The Spirituality Of Phillis Wheatley's Poems

When it comes to Phillis Wheatley who was well known at her time as one of the best-known poets in pre-19th century America, even though she was an African slave. Phillis was considered as the first African American poet to publish her book. She was kidnapped from West Africa and transported in a slave ship to America in 1761, Phillis was purchased by her slave master John Wheatley who wanted to be a servant for his wife. She was able to learn how to read and write English by the age of nine, and she became familiar with Latin, Greek, the Bible, and other selected classics at an early age. Wheatley began writing poetry at the age of thirteen, inspired by English poets of the time, such as John Milton, Thomas Gray, and Alexander Pope. She set a great example for abolitionists everywhere, that blacks could have the potential to be rather artistic and intellectual. Her achievements were extremely motivating for the starting of the antislavery movement.

In early African American literature, there was a consistent theme of gaining freedom through assimilation that slowly melted and became active, as it continued to be ineffective in the black struggle for freedom and equality. In Wheatley's poems, she uses a lot of different techniques, such as rhyme schemes, metaphors, similes, ironies, alliterations, allusions, imageries, and personifications. For example, one of her poems "On Being Brought from Africa to America", describes her experience as a young girl who was enslaved and brought to America in 1761. She argues that all people, regardless of race, are capable of finding salvation through Christianity. In the poem (Lines 5-6), it says that "Some view our sable race with scornful eyes, / 'Their color is a diabolic die'" (Wheatley). The author uses hyperbole and a metaphor in these lines, to create an exaggeration, as a slave's point of view, and to compare a black person's skin color to some-sort of characteristic, perhaps. These lines also mean that some people view Blacks as unworthy to exist and their skin color symbolizes negativity. Also in the poem (Line 7), it says, "Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain…" (Wheatley). The author uses a simile in this line to compare the color black to Cain, who is the first murderer in the Bible. This line was a reminder to White Christians that African Americans, maybe have a dark color as a biblical figure. Rhyming schemes are also used to end off every line. Wheatley's point of view of using these techniques in this poem is to let the readers feel that slavery was immoral and that God would deliver her race in time.

Another example, in this poem "To S. M., A Young African Painter, On Seeing His Works", Wheatley was responding in seeing paintings, created by an African painter, named Scipio Moorhead. She was describing the joy she felt when watching him create his work, which gave her the idea that both of their art can bring them closer to spiritual achievement. In the poem (Lines 23-24), it says that "But when these shades of time are chased away, / And darkness ends in everlasting day…" (Wheatley). These lines are examples of how the author uses metaphors throughout the poem, to express her feelings; where she compared shades of times to the dark times of history. These lines also mean that when the era of racism has passed, where the hard times end and instead come the good times. Also in the poem (Lines 11-14), it says that "And may the charms of each seraphic theme/Conduct thy footsteps to immortal fame! /High to the blissful wonders of the skies/Elate thy soul, and raise thy wishful eyes" (Wheatley). These lines also use metaphors, where the author compared immortal fame to Heaven. The author was sending a message to the painter that he should celebrate God

through his works, while at the same time, remember to always keep his eyes set on Heaven. She saw both of their talents, as an escape from the racial world they lived in, and felt that the only way they both could be free, is when they enter Heaven. The metaphors and rhyme schemes used in this poem let Wheatley see that art is a powerful medium of self-expression.

In addition, this poem “To the University of Cambridge, In New England”, addresses a graduating class about mercy, salvation, and hope for an approaching and distant future. Even after all Wheatley went through as a slave, she still saw God as a gracious being, who dispenses mercy. She used religious imageries and metaphors to appeal to the students to keep Christian beliefs strong, surrounded by the growing trend of science. In the last stanza of the poem (Line 26), it says that “Suppress the deadly serpent in its egg” (Wheatley). First of all, the serpent is a representative of the devil, which represents sin. So, this metaphoric line is comparing an egg to not coming alive. In other words, the author suggested that the students should get rid themselves of evil before it ever surfaces. Also, in the last stanza (Line 27), it says that “Ye blooming plants of the human race divine…” (Wheatley). The author displayed another metaphoric example that is comparing blooming plants to the students, as they are reaching for a higher level. This line also shows the students’ youth, beauty, and ability to resist evil. In the last line, of the last stanza of the poem (Line 30), it says, “And in immense perdition sinks the soul” (Wheatley). The author ended this poem with an image of a soul sinking in ‘immense perdition’, meaning failure or punishment, if it cannot overcome its sins. This imagery is effective to the reminding youth, for their need to hold strong to values because the teaching of salvation is real. Wheatley’s choices of metaphors and imageries allow the effectiveness to deliver the central theme of this poem.

In conclusion, Phillis Wheatley was the type of poet, who would write an incredible number of poems that were meant to speak out against slavery. Wheatley’s poetry was used as a means to depict the unreasonably restrictive nature of unequal rights. The poems she wrote best demonstrate her abilities to include classical themes, as well as different techniques, such as metaphors, similes, imageries, rhyme schemes, and etc. Wheatley used her poetry to fight against the inequality encouraged by slavery. Initially, her poetry was regarded as a threat to the conventional style of society. However, within time, anti-slavery proponents were beginning to use Wheatley to prove that no race was superior to another. Throughout the years, after her passing, Phillis Wheatley is still considered to be the most important poet in the American literary history.