

liberty and peace phillis wheatley analysis

Liberty and Peace: An Analysis of Phillis Wheatley's Works

Phillis Wheatley, one of the first published African American poets, emerged in the 18th century as a powerful voice for liberty and peace. Living at a time when the transatlantic slave trade was at its height, Wheatley's poetry reflects her unique experiences, her deep understanding of the ideals of freedom, and her pursuit of peace amidst the turmoil of her life as an enslaved person. This article delves into her exploration of these themes, examining her works, historical context, and the impact they had on both her contemporaries and future generations.

Historical Context

To fully appreciate Wheatley's treatment of liberty and peace, it is essential to understand the historical backdrop against which she wrote.

The Life of Phillis Wheatley

- Background: Born in West Africa around 1753, Wheatley was kidnapped and brought to America at a young age. She was sold into slavery and purchased by the Wheatley family of Boston, who recognized her intellectual potential and provided her with an education.
- Literary Recognition: By the age of 13, Wheatley had begun to write poetry, and her work gained recognition, leading to the publication of her first book, "Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral," in 1773. This made her the first African American woman to publish a book.
- Cultural Climate: Wheatley's work was published during a time of significant political upheaval in America, as the colonies were striving for independence from British rule. The ideals of liberty and freedom were at the forefront of American revolutionary thought.

Wheatley's Literary Contributions

Wheatley's poetry is rich with references to classical themes, religious sentiments, and Enlightenment ideals. Her works often grapple with the contradictions inherent in the notion of liberty, especially considering her own status as a slave.

- Literary Style: Wheatley's style is heavily influenced by Neoclassicism. Her use of iambic pentameter and heroic couplets reflects the literary conventions of her time while allowing her to explore profound themes.
- Themes: The themes of liberty and peace pervade her work, as she often contrasts the ideals of freedom with the harsh realities of slavery.

Liberty in Wheatley's Poetry

Wheatley's exploration of liberty is multifaceted. She grapples with the concept of freedom both personally and universally.

Personal Liberty

In many of her poems, Wheatley reflects on her own experience as an enslaved person and the paradox of her existence.

- Self-Identification: In her poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America," Wheatley reflects on her transformation from a state of bondage to one of enlightenment. She frames her enslavement as a divine plan, suggesting that her experience has led to greater spiritual understanding.
- Cultural Commentary: Wheatley challenges the prejudices of her time by asserting her intellectual capabilities and her right to freedom. By highlighting her own achievements, she contests the notion that enslaved individuals are inferior.

Universal Liberty

Wheatley's poetry extends beyond her personal narrative, engaging with broader themes of freedom.

- Call for Freedom: In "To His Excellency, General Washington," Wheatley expresses her support for the American Revolution and the pursuit of liberty. She invokes the spirit of freedom and encourages the fight against tyranny.
- Contrast with Oppression: She juxtaposes the ideals of the American Revolution with the reality of slavery, calling attention to the hypocrisy of a nation fighting for its freedom while enslaving others.

Peace in Wheatley's Works

Peace is another central theme in Wheatley's poetry, often intertwined with her thoughts on liberty.

Spiritual Peace

Wheatley's religious faith plays a crucial role in her conception of peace.

- Divine Providence: Many of her poems reflect a belief in divine providence, suggesting that true peace comes from a relationship with God. In her poem "A Hymn to the Evening," she invokes the tranquility of nature as a reflection of divine order.
- Inner Peace: Wheatley often emphasizes the importance of inner peace, achieved through faith and moral integrity. This theme resonates in her works that discuss the struggles faced by individuals in a tumultuous world.

Peace Among Nations

Wheatley also advocates for peace on a larger scale.

- Unity: In her poems, she often promotes the idea of unity among people, regardless of their background or status. She envisions a world where individuals embrace peace and work towards common goals.
- Critique of War: While Wheatley supports the fight for liberty, she also expresses the desire for peace, cautioning against the ravages of war. Her work often reflects a nuanced understanding of conflict, recognizing that while struggle is sometimes necessary, the ultimate goal should always be harmony.

Impact and Legacy

Wheatley's contributions to literature and her exploration of liberty and peace have left a lasting legacy.

Influence on Future Generations

- Cultural Icon: As one of the first African American poets, Wheatley paved the way for future generations of writers and activists. Her work has inspired countless individuals to explore themes of identity, freedom, and justice.
- Literary Significance: Wheatley's poetry has become a cornerstone of African American literature, studied for its artistic merit and its profound commentary on the human condition.

Reevaluation of her Work

In recent years, scholars have reexamined Wheatley's poetry, recognizing her as a complex figure who navigated the challenges of her time with remarkable grace and insight.

- Critical Analysis: Contemporary scholars analyze her work through various lenses, including postcolonial theory, feminist criticism, and African American studies, highlighting the depth of her engagement with themes of liberty and peace.
- Continued Relevance: Wheatley's exploration of freedom and her calls for peace resonate in today's social justice movements, illustrating the enduring nature of her message.

Conclusion

Phillis Wheatley's poetry remains a powerful testament to the struggle for liberty and the pursuit of peace. Through her unique perspective as an enslaved woman, she illuminated the complexities of freedom and the importance of harmony in human society. Her contributions have not only enriched American literature but have also provided a critical voice in the ongoing dialogue about race,

identity, and justice. As we reflect on her work, we are reminded of the timeless nature of her themes and the relevance they hold in our contemporary world.

Frequently Asked Questions

What themes of liberty are present in Phillis Wheatley's poetry?

Phillis Wheatley's poetry often explores the theme of liberty, particularly in the context of her own experiences as an enslaved African American. She emphasizes the importance of freedom, both for herself and for her people, while also highlighting the contradictions of a society that values liberty yet perpetuates slavery.

How does Phillis Wheatley address the concept of peace in her work?

Wheatley's work frequently reflects a yearning for peace, both personal and societal. She advocates for harmony and understanding, underscoring how peace is essential for the progress of humanity, especially in a world marked by conflict and oppression.

In what ways does Wheatley's background influence her writings on liberty and peace?

As an enslaved woman who was educated and published at a time when few women or African Americans were, Wheatley's background deeply influences her writings. Her unique perspective allows her to articulate a profound longing for liberty and peace, making her work both a personal reflection and a broader commentary on societal injustices.

What rhetorical devices does Wheatley use to convey her messages about liberty and peace?

Wheatley employs various rhetorical devices, such as allusion, metaphor, and personification. For example, she often alludes to biblical figures and classical literature to frame her arguments about liberty and peace in a way that resonates with her audience's values and beliefs.

How does Wheatley's poem 'On Being Brought from Africa to America' reflect her views on liberty?

In 'On Being Brought from Africa to America,' Wheatley reflects on her forced migration and the spiritual awakening it prompted. She acknowledges the brutality of slavery while also expressing gratitude for her Christian faith, suggesting that true liberty comes from spiritual enlightenment rather than mere physical freedom.

What role does religion play in Wheatley's expressions of peace?

Religion plays a significant role in Wheatley's poetry, often serving as a source of comfort and hope. She invokes Christian ideals to argue for peace and unity, suggesting that faith can inspire individuals and nations to overcome conflict and strive for a more harmonious existence.

How does Wheatley critique the societal norms of her time regarding liberty?

Wheatley critiques societal norms by juxtaposing the ideals of freedom and equality espoused by the American Revolution against the reality of slavery. She subtly challenges her audience's hypocrisy, urging them to recognize the inherent rights of all individuals, regardless of race or status.

What impact did Phillis Wheatley have on the understanding of liberty and peace in American literature?

Phillis Wheatley had a profound impact on American literature by being one of the first African American poets to publish work in the 18th century. Her exploration of liberty and peace laid the groundwork for future writers and activists, influencing the discourse surrounding freedom, race, and human rights in America.

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