland as, “Egyptian gloom” was the first metaphor that alluded to the injustice of slavery. In the bible, Egypt was the place that God led the Hebrews from, as the Egyptians enslaved them for generations. As God led them out of Egypt, I think Wheatley included this reference to illustrate that he intends to bring black people out of slavery as well. As this is the first subtle, religious reference, I believe it’s effective because for those students who are Christian readers, they can’t deny the equivalence between the sin of slavery at that time, and the sin of

slavery in their time as well. If God led his people out of that, why would he want his people enslaved now? Introducing the conversation and the harshness of enslavement, is the most appropriate way to persuade a student to consider why it's unjust. Similarly, when she says, "Father of mercy, 'twas they gracious hand/Brought me in safety from those dark abodes" (Wheatley ln. 4-5), this is effective as she glorifies the testimony in her test. As a slave, taken from Senegal at seven years old and transported to Boston, her experience qualifies and validates her statement. It wasn't archetypal of slaves who had been brutally transported from their native land to America, to be appreciative of how far they'd come. For her to use her own freedom and overlook the ruthlessness she'd endured as a slave to rejoice in the Lord's faithfulness, illustrated the exact dedication to the Lord that she wanted these Cambridge men to display.

Additionally, in stanza two, she reels the students in by including context that suggests the errors of the kind of Christianity that the students are learning:

Students, to you 'tis giv'n to scan the heights

Above, to traverse the ethereal space,

And mark the systems of revolving worlds.

Still more, ye sons of science ye receive

The blissful news by messengers from heav'n,

How Jesus' blood for your redemption flows.

See him with hands out-stretcht upon the cross;

Immense compassion in his bosom glows;

He hears revilers, nor resents their scorn:

What matchless mercy in the Son of God!

When the whole human race by sin had fall'n,

He deign'd to die that they might rise again,

And share with him in the sublimest skies,

Life without death, and glory without end.

For her to begin the stanza by saying "Students, to you 'tis giv'n to scan the heights above, to traverse the ethereal space, and mark the systems of revolving worlds, (Wheatley ln. 7- 20)", she's using strategy to captivate them. By suggesting that they can dream, learn, and accomplish anything in the world, she reinforces her genuine interest in them as human beings. This is obviously one of the most important strategies as before she can impact the way they think, she has to convince them to want to entertain her thoughts at all. It's important to

remember that she has to be able to relate to a group of white kids, as an African, female slave. Her experience isn't there's and if she's not strategic in her attempt to consistently have their attention, her letter won't have the impact that it's intended to have. In the same way, I think she mentions their potential to hook them in, before she fully drives home her point and reels them in. When she calls them the "sons of science (Wheatley ln. 10)", my perception is that she's detailing that while they may be book smart, Cambridge elites, they lack authentic, basic religious values. In the 18th Century, Christianity was based on the benefit of the white man as opposed to the benefit of human nature. She's encouraging the men to realize that true Christianity is based off of Jesus's declarations and values—rather than general values. Without this mention of "sons of science (Wheatley ln. 10)", her ploy to use Christianity to depict the injustice of slavery, doesn't offer the same effectivity. The stanza would be less effective without it because from the student's perspective, Christianity includes slavery. To be able to evoke a redefinition of the true parameters of Christianity in these students, she has to highlight that there is a difference at all between Christianity based on traditional values, and Christianity based on Jesus.

Lastly, in the final stanza, Wheatley seals her letter by reminding the students that if they refuse to submit to Jesus and his principles, the ultimate consequence is eternal death.

Improve your privileges while they stay,

Ye pupils, and each hour redeem, that bears

Or good or bad report of you to heav'n.

Let sin, that baneful evil to the soul,

By you be shunn'd, nor once remit your guard;

Suppress the deadly serpent in its egg.

Ye blooming plants of human race divine,

An Ethiop tells you 'tis your greatest foe;

Its transient sweetness turns to endless pain,

And in immense perdition sinks the soul.

While this stanza was a stark contrast from stanza two, it redirects the focus back on her argument as opposed to her appeal. The tone switch from informative to declarative is representative of the urgency of her argument. As this letter is a daunting foreshadowing of what's to come if the students don't realize the errors of their ways, this tone switch is necessary. Her mention that the boys need to "Suppress the deadly serpent in its egg (Wheatley ln. 26)", was the central statement pertinent to the theme, in my opinion. It was the most important quote in this stanza because of what it represented. In my perspective, the serpent she speaks of is symbolic of racism and the slave owner mindset. She's telling the students to rebuke the theory of slavery and renew their mind to other values. However, this is the most effective statement because I wonder if she's highlighting that she wants the

Cambridge men to recognize the serpent in themselves. Slavery was a way of life accepted by those who enforced it and those who experienced it. I don’t think people in that time really recognized nor valued the inhumanity of such racism, and that’s why this statement is so powerful. Ultimately, it appears as though Wheatley is calling on the students to recognize the inherent and intrinsic serpent within themselves. She’s asking them to rebuke their inner serpent in its egg—their formative stages of their lives—in hopes that they can change their views on slavery before they have the power to enforce or deny it.