

Fred M. Fetrow On "A Letter from Phyllis Wheatley

Here the poet uses an epistolary technique in the creation of what he called a "psychogram," a psychological profile of this first recognized American black poet within her historical-cultural context. Ostensibly written from England to her friend Orbour Tanner in 1773, the letter derives its verisimilitude from Hayden's imitation of Wheatley's "voice" through his deft creation of vocal cadence, latinate diction, and a plausible "style."

The resultant poem abounds in irony. Its drama grows out of disparities between those ironies Wheatley notes and those that are lost on her, but not the reader. For example, she mentions the ironic contrast between her recent uneventful ocean crossing and the earlier westward crossing as a slave, but it is the reader who senses the irony in her assumption that her enslavement ("my Destined/ Voyage") was God-willed. She also sees no disparity in being received by the nobility, yet excluded from joining her hosts at supper ("I dined apart / like captive Royalty"). As a true "Patriot," she seems more concerned about the loyalty of being presented at the English court, but such a prospect is not without ironies she does perceive ("I thought of Pocahontas"). Even in "Idyllic England," she realizes, "there is / no Eden without its Serpent," yet in expectable neoclassical manner she resists "Sombreness," even in intimate correspondence. Hayden further humanizes his subject with her closing anecdote about an incident she considers "Droll." Hayden's fully dimensioned version of the "Sable Muse" displays her appreciation of life's lighter ironies also, as shown by her amusement at being asked by a blackened young British CHIMNEY SWEEP, "Does you, M'lady, sweep chimneys too?"

Publication Status:

[Excerpted Criticism](#) [1]

Publication:

- Private group -

Criticism Target:

[Robert Hayden](#) [2]

Tags:

[psychogram](#) [3]

[American black poet](#) [4]

[England](#) [5]

[Orbour Tanner](#) [6]

[Irony](#) [7]

[ocean crossing](#) [8]

[westward crossing](#) [9]

[slave](#) [10]

[British Chimney Sweep](#) [11]

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Links

[1] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism>

[2] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/poet/robert-hayden>

[3] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/psychogram>

- [4] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/american-black-poet>
- [5] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/england>
- [6] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/orbour-tanner>
- [7] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/irony>
- [8] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/ocean-crossing>
- [9] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/westward-crossing>
- [10] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/slave>
- [11] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/british-chimney-sweep>