

CHAINS OF SALVATION, IRONY OF REDEMPTION: WHEATLEY AND MCKAY ON CHRISTIAN HYPOCRISY

Kodzo Kuma AHONDO

Littérature et Civilisation américaines,

Université de Lomé, Togo

ORCID iD : 0009-0005-5433-3622

lionkum11@gmail.com

Abstract: Phillis Wheatley's "On Being Brought from Africa to America" and Claude McKay's "Enslaved" revolve around the paradox of Western Christian hypocrisy in the enslavement of Africans. The two poets confront the dissonance of Christian discourse of salvation and redemption, and its propensity to carry out slavery. Phillis Wheatley, an eighteenth-century Black poet uses stylistic devices to exhibit the contradictions of Christian rhetoric of salvation of Blacks while keeping them in bondage, whereas Claude McKay, two centuries later, defiantly challenges the dehumanizing of Africans in the Christian West. Based on Afrocentricity and Stylistic as theoretical framework, this paper highlights how both poet use their texts as vehicle for resistance while denouncing Christian hypocrisy and its dehumanizing nature.

Keywords: Christian hypocrisy, African American poetics, irony, salvation, redemption

LES CHAINES DU SALUT, L'IRONIE DE LA REDEMPTION : WHEATLEY ET MCKAY SUR L'HYPOCRISIE CHRETIENNE

Résumé : Le poème « On Being Brought from Africa to America » de Phillis Wheatley et « Enslaved » de Claude McKay s'articulent autour du paradoxe de l'hypocrisie chrétienne occidentale face à l'esclavage des Africains. Les deux poètes dénoncent la dissonance entre le discours chrétien sur le salut et la rédemption, et la propension de ce même discours à perpétuer l'esclavage. Phillis Wheatley, poétesse noire du XVIII^e siècle, utilise des figures de style pour mettre en évidence les contradictions de la rhétorique chrétienne du salut des Noirs, qui les maintient dans l'esclavage, tandis que Claude McKay, deux siècles plus tard, dénonce avec force la déshumanisation des Africains dans l'Occident chrétien. S'appuyant sur l'afrocentricité et la stylistique comme cadre théorique, cet article met en lumière la manière dont ces deux poètes utilisent leurs textes comme vecteur de résistance tout en dénonçant l'hypocrisie chrétienne et sa nature déshumanisante.

Mots-clés : hypocrisie chrétienne, poétique afro-américaine, ironie, salut, rédemption

Introduction

The place of African Americans in the U.S. has always been problematic. If one considers just how these people have been named over time, it becomes clear how dangerous the Black question is in America. Naming them African slaves from colonial era to early 1800s, Colored in Antebellum era (1800s), Negro or Afro-Americans from late 19th to early 20th century, (New) Negro in Harlem Renaissance era (1920s-1930s), Blacks during the

Civil Rights era (1960s-1970s), African-American and African American during late 20th century (1980s-1990s), Blacks and African Americans in the 21st century (2000s-today), unmistakably demonstrates their cultural identity and power, and reflects their resistance and resilience. Abu Abarry (1990) noted that “Since their enforced and brutal emigration to North America about 400 years ago, African-Americans have forged rich and dynamic literary forms that today have become an important and unique aspect of American literature and culture” (p. 379). Their cultural contributions ranged from “the spirituals, the blues, and the work songs to the sermons, proverbs, and tales. The literary significance of these forms seems to surpass anything written by African-Americans until modern times” (p. 380). Other forms include poetry.

Phillis Wheatley and Claude McKay’s voices, despite being separated by at least two centuries, confronted American slavery and racial violence, questioning the standard of Western Christian morality. Christianity, which is supposed to preach divine love, salvation, and redemption of all mankind, has rather been used as the moral foundation and the spiritual cornerstone to launch a vast terrorist attack on the African continent, a phenomenon called the transatlantic slave trade. Wheatley’s “On Being Brought from Africa to America” and McKay’s “Enslaved” plainly challenged Western Christianity’s claim to moral superiority and its complicity in the enslavement of millions of African people and the murder of many other millions of Black lives.

Although William Long (1993, as cited in Boren, 2004) views Wheatley as a traitor to her race by suggesting she is “a bird that forgets its native melody and imitates only what it hears” (p. 39), and “Because McKay’s tendencies were more akin to the European tradition and experience, he was a misfit at a time when blackness was being celebrated” (MeSeur, 1989:299), both poems were no complacency to slavery. MeSeur also observed that Claude McKay, “Regardless of his thoroughly British orientation, emotionally and literarily he never forgot his blackness” (307-308).

Has the US ever been a real Christian nation? Should real good Christians take part in the enslavement of others? In this regard, this paper contends that the United States has never been a Christian nation. It seeks to analyze how Wheatley and McKay have exposed the incongruity of Christian notion of “salvation” in contrast with the cruel reality of bondage in their poems. To conduct this analysis, Afrocentricity and stylistics are used as theoretical framework. Afrocentricity re-centers the narrative from an African perspective and agency, while stylistics highlights how rhetorical devices as well as other literary techniques are used to construct meaning. Firstly, this paper elaborates on the hypocrisy of Christian West. Then it focuses on the analysis of Wheatley’s poem. And the last part scrutinizes McKay’s text.

1. Christian Hypocrisy

This section traces the biblical justifications of slavery in Western discourse and highlights the irony and the incongruity of enslaving free African people under Christian authority. In this matter, there is no excuse for the West. They always know what they are doing. They have willingly wanted it, designed it, implemented it, protected and preserved it for their own comfort for over five centuries. To begin with, it is worth noting Europe has always been a land of cruelty, barbarism, wars and slavery, where the Slavic Europeans were captured by their brothers from the West and sold to Arabs kings in North Africa. So, before getting in contact with Black Africa, Europe had already got the expertise of savagery, barbarism and enslavement of people. Christianity would prove a failure in changing that

fundamental barbaric nature of the white man, as the Church had persecuted their own people, forced them to believe in God, and tortured tens of millions of white people they referred to as heretics, witches and wizards. That is the nature of the expertise they had brought to America, where they genocided millions of Native Americans, stole their land, poisoned their rivers, brought the population of bison to the verge of extinction. To justify the barbaric nature, they put it on God, whose servant Noah cursed Canaan after his son Ham saw his nakedness (Genesis 9: 18-27). Yet, these verses did not mention Africans. This “Curse of Ham” was the most notorious distortion and weaponization of the Bible to justify the enslavement of African people (Goldenberg, 2003). Once this was well spread enough by the Catholic Church, it was encoded into decrees and laws through Papal bulls. Though all the other Christian denominations, considered as protestant groups, had resented the Catholic doctrine, they found no reserve in following its Papal bulls as far as the enslavement of Africans is concerned. Besides these reasons, slavery was held for convenience, just for fun and fashion, for its economic necessity, the so-called inferiority of Blacks, and the most mind-blowing reason: Christianized slaves were better off than free pagan Africans on the continent.

1.1. Western Christian Pro-Slavery Discourse

Through the Dum Diversas (1452), Pope Nicolas V gave full authority to the Portuguese king Alfonso V to wage war against Saracens, pagans and all unbelievers, to invade their lands, capture, vanquish, and subdue the non-Christians to perpetual servitude. This prompted numerous Portuguese raids, the kidnapping and enslavement along West African coasts. This was way before the so-called Christopher Columbus’s discovery of America. Three years later, the Pope issued another papal bull, Romanus Pontifex (1455), reaffirming Portugal’s monopoly on the enslavement and conquest in Africa. The bull had increased their right to seize lands, goods and people, which explained, strengthened, and served as the moral, legal, and spiritual framework of the kidnapping and deportation of tens of millions of Africans, this time not to Europe like the Portuguese first did, but to the Americas. Once the savage and barbaric institution that enslaved Africans was set, other means were invented to preserve it. In this perspective, the Slave Bible (1807), literally a pro-slavery pamphlet, was designed. The Bible generally has about 1,189 chapters, but the slave Bible had only 232 chapters. The whole book of Exodus, which talks about the liberation of Jews from the yoke of Pharaoh, was purposefully missing. They had carefully removed from it anything dealing with liberation, justice, and equality. In this regard, realizing the tremendous challenges of taming enslaved Africans and the permanent threat they represented, the slave bible was weaponized to lure Africans into obeying their masters. It removed passages that encourage freedom and condemn slavery. Paradoxically and though they had invented the Slave Bible, they prevented Blacks from learning to read and write. Samkutty (1992) commented that during slavery “Afro-American bishops like Richard Allen organized Afro-American churches and encouraged reading of the Bible, sometimes secretly” (pp. 423-424). Yet, the very Bible by which the West pretended to abide by says that no one should add or take away any words from it (Revelation 22: 18-19). Western Christianity is a deliberate, demonic, dehumanizing institution that degraded Black people for their own gain, greed, and infamous glory.

Additionally, the West thinks it is intellectually superior to Africans. “Caucasian intellectuals were drawn to the Enlightenment, a philosophical movement which spawned the conclusions of Thomas Jefferson, Augustus Smith, David Hume and other “scientists”

that Blacks were the evolutionary link between (white) men and apes” (O’Neale, 1985, p. 502). Carla Willard (1995) remarked that Thomas Jefferson, in particular, “conjures a myth of the Inferior African which undergirds his entire argument for the emancipation-and the exportation-of slaves” (p. 234). This is the hostile context in which Phillis Wheatley had to write her poems. A group of American so-called intellectuals referred to as “the most respectable Characters in Boston,” as it would later define itself, had assembled to question closely the African adolescent on the slender sheaf of poems that she claimed to have “written by herself” (Balkun, 2002, p. 121). Her prowess was that within sixteen months after being bought, she could read and write English. Within four years, Wheatley wrote a letter to the Mohegan minister Samson Occom, “to whom in 1774 she sent her most eloquent prose protest against slavery. By age twelve, she read Latin with sufficient fluency to translate Ovid into heroic couplets. At fourteen, she published her first poem” (Bennett, 1998:65).

Although they realized the perfect intelligence and humanity of Blacks through Phillis Wheatley’s writing skills, slavery did not end then. Once the unfounded argument of Black inferiority had faded, they brought forth the economic issue that had sustained this enterprise from its beginning. Sondra A. O’Neale (1985) noted that “In fact, Hume, a prominent spokesman in the movement, said that slavery was a necessary economic support to British naval power and that Blacks were “naturally inferior to the whites,” capable of “no ingenious manufactures, ... no arts, no sciences” (p. 503). So, instead of relying on their own effort to develop their world, the lazy Christian West had transformed tens, if not, hundreds of millions of African souls into economic slaves. For others who vehemently preached freedom from England, the argument was the convenience of owning slaves, since that was the fashion of the day. Even the herald of liberty, Patrick Henry, “one of the best known American proponents of the Enlightenment, admitted that, while slavery was against the spirit of freedom in the age, he himself was a slave master simply because of the “general inconvenience of living without them” (O’Neale, 1985, p. 503). Other shameless American Christian slave owners like the Wheatleys of Boston “believed that Christianized Negroes, even though slaves, were better off in America than free Negroes in ‘benighted, heathen, Africa” and “so did Phillis,” their slave” (Levernier, 1993:172).

1.2. Blacks in the Bible

Curiously enough, inside the West that had kidnapped and held millions of African souls in captivity, there were honorable white Christian men and women, who believed that Africans were full human beings just like themselves. So, when they saw Wheatley’s intellectual demonstration, they “eventually found in her poems an effective weapon with which to attack White misconceptions and prejudice concerning the nature and quality of the African mind” (Abarry, 1990, p. 386). Later on, “Her life and works were exploited to prove that African-Americans, like Euro-Americans, could also possess a benign soul and intellectual and social graces given favorable human conditions, such as the abolition of slavery” (p. 386). Sondra A. O’Neale (1985) also observed that Wheatley’s writing challenged “white Christians’ faith in the effectiveness of Christ’s atonement. Either His sacrificial redemption was totally effective for all who come unto Him, regardless of original or inherited sin, or it was effective for no one” (p. 509). The Christian West has never got any true Biblical verse that sustains the kidnapping and the enslavement of Africans or any other people.

Sondra A. O’Neale (1985) pointed out that “Not only Black writers, but also the entire eighteenth-century Bible-reading community knew that in the Bible Ethiopians were

depicted as royalty and were accorded the greatest dignities and honors” (p. 510). She noted that “Moses, the Israeli deliverer, married an Ethiopian woman; King Solomon supposedly had a love affair with the Queen of Sheba (i.e., of Ethiopia); Ebed-Melech, an Ethiopian statesman in service in Judah, rescued the prophet Jeremiah” (p. 510). Beside this, she revealed that “the Treasurer to Queen Candace of Ethiopia was the first non-Palestine gentile to whom the gospel was taken in the New Testament” (p. 510). In the same perspective, O’Neale observed that “In one of her letters to Hopkins, Wheatley cites one from Psalms 68:31-32: ‘Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hand unto God’” (p. 510). It would not hurt to remember that when little Jesus’ life was threatened, it was in Egypt, Africa, that he found asylum and refuge. There in Egypt, Black Africans had preserved and protected the life of the very Master the Christian West pretended to serve. And many other instances where Africans have played key roles in the Bible are rampant.

2. Phillis Wheatley’s “On Being Brought from Africa to America”

This section focuses on the analysis of Wheatley’s poem. In this respect, it is worth noting that centuries later, there had been heated debates about Phillis Wheatley’s betrayal to her race and condoning slavery. According to Mark Edelman Boren (2004), “Proponents of the Black Aesthetics movement saw Wheatley as turning her back on her roots and her race” (p. 40). Such proponents have to bear in mind that Wheatley had lived in a context where she could be killed just for a poem, at the hands of white people who had been enslaving free African people in the name of God, the Creator of all human lives. It is much more comfortable for them to just criticize her. Instead, Blacks should concentrate on what is positive in her life. He also revealed that “On the surface, for example, what has become Wheatley’s representative poem, “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” appears to condemn a pagan” (p. 40). On the other hand, Hilene Flanzbaum (1993) noticed that “the very fact that Phillis Wheatley, a black female slave, wrote at all has attracted more attention, prompted more theories, and inspired more heated debate than any line of her poetry ever has” (p. 71). This is Wheatley’s key contribution to the freedom of Blacks in the US. In the same vein, Antonio T. Bly (1997) expounded that the little Black enslaved poet used her pen to “denounce the hypocrisy practiced by white Christians, but also [to] express a strong sense of black pride to her fellow slaves, who were often read her poetry by slave masters who thought that her writings were harmless” (pp. 205-206). Astrid Franke (2004) also noted that “If we attend to the cultural context the engraving of the poet was offered to her readers, we can discern in it the public role Wheatley carefully by means of her poetry” (p. 225).

2.1. Close Reading

Phillis Wheatley’s “On Being Brought from Africa to America” is deceptively short but highly loaded with irony, tonal shifts, and rhetorical devices. Three major themes are identified in it: Christian redemption, racism and prejudice, and equality before God. The poem’s opening lines frame the speaker’s view of enslavement as “mercy” (line 1), which emphasizes salvation through Christian bondage, evoking a clear but laughing paradox. In this line and the next three ones, the speaker seems to have put Christianity higher above her “Pagan land” (line 1), and her “benighted soul” (line 2) understands “there’s a God” and “there’s a Saviour too” (lines 2-3). In this perspective, Boren (2004) noted that “With the second line, Wheatley introduces the theme of education - mercy has “Taught” the speaker’s soul “to understand” that the “God” and “Saviour” of line three exists” (p. 45). Yet, there is curiosity and a kind of innocence in this assertion, since Africans have always

referred to God, the Creator of which their other gods are but tangible emanations. For a keen reader, the speaker is setting a trap for white listeners who hear only what they wish to hear. It then becomes clear that Wheatley uses ambiguity to cover her true mind in this poem.

The very first word of the poem, “’Twas”, is a genuine clue into this strategy. “’Twas” grammatically should be “It was”. Shortening it does not only shift the vowel sound “I” to the consonant sound “T”, but also silences it. This technique suggests that the poet passes a silence message just like the silent “I.” She meant a vowel, yet, her oppressor only heard a consonant sound. Mary Catherine Loving (2016) observed that at first glance, Wheatley’s poem “fills in the forms she has appropriated for her own use: she appears to explain the reason for her conversion to Christianity, crediting the system of Christian slave ownership for her insight; however, the poet wears a mask” (p. 69). William J. Scheick (1995) also corroborated this mask of ambiguity. “Wheatley’s use of ambiguity, it is reasonable to suspect, was partially influenced by her exposure to Enlightenment thinking on human rights and abolitionist theory” (p. 123). It becomes crystal clear Christian West’s racial prejudice that prompted Wheatley’s adoption of ambiguity as strategy.

For those who think that Wheatley should have been more defiant to the white power structure of the era, Sondra A. O’Neale (1985) explained that “the resistance was rarely overt and, when it did surface in violence, the conflict usually ended with public execution of scores of Blacks” (p. 501). Defiance then was not the appropriate strategy. “The sacrifices that Wheatley or any other slave may have made to the guerrilla warfare are not, and perhaps will never be, a matter of historic record” (p. 501). Still, through all kinds of subtleties, the poet managed to express white Christians’ scornful view toward Blacks, “our sable race” (line 5), whom they associated with evil. And because Africans were associated with evil, whites have found it morally sound to commit any kinds of crimes against them. “Indeed, crimes committed against the African body is the most crucial evidence Wheatley offers in her criticism of Christian slave ownership, and she begins that criticism by recounting the movement of her own body” (Loving, 2016, p. 69). So, one can easily see that the title of the poem, “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” itself is plain evidence and a strong accusation against those who brought the speaker to America. This is a criminal deed.

By so doing, the poet clearly distinguished between the evil nature of enslaving African people and God’s mercy. O’Neale (1985) pointed out that “By maintaining a clear distinction between the evils of slavery and God’s merciful, providential redemption, she offers a way to avoid the imperial Christian rhetoric that some used to rationalize the slave trade” (p. 562). Coming back to the poet’s strategy of ambiguity, “my benighted soul” (line 2) “suggests that the soul was benighted - that is, overtaken by darkness or “made dark, like night.” Such a reading implies that the soul was not originally dark - that something occurred to make the speaker’s soul dark” (Boren, 2004, p. 45). That factor probably is slavery.

Equality before God is the last aspect this subsection covers. The closing couplet embodies the poet’s philosophy. “Remember, *Christians, Negros*, Black as *Cain*/ May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train” (lines 7-8) seems to suggest that Blacks could be saved without undergoing slavery, just the way whites, free, could be. These closing lines simply highlight the equality of all human souls before God, their Creator. And also “Christians” is emphasized in an effort to underscore the inconsistencies between Christian principle and Christian practice” (Loving, 2016, p. 73). In the same perspective, line 7 “chastises Christian principle by alluding to the redemptive power of the blood of Christ, which, it seems, had neglected to remove the stain of sin from African converts” (p. 73).

To Boren (2004), “These lines also hold the key for reinterpreting this poem as an attack on both slavery and missionary Christianity” (p. 47). He also insisted that the last couplet “contain the lynch pin around which the various readings of this poem revolve - whether they support the traditional reading of this poem as one of gratitude, or whether, like Levernier's, they suggest the poem is ironic” (p. 47).

Abarry (1990) pointed out that Wheatley's “life and works were exploited to prove that African-Americans, like Euro-Americans, could also possess a benign soul and intellectual and social graces given favorable human conditions, such as the abolition of slavery” (p. 386). In the same spirit, Jeffery Bilbro (2012) noted that “Wheatley's memory of her own redemption models the process of remembering, and she then orders her readers to remember that the color that matters on the judgment day will not be skin color but soul color” (p. 566). He also explained that “The scornful souls who fail to keep this in mind and who oppress Africans are the ones who will receive a diabolic die” (p. 566).

It is also important to mention that through this closing couplet, Wheatley “was approaching two arguments of the slave controversy: first, the origin of the African; and second, any inherited guilt attendant to that origin which could be used as an excuse for slavery” (O'Neale, 1985, p. 509). In this regard, she “chose to attack 'Cain,' whom proslavery theologians claimed to be the murderous progenitor of Black people” (p. 509). The choice of “Cain” is very interesting since it embodies her subversion strategy. “Cain” is known for his evil doings and murder of his brother, Abel. Now, the point she was subtly raising is that between the white Christians who had left their homeland to invade other people's land, kidnapped their children, raped their women, killed their elderly, sold those they could, and the “Pagan” Africans who potentially did none of these reprehensible things, who is the true “Cain”? Once again, the title of the poem gives the perfect answer. From whatever angle slavery is taken, it is simply an indefensible matter. Bilbro (2012) elaborated that when “Balkun paraphrases Wheatley's rhetorical strategy in this poem precisely: “Christians who support, practice, or even tolerate slavery are guilty of the basest hypocrisy” (p. 566).

2.2. Stylistic analysis

Regarding the stylistic analysis, many devices are utilized to convey meaning. These devices range from poetic form, subversion, irony, biblical allusion, imagery, symbolism, diction, some core elements of graphology, and tonal shift. As for the poetic form, “Wheatley's choice of form is critical: the exact measure and rhyme of the octave are essential to masking her subversion” (Loving, 2016, p. 69). An octave is a poem of eight lines. Wheatley's octave has an AA BB CC DD rhyme pattern of four couplets. An octave also evokes a group of eight sounds A-B-C-D-E-F-G-A, seven basic sounds and a repetition of the first sound. The first line of the poem has eight words. Its last line also has eight words, and the poem is eight lines. The “poet pens sentences free of grammatical fault; they are concise, cohesive, and emphatic” (p. 69). All these elements demonstrate Wheatley's full mastery of her writing art. This mastery helped her safely and soundly navigate the risky waters of subversion.

Daniel P. Black (2005) noticed that “Wheatley's mastery of rhetorical strategy allows her the use of a “double tongue” as she seemingly genuflects before white audience while simultaneously insulting them” (p. 397). He also explained that “The game of masking is a sport that black writers played long before Dunbar. In fact ... Phillis Wheatley is the first African American writer to employ the trope of the mask” (p. 394). Mark E. Boren (2004) also elaborated on this subversion strategy. The “first

half of the poem clearly supports an earnest (Levernier's "intentionally naïve") reading that applauds both the act of the speaker's enslavement and the practice of missionary Christianity" (p. 44). This is Wheatley's strategy to bypass white Christians' vigilance. But "the last four lines contain a radical, sophisticated subversion of the first half of the poem that goes far beyond the use of irony" (p. 44). Daniel P. Black confirmed that "Dunbar, Wheatley, Sutton Griggs, Chesnutt, and other pre-twentieth-century African American writers often wrote with humor and black dialect so as to distract the hostile reader away from messages of freedom and black self-love disguised in their texts" (p. 389).

The poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America" is all about irony. While dealing with the speaker's skin, it "suggests the darkness of her African skin; it also resonates with the state of all those living in sin, including her audience" (Balkun, 2002, p. 129). From this standpoint, "To be "benighted" is to be in moral or spiritual darkness as a result of ignorance or lack of enlightenment, certainly a description with which many of Wheatley's audience would have agreed" (p. 129). The fact that the white Christian had believed in, tolerated, condoned, held share, and practiced the enslavement of human beings created by the very God they pretended to serve, has thoroughly and unquestionably "benighted" their souls. "They have become, within the parameters of the poem at least, what they once abhorred-benighted, ignorant, lost in moral darkness, unenlightened-because they are unable to accept the redemption of Africans" (p. 130).

In the same spirit, according to Paula Bennett (1998) studies have demonstrated that "Wheatley used the irony of her situation as a despised "Ethiop" in a culture that boasted of its commitment to freedom and equality as the basis for her speaker's voice and persona" (p. 65). In the same respect, Carla Willard (1995) highlighted the fact that "The nature of freedom, the brutality of slavery, and the excesses of tyranny-themes bandied about by royalist and patriot alike-are central impulses in her poetry" (p. 236). This is very curious about a poem that allegedly condoned slavery. The poet has also used Biblical allusion "carefully aligning herself with those readers who will understand the subtlety of her allusions and references, creates a space wherein she and they are joined against a common antagonist: the "some" who "view our sable race with scornful eye"" (Balkun, 2002, pp. 129-130). Those who belonged to "Some" (line 5), who "view our sable race with scornful eyes" (line 5), "are not only guilty of the sin of reviling others (which Wheatley addressed in the Harvard poem) but also guilty for failing to acknowledge God's work in saving "Negroes"" (p. 130).

Besides the various devices and stylistic features in her poem, Phillis Wheatley also utilized some elements of graphology, such as capitalization, and italics to create meaning. In the poem's title, she employs "a rhetoric of capitalization to position Africa and America as equal. In doing so, she acknowledges, certainly, the influence of American culture on her African sensibility, but she also rejects the notion of American superiority over her African self" (Loving, 2016, pp. 69-70). Her "capitalization of AFRICA and AMERICA suggests both figure prominently in the protagonist's perspective and may point to the protagonist's declaration of dual citizenship" (p. 70). In this regard, her "work can be posited as a forerunner of the term Africa[n] America[n] to denote blacks of African heritage" (p. 70). The use of capitalization is coupled with italics. Writers employ italics to convey emphasis, a spoken tone, or an inner voice. While the emphasis gives extra force to a specific word, the inner voice reveals the shift to a character/ speaker's private thoughts. The spoken tone underscores how a voice sounds: whispering, shouting, or sarcasm. They may be soft, loud or gentle; high, low or medium; fast, slow, or steady; smooth, rough, breathy, nasal, warm, or

cold; sad, angry, nervous or happy. In the poem, “Pagan” (line 1), “Saviour” (line 3) and “Christians, Negroes, Cain” (line 7) are all capitalized and italicized. Loving (2016) pointed out that “The italics and capitalization of “pagan” is an early indication of the poet's intent to subvert language. In this opening line, Wheatley discounts not only the received image of her homeland but also her buy-in of Christianity” (p. 70). Moreover, by “italicizing “Christians,” “Negroes,” and “Cain,” Wheatley links the three rhetorically, questions Christian dogma regarding the power of baptism to remove sin” (p. 73).

Another important aspect of the poem is tonal shift. Were all these narrative strategies, stylistic features and rhetorical devices not arranged in a logical, cohesive and coherent structure, meaning in “On Being Brought from Africa to America” would be very challenging. Such a structure is embodied in the tonal shift. This poem has three tonal shifts: gratitude and redemption (lines 1-4), criticism of racism (lines 5-6), and assertion of equality (lines 7-8). These shifts are marked by three full stops, the first at the end of line four, the second at the end of line six, and the last one at the end of line eight. Moving from one tonal shift to another demonstrates Wheatley's rhetorical genius. She starts her poem by showing gratitude for Christian discourse of salvation (her strategy of assimilation), then switches to expose and denounce racial prejudice (subtle resistance), and ends by demanding theological recognition of Blacks' humanity and equality (authoritative correction).

In the tone of gratitude and redemption the first four lines deal with, the speaker only talks about internal and individual experience (me, my, and I). But from the fifth line which marks the beginning of the second tonal shift that experience has become collective and external (our, their). “Until this point, the attention of the work has been directed inward, but the language in line five shifts to include all enslaved Africans. Note the poet's use of the plural pronoun “our” rather than the single pronoun “my”” (Loving, 2016, p. 72). The ultimate goal of the poet's strategies is to tell the stories of enslaved Black people from an African perspective. And this is exactly what Afrocentricity is all about.

3. Claude McKay's “Enslaved”

Claude McKay's sonnet “Enslaved” (1922) goes in the same line as Phillis Wheatley's octave “On Being Brought from Africa to America” to denounce the Christian West's hypocrisy in the dehumanization of Blacks. Like Phillis Wheatley whom many critics considered as not vehement enough in the struggle for liberation, McKay was not fully accepted in his community, at least, at the beginning. According to Geta J. MeSeur (1989), “All poetry, McKay thought, should be judged by its own merits, not by categories of race and nationality. The double standard was something which he opposed, and this too was carried over into his lifestyle” (p. 306). Later on, as he continued to support the Black cause, that earlier consideration faded. “That McKay's self-assurance, like his passionate devotion to the cause of the black race, did a yeoman's service to the advancement of African American literature is a fact widely, and correctly, accepted” (Chauhan, 1990, p. 71).

Claude McKay (1970) himself vehemently asserted that “Never in my life did I feel prouder of being an African, a black; and make no mistake about it” (p. 168). It is surely this deep sense and pride in his blackness which had “His poems truly served as a clarion call to the New Negro, “the younger generation [that was] vibrant with a new psychology”” (Chauhan, 1990, p. 70). Yet, he continuously “felt a great tension between black content and traditional white form, and this, for him, was perhaps the hardest

problem to solve. He grappled with the two as to where the thrust of his writing should be" (McSeur, 1989, p. 299).

3.1. Close Reading

Claude McKay's "Enslaved" explores the concepts of historical suffering, Christian hypocrisy, rage and vengeance, and liberation through destruction. Contrary to Wheatley, McKay voluntarily migrated from Jamaica to the US in 1912. When Walter Jekyll, his mentor, asked him whether he knew how Blacks lived in the US, McKay replied, "I said that I knew, but that America was a great modern land and that I wanted to go there" (McLeod, 1980, p. 337). McKay wanted to be at the center of the zeitgeist of the era. To his dismay, the type and the depth of hatred and racism experienced there was simply cataclysmic. John Hillyer Condit (1979) observed that "This phenomenon proved too devastating to his need for wholeness for any rationalization through some combination of romantic pessimism and social Darwinism" (p. 354). In his approach to analyzing poetry, Robert A. Lee (1974) stated that "I suggest severe limits on the reading of a poem; above all, its context must be understood as specifically as possible" (p. 221). This is the case of McKay's "Enslaved" of which the central theme of historical suffering of Blacks must be thoroughly assessed against the background of the racial violence of the era. "The race riots in the United States during 1919 were apparently the great catalyst for McKay; thereafter, he threw his lot in with the forces of reform, both socially and politically" (McLeod, 1980:339).

When the speaker says, "Oh when I think of my long suffering race,/ For weary centuries despised, oppressed,/ Enslaved and lynched, denied a human place/ In the great life line of the Christian West" (lines 1-4) s/he joins their voice to Wheatley's speaker to elaborate on the historical and on-going suffering of Blacks. But here, the voice is plain and straightforward, and void of subversion and subtleties. This quartet expresses how the poet felt about the long-suffering of his race. This point is also underscored in his debut prose, *Trial by Lynching* (1925), a collection of short stories, which stands in for "McKay's first experiment in prose fiction, reveals the author's anguish at the barbarity of Southern ways and his deep-felt sympathy for those deprived of self-respect, justice, and life itself" (McLeod, 1980, pp. 336-337). By highlighting these elements, the poet not only unveiled the accumulated pain of his people over centuries but also grounded his poem in a collective historical memory.

The last line of the quartet introduces the hypocrisy of the Christian West, which preaches salvation and redemption of human souls while dehumanizing Blacks and other non-whites. The result is that, "in the Black Land disinherited,/ Robbed in the ancient country of its birth,/ (lines 5-6). If Christianity, coming from God, is of a higher mindset, how come those who possess that higher spirit would fall so low as to possess other human beings who are the possession of the very God they pretended to serve? That is incongruity, insanity, and hypocrisy. When your religion is better than Africans', should it not demonstrate values higher than those of Africans? If Africans were viewed as "pagans" and they had practiced slavery (a pagan low-value system), would Christians, who were of a higher mindset, not teach those "retarded" Africans to do better by putting an end to that pagan internal slavery? By not only joining in this pagan low-value system of slavery, but also raising it to an industrial level, the Christian West had brought itself lower than pagan Africans. This automatically positions African paganism in a morally higher position. Through this couplet (lines 5-6) with the first quartet (lines 1-4), forming a sextet (1-6), Claude McKay indicts

the “Christian West” by exposing the contradictions between the faith it professes and the cruel, brutal oppression of slavery.

The speaker moves on by changing gears. “My heart grows sick with hate, becomes as a lead,/ For this my race that has no home on earth” (lines 7-8) depicts anger and rage. This couplet not only portrays visceral hatred and despair, but also intensifies the emotional charge of the poem. In the previous sestet, the speaker was using their mind, “When I think”, but here they are in their heart, the seat of emotions, “My heart grows”. This couplet also constitutes the crucible of wrath holding in itself destructive forces. These destructive forces are what the speaker articulates clearly in last sestet, “Then from the dark depths of my soul I cry/ To the avenging angel to consume/ The white man’s world of wonders utterly:/ Let it be swallowed in earth’s vast womb,/ Or upward roll as sacrificial smoke/ To liberate my people of its yoke” (lines 9-14). Here, the rage and wrath explode into revenge, in the guise of liberation of Black people through the destruction of the white man’s destructive power. This sestet reveals the speaker’s profound desire and perpetual prayer, and dramatizes the apocalyptic vision of liberation through destruction as purification.

3.2. Stylistic Analysis

The stylistic analysis of Claude McKay’s “Enslaved” covers the use of literary devices and tonal shifts. Stylistics is the framework employed in this regard. Although the poem counts many devices, only personification, metaphor, biblical allusion, imagery, tone and diction, rhyme scheme and tonal shifts are to be assessed in this subsection. Claude McKay (1937) said “I wrote a series of sonnets expressing my bitterness, hate and love” (p. 86). In “Enslaved” it expresses bitterness, rage, hate and revenge. McKay wants “The universality of his romanticism and poetry surpasses color or time lines” (MeSeur, 1989, p. 308), and he “makes use of the elements of prosody to construct a finely wrought sonnet” (Lee, 1974, p. 216). Not only “Enslaved” sonnet’s “overt form is English, with the structure of three quatrains and a final couplet giving the conventional effect of sequential argument and concluding moral apothegm” (p. 216), but its theme also “is simultaneously expressed by the Italian sonnet form’s division into sections of eight and six lines, situation and resolution” (p. 216). In the same respect, his predilection for the sonnet “can be partly explained by the challenge inherent in a demanding verse form practiced by many of the greatest English poets. Mastering the sonnet would be irrefutable proof that he too was “a real poet”” (Condit, 1979, p.359).

To bring about his indictment about his “long-suffering race,/ For weary centuries, despised, oppressed,/ Enslaved, lynched, denied a human place” (lines 1-3), McKay had to personify the “Christian West” (line 4). In his eyes, the “Christian West” is the personified guilty entity that caused the Black people to suffer for centuries. Considering the nature of the suffering, the speaker’s heart growing sick with hate, “becomes as lead” (line 7). This metaphor portrays deep despair and intense bitterness. The “lead heart”, in turn, opens the door to a Biblical allusion, the “avenging angel” (line 10), conjuring divine justice against the West. The imagery of “earth’s vast womb” (line 12) and “sacrificial smoke” (line 13) also invokes annihilation as

purification. To bind all these devices together, the poet uses a harsh tone and uncompromising language, which intensify the poem's strength.

As far as tonal shift is concerned, "Enslaved" moves from grief, rage, invocation to destruction. The poet does so to dramatize the speaker's emotional and spiritual journey from lamentation to ultimate hope. While tone is mournful, heavy with grief and reflective from lines 1 to 6, it is bitter, visceral and despairing in lines 7 and 8, fiery, apocalyptic and militant from lines 9 to 12, and ritualistic, destructive and transformative in the final couplet. Overall, this poem offers a vision of liberation via cosmic renewal and rebirth, where the white man is rendered impotent, incapable of doing any further harm like those the world has witnessed since the 15th century.

Conclusion

The conception, the justification, the planning, the execution, the preservation and the systematization of the enslavement of the African people as Phillis Wheatley's "On Being Brought from Africa to America" and Claude McKay's "Enslaved" have clearly demonstrated highlight the fact that the concepts of Christianity and the West are antinomic. The barbaric deeds of kidnapping, deportation, selling and buying of human beings, lynching, racism, and things alike across centuries speak volumes about the West being unable to follow the basic principles. There is a huge paradoxical gap between the Christian rhetoric of salvation and the enslavement the West practices. This paper intended to expose the hypocrisy and the incongruity of Christian Western salvation rhetoric and the crude reality of slavery through Afrocentricity and stylistics. Afrocentricity has served as a corrective lens which restores African dignity and agency. It not only re-centers African humanity through both poems, but also exposes Western cultural illiteracy. Both theories help contrast Wheatley's veiled irony with McKay's overt condemnation of slavery. As this paper closes, it is important to re-read African American poetics as critiques of Eurocentric moral and spiritual contradictions.

References

- Abarry, A. (1990). The African-American legacy in American literature. *Journal of Black Studies*, 20(4), 379-398.
- Balkun, M. M. (2002). Phillis Wheatley's construction of otherness and the rhetoric of performed ideology. *African American Review*, 36(1), 121-135.
- Bennett, P. (1998). Phillis Wheatley's vocation and the paradox of the "Afric muse". *PMLA*, 113(1), 64-76.
- Billbro, J. (2012). Who are lost and how they're found: Redemption and theodicy in Wheatley, Newton, and Cowper. *Early American Literature*, 47(3), 561-589.
- Black, D. P. (2005). Literary subterfuge: Early African American writing and the trope of the mask. *CLA Journal*, 48(4), 387-403.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/44325281>

- Bly, A. T. (1997). Wheatley's 'To the University of Cambridge in New England.' *Explicator*, 55(4), 205-208.
- Boren, M. E. (2004). A fiery furnace and a sugar train: Metaphors that challenge the legacy of Phillis Wheatley's "On being brought from Africa to America". *CEA Critic*, 67(1), 38-56.
- Chauhan, P. S. (1990). Rereading Claude McKay. *CLA Journal*, 34(1), 68-80. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44322112>
- Condit, J. H. (1979). An urge toward wholeness: Claude McKay and his sonnets. *CLA Journal*, 22(4), 350-364. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44329421>
- Flanzbaum, H. (1993). Unprecedented liberties: Re-reading Phillis Wheatley. *MELUS: Society for the Study of Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, 18(13), 71-82.
- Franke, A. (2004). Phillis Wheatley, melancholy muse. *The New England Quarterly*, 77(2), pp. 224-251.
- Goldenberg, D. M. (2003). *The curse of ham: Race and slavery in early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. Princeton University Press.
- Harris, W. (2008). Phillis Wheatley, diaspora subjectivity, and the African American canon. *MELUS*, 33(3), 27-43.
- Lee, R. A. (1974). On Claude McKay's 'If we must die'. *CLA Journal*, 18(2), 216-221. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44329132>
- Levernier, J. A. (1993). Style as protest in the poetry of Phillis Wheatley. *Style*, 27(2), 172-193.
- Loving, M. C. (2016). Uncovering subversion in Phillis Wheatley's signature poem: "On being brought from Africa to America". *Journal of African American Studies*, 20(1), 67-74.
- McKay, C. (1922). *Harlem shadows*. Harcourt, Brace and Company.
- McKay, C. (1925). *Trial by lynching: Stories about Negro life in North America*. The Worker's Library.
- McKay, C. (1937). *A Long way from home*. Lee Furman.
- McLeod, M. B. (1980). Claude McKay's Russian interpretation: "The American negro". *CLA Journal*, 23(3), 336-351. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44328580>
- MeSeur, G. J. (1989). Claude McKay's romanticism. *CLA Journal*, 32(3), 296-308. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44322030>
- O'Neale, S. A. (1985). Challenge to Wheatley's critics: "There was no other 'game' in town". *The Journal of Negro Education*, 54(4), 500-511.
- Pope Nicholas V. (1452). *Dum Diversas* [Papal bull]. Vatican Archives.
- Pope Nicholas V. (1455). *Romanus Pontifex* [Papal bull]. Vatican Archives.
- Samkutty, E. C. (1992). The Promised land in Afro-American poetic vision. *CLA Journal*, 35(4), 422-431.
- Scheick, W. J. (1995). Subjection and prophecy in Phillis Wheatley's verse paraphrases of scripture. *College Literature*, 22(3), 122-130.
- The Holy Bible, King James Version. (1769/2017). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1611)

Willard, C. (1995). Wheatley's turns of praise: Heroic entrapment and the paradox of revolution. *American Literature*, 67(2), 233-256.

Wheatley, P. (1773). *Poems on various subjects, religious and moral*. A. Bell.

