

"On Being Brought": How Phillis Wheatley Peters Brought Sarcasm into American Resistance

By Claire Litchfield

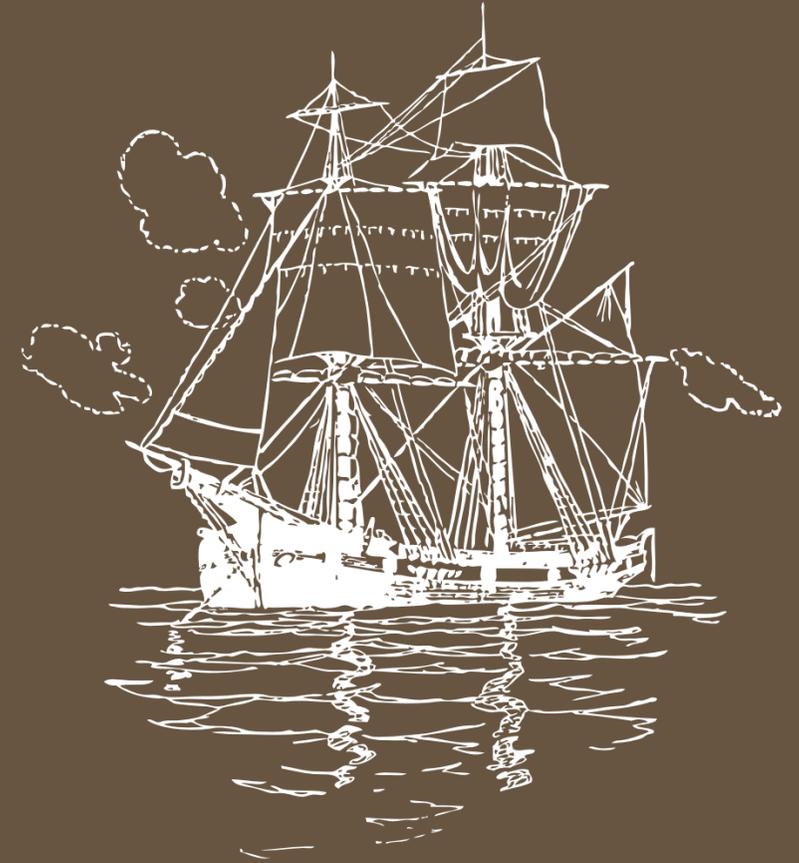


Image Source: "Poems on Various Subjects"
1773

Sarcasm & Irony

Irony is the specific literary device that best includes sarcastic language. The terms "irony" and "sarcasm" were first used to describe statements with double meaning in the 16th century.

"Sarcasm" specifically includes "cutting expression" and is "sharp" and "bitter."



Sarcasm & Irony

These two words describe exactly what Wheatley Peters was doing in her poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America."

On being brought from A F R I C A to
A M E R I C A.

'T W A S 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, 5
" Their colour is a diabolic die."

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

On being brought from A F R I C A to
A M E R I C A.

'T W A S 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 fable race with scornful eye, 5
" Their colour is a diabolic die."
Remember, *Christians, Negros*, black as *Cain*,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

For decades, Wheatley's most anthologized poem has been read as a wholehearted acceptance of Christianity, and turning her back on her African roots. More recently, scholars have dug deeper into her stylistic choices and form for a different, more "subversive", understanding. (Loving 69)

On being brought from A F R I C A to
A M E R I C A.

'T W A S 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 fable race with scornful eye, 5
" Their colour is a diabolic die."
Remember, *Christians, Negros*, black as *Cain*,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

This poem is off-putting when read at face value, giving no agency to Wheatley Peters to do anything but rewrite exactly what she was hearing in her enslavers' household.

I argue that not only does she use sarcasm with clear intent, but also that this poem marks the beginning of the American literary tradition of using sarcasm as resistance.

On being brought from A F R I C A to
A M E R I C A.

'T W A S 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 fable race with scornful eye, 5
" Their colour is a diabolic die."
Remember, *Christians, Negros*, black as *Cain*,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

The way Wheatley Peters highlights the difference between words in italics and words in quotes can help her readers follow which words are not her own, and may not have an exact translation in her native language. The italicized words were likely common vocabulary for the time, while the quote was probably a more specific comment.

On being brought from A F R I C A to
A M E R I C A.

'T W A S 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 fable race with scornful eye, 5
“ Their colour is a diabolic die.”
Remember, *Christians, Negros*, black as *Cain*,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

Reread the poem out loud,
and make sarcastic air quotes
around the italicized words.

On being brought from A F R I C A to
A M E R I C A.

'T W A S 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 fable race with scornful eye, 5

“ Their colour is a diabolic die.”

Remember, *Christians, Negros*, black as *Cain*,

May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

The sarcasm and irony of Wheatley using those terms becomes more clear to the modern ear with the extra reminder of sarcasm.

However, to her contemporaries, these font and punctuation choices were likely read as emphasis, rather than irony.

On being brought from A F R I C A to
A M E R I C A.

'T W A S 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 fable race with scornful eye, 5
" Their colour is a diabolic die."
Remember, *Christians, Negros*, black as *Cain*,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

Additionally, Wheatley would have faced "severe consequences" if she made outright anti-establishment statements, both from her enslavers and her readers. (Levernier 173)

Her use of irony and sarcasm through form and style protected her.

Sarcasm as Resistance

Sarcasm and irony give the author the space to write one thing and mean another. Wheatley Peters takes advantage of the literary devices to get her book published in 1773, before the United States existed and nearly one hundred years before slavery was abolished.

Sarcasm as Resistance

Wheatley Peters uses irony and sarcasm in her poetry to subtly resist institutionalized ideas of racism. She is the founding mother of the trope that becomes ingrained in American culture.

20th – Century

Example

Here is a more modern example to explain my argument.

BORN
IN THE
U.S.A.

"Born in the U.S.A."

By Bruce Springsteen
Track 1 on the 1984 Album: *Born
in the U.S.A*

BRUCE
SPRINGSTEEN

"Born in the U.S.A."

 Bruce Springsteen - Born in the U.S.A. (Official Video) Share



vevo

Watch on  YouTube

Patriotism or Criticism?

In the wake of the Vietnam War, many veterans came home to an unwelcoming country. The chorus Springsteen belts on stage sounds patriotic, if those are the only words an audience remembers.

To the Vietnam vets, however, the repeated "Born in the U.S.A./ I was born in the U.S.A now" served as a plea to remember that these men went to war because they were drafted, because they were simply "born in the U.S.A."

Patriotism or Criticism?

Whether the dual meaning was intentional on Springsteen's part is up to interpretation. In one interview, Springsteen said that his initial title for the song was "Vietnam Blues," suggesting that he made the conscious decision to juxtapose irony and patriotism in the lyrics to criticize the government and society.

One annotator on Genius.com comments that the change from a somber song to a "hard-rocking version...infused with a sense of bitter sarcasm" is what makes the song such a classic.



"Born in the U.S.A." tour.
Ebet Roberts, Referns

"On being brought from Africa to America"

Phillis Wheatley Peters's poetry, when read with a sarcastic tone, showcases early resistance in the American psyche (even before the U.S.A. existed). Her diction choices help her poems engage with the contemporary Christian audience and patrons of the volume, as well as communicate about the larger issue of forcible religious conversion.

In Conclusion:

Wheatley Peters's use of sarcasm as resistance was perfectly timed with the American Revolution, effectively intertwining sarcasm and resistance for centuries of Americans to follow.

"Born in the U.S.A."

Bruce Springsteen's positionality as a Vietnam-era singer gave him the ability to write a song that can represent the American patriotism, while also pointing out major systematic issues surrounding the military.

Bibliography

"irony, n." *Cambridge English Dictionary*.

Mikle, Jean. "Springsteen 'born in the U.S.A.' Global Tour's Humble Start at the Stone Pony." Asbury Park Press, 8 June 2019,
www.app.com/story/news/history/2019/06/08/springsteen-born-usa-tour-stone-pony/1205708001/.

"sarcasm, n." *Cambridge English Dictionary*.

Wheatley Peters, Phillis. *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. 1773, Internet Archive,
https://archive.org/details/poemsonvariousu00whea_1/page/n7/mode/2up.

Wheatley Scholarship

- Levernier, James A. “Style as Protest in the Poetry of Phillis Wheatley.” *Style*, vol. 27, no. 2, 1993, pp. 172–93. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42946037>.
- Loving, MaryCatherine. “Uncovering Subversion in Phillis Wheatley’s Signature Poem: ‘On Being Brought from AFRICA to AMERICA.’” *Journal of African American Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2016, pp. 67–74. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44508165>.

Reflection

The hardest part of this project for me was deciding what topic I wanted to focus on, as there is so much that PWP had done to impact American life and literature. To organize my presentation, I tried to follow a normal essay structure, giving the literary background I will use, before jumping into my specific close readings, and overarching claims. I definitely struggled putting all my thoughts onto the presentation itself! Normally for presentations, I have just a few bullets and talk about them, but I had to be a little more creative with this project to include both space on the slides and the transitions between ideas.