To the University of Cambridge, in New

POEM TEXT

While an intrinsic ardor prompts to write,
The muses promise to assist my pen;
'Twas not long since I left my native shore
The land of errors, and *Egyptian* gloom:
Father of mercy, 'twas thy gracious hand
Brought me in safety from those dark abodes.

Students, to you 'tis giv'n to scan the heights
Above, to traverse the ethereal space,
And mark the systems of revolving worlds.
Still more, ye sons of science ye receive
The blissful news by messengers from heav'n,
How Jesus' blood for your redemption flows.
See him with hands out-stretcht upon the cross;
Immense compassion in his bosom glows;
He hears revilers, nor resents their scorn:
What matchless mercy in the Son of God!
When the whole human race by sin had fall'n,
He deign'd to die that they might rise again,
And share with him in the sublimest skies,
Life without death, and glory without end.

Improve your privileges while they stay,
Ye pupils, and each hour redeem, that bears
Or good or bad report of you to heav'n.
Let sin, that baneful evil to the soul,
By you be shunn'd, nor once remit your guard;
Suppress the deadly serpent in its egg.
Ye blooming plants of human race divine,
An Ethiop tells you 'tis your greatest foe;
Its transient sweetness turns to endless pain,
And in immense perdition sinks the soul.

SUMMARY

Since I have this natural passion for poetry, the Greek goddesses of inspiration promise to inspire my writing. It wasn't long ago that I left my native Africa, a land full of human error and the misery of slavery (of the kind caused by the Egyptians in the Bible). Merciful Lord, it was your loving hand that ensured my safety when I was enslaved and taken from Africa. You students of Harvard—you are tasked with surveying the heights of human knowledge, traveling through the heavenly realm, and measuring the orbits of the planets. What's more, you next generation of learners, you have already heard the wonderful news told by angels and prophets: that Jesus died in order to save you (and humanity more generally). Picture him, his hands stretched out as he is crucified. Limitless love shines from his heart. He listens to those that hate him without hating them back—what unparalleled kindness from the son of God! When humankind had fallen into sin, he decided to die so that it could rise up again—so that people could live with him in the heavens, sharing a deathless life of infinite glory.

Make the most of your opportunities while you have them, students, and work hard in every hour—because your behavior, good or bad, will be reported to God. Make sure that you reject the corrosive influence of sin, and never let your guard down. Kill the snake of sin before it's even born. You flourishing flowers of our amazing human race, this African warns you that sin is your worst enemy. Sin's brief pleasure soon turns into infinite suffering, and sends people's souls to eternal damnation in Hell.

THEMES

GRATITUDE AND REDEMPTION

The poem's speaker, who can be read as Phillis Wheatley herself, addresses students at Harvard University, calling on them to be grateful for the "privileges" that God has afforded them. The speaker argues that these students, and people in general, should always remember Jesus's sacrifice on the cross and reject sinfulness. In doing so, the speaker says, people can stay close to God and avoid "endless pain."

To make her case, the speaker draws a comparison between her own life and the lives of the students. The speaker was born in Africa, the "land of errors and Egyptian gloom." (Scholars debate whether Wheatley is referring to Africa and its peoples, or to the terrible atrocities being committed there by white slave traders.) Her earlier life was spent in "dark abodes," the lack of light signaling evil, ignorance of the divine, and the threat of death—but also the hellish conditions on board the slave ship that brought her to America. But God, the speaker says, saved her by bringing her to America, and she thus remains grateful for his "mercy."

Wheatley tells her own story in order to put things in perspective, and to inspire similar gratitude to God: the students of Harvard have not had to endure the kind of

hardships that Wheatley has. Their life, comparatively, is full of "privileges."

For one thing, they've been given the opportunity to learn, something the poem presents as heavenly and blissful. The students are taught "to traverse the ethereal space"—which can mean both to reach the heights of human understanding and to understand the beauty of God's designs for the world—through disciplines from astronomy to geometry to theology.

The speaker reminds these fortunate students not to forget about "the blissful news"—that humanity was saved by Jesus through his sacrifice. Much of their studies would have had a religious framework, too, so it's also something that they should be learning to understand and appreciate more deeply. In other words, the Son of God died in order that humankind might live—including those who happen to be studying at Harvard in the 18th century!

Such "privileges," the speaker says, should not be taken for granted. Students should be grateful for God's mercy, and their lives should always be lived *for* God. Otherwise, humankind will only get lost in sin. The students' access to good education is afforded to them by God *and*, in the poem's view, should be received with gratitude and commitment *in the service* of God.

That's why the poem asks the students to acknowledge how Jesus died so that the human race "might rise again." The speaker ultimately challenges the students to be more righteous. Without "suppress[ing]" sinfulness, the students risk eternal punishment and damnation. The temporary "sweetness" of sin quickly turns to "endless pain," and Jesus's sacrifice will have been in vain. The poem implies that this is true for all people, urging them to be good Christians in "each hour" of their lives.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-30

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

While an intrinsic ardor prompts to write,
The muses promise to assist my pen;

The poem begins with an invocation. This is a brief call on the "muses"—ancient Greek goddesses—to grant the poet inspiration and creativity. Many, many famous poets began their work with invocations: John Milton, for example, asked the "heavenly muse" to help him compose *Paradise Lost*.

This invocation would thus feel pretty conventional—were it not for the fact that it's being made here, not by a standard-issue 18th-century white male poet, but by a young Black woman. Snatched from her family and enslaved when she was only a child, Phillis Wheatley was most likely the first Black woman to publish poetry in print anywhere in the world.

The allusion to the muses, then, signals that the speaker (generally taken as Wheatley herself) knows her poetry. It's clear that she is well-educated and has a passion for poetry: she describes herself as having an "intrinsic ardor" for the form, a God-given longing to write.

In other words, she's standing up for herself with this invocation, implying that she's just as inspired, and just as worthy to call on the muses, as any white male poet.

Alliteration between "prompts," "promise," and "pen" links the speaker's urge to write with the assistance of external forces and the act of writing itself. This connection subtly makes the point that the assistance of the muses need not solely belong to educated white men: this speaker, too, is "prompt[ed]" by divine inspiration. This has implications later on in the poem when the speaker compares her background to those of the students attending Harvard University (to whom this poem is addressed).

LINES 3-6

'Twas not long since I left my native shore
The land of errors, and
Egyptian
gloom:
Father of mercy, 'twas thy gracious hand
Brought me in safety from those dark abodes.

In lines 4 to 6, the speaker retells her life story thus far—a life story that is clearly Wheatley's own. It's worth bearing in mind that Wheatley was only 14 when she wrote the first draft of this poem! Only six or so years before writing this, she was captured somewhere in West Africa and taken to America, where she was enslaved.

It's here that Wheatley's story gets a little more complicated, and it's important to have some contextual knowledge when reading this poem. In these lines, Wheatley describes her former home in Africa as a "land of errors" and a "dark abode[]"—lines that have led some critics to accuse Wheatley of buying into the idea that the Western world was civilized (and pious) while the African continent was not. Others claim that what is often mistaken for a negative portrayal of Africa is actually more of an attack on the slave trade itself.

These are ambiguous lines: both "errors" and "gloom" *could* relate to the miseries of enslavement. On the other hand, the poem might be parroting the dominant Western view that Africa was in "error[]" because its inhabitants were, by and large, not yet Christian (among other out-and-out racist ideas).

There's no simple answer to the question of how Wheatley means these lines:

- Wheatley was very young at the time of writing and

was being educated by those who had enslaved her (though she was treated far better than most enslaved people). So there is indeed some chance that she came to believe in the narrative that Western culture was somehow more "enlightened" than the cultures of Africa.

- But given the Christian framework of the poem, it's certainly worth noting that, in the biblical narrative, Egypt and its rulers are depicted as enslavers. Furthermore, Wheatley explicitly condemned slavery elsewhere in her writing, and referred to enslavers as "our modern Egyptians."

Whatever the speaker's view on Africa, her deep Christian faith is clear enough. In lines 5 and 6, the speaker expresses gratitude to God—alluded to here as the "Father of mercy"—for rescuing her with his "gracious hand." She credits him with saving her from "those dark abodes." This could be a reference to the deadly conditions on board slave ships like the *Phillis*, the boat on which Wheatley was transported to America (and after which she was renamed). But it could also be a more general reference to Africa as the so-called "dark continent," in contrast to the lights of knowledge and civilization supposedly to be found in America.

LINES 7-9

Students, to you 'tis giv'n to scan the heights
Above, to traverse the ethereal space,
And mark the systems of revolving worlds.

Here, the poem directly addresses the "students" of the "University of Cambridge, in New England" mentioned in the title—that is, students at Harvard. Bear in mind that this isn't a real address: this is a 14-year-old writer *imagining* what she would say to such students! Her main point here seems to be that these students must always remember that their education is a gift. What's more, they must use that gift to serve God.

Of course, that fits right into 18th-century ideas about what academia was for. Harvard's first motto was "Truth for Christ and Church," and theology was an important part of its educational system. In presenting education as something that complements faith, the speaker is only stressing what those students would already have believed—and warning them not to forget it!

The speaker tries to make the students see how lucky they are to be receiving the benefits of learning. Using metaphor, the poem links knowledge with the heavens, saying that students are "given to scan the heights / Above": that is, through reaching out into the "heights" of human knowledge, they also gain a richer understanding of the "heights" of heaven. This opens up a symbolic link between thought and the heavens, between knowledge and the sacred.

The speaker then takes this further, discussing how the students will "traverse the ethereal space" (meaning the heavens), and also learn about the different planets through astronomy. Again, the main takeaway here is that education is all about gaining a deeper appreciation of God's divinity. What greater privilege, the speaker asks, than to learn more about how God's designs for the universe actually work? These fortunate students will get to "mark the systems of revolving worlds."

To "mark" here means to take measurements *and* to remark upon, as in to appreciate. This also plays into the overall argument that the students should be grateful for their education and, ultimately, to God.

It's important to note here that, in addressing and advising Harvard students (who, in the 18th century, would all have been white and male), this speaker is also making a serious claim about her own intellectual capabilities and poetic prowess. A young, enslaved Black woman would not have been expected to be literate, let alone educated enough to advise her supposed "superiors." While the advice the speaker gives is relatively conventional for her time, she's making a subversive political point by writing this poem at all.

LINES 10-12

Still more, ye sons of science ye receive
The blissful news by messengers from heav'n,
How Jesus' blood for your redemption flows.

As the poem continues, the speaker makes the link between education and religion even more explicit. The students, she says, are "sons of science" (who, indeed, would have been "sons"—the first female student wasn't admitted to Harvard until the 20th century). And being a "son of science" seems to make these students especially well-positioned to receive "the blissful news" that Jesus died in order to redeem humankind. Learning about the beauty and wonder of the world, in this speaker's eyes, also means gaining an even deeper appreciation of Christian faith.

Here, the poem alludes to the biblical story of the Atonement, in which Jesus, the son of God, dies on the cross in order to save the human race. By allowing himself to be sacrificed, he absolves humanity from original sin: that is, the sin that began in the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. This sacrifice reunites humanity with God: the "redemption" the speaker describes here is the promise of eternal life in God's heavenly company.

This profoundly influential story would have seemed like a matter of course to the 18th-century white American men the poem addresses, who grew up in a predominantly Christian society. In bringing up the Atonement here, the speaker is warning these students not to get so used to this story that they forget what it really means!

The poem presents the Atonement, not as something that's over and done with, but as an ongoing sacrifice—note the use of the present-tense "flows" rather than "flowed." By casting Christ's sacrifice as ongoing, the speaker presents it as a matter of urgency, something that's still intensely important.

And that urgency, the speaker suggests, should make the students of the university grateful for their education and their lives more generally. The end-stop that closes this passage lets this message sink in, giving it drama and force—as though this is an actual address to a group of students, and the speaker pauses for emphasis.

LINES 13-16

See him with hands out-stretcht upon the cross;
Immense compassion in his bosom glows;
He hears revilers, nor resents their scorn:
What matchless mercy in the Son of God!

Still in the present tense, the speaker implores the students to "See" Jesus on the cross right in front of them. There he is, "hands out-stretcht" on the crucifix, feeling only "immense compassion" for humanity even as humanity murders him. Here, the speaker presents Jesus's death with vivid imagery, making it feel fresh and immediate—not just a story from long ago.

Lines 15 and 16 marvel at the way Jesus kept his limitless compassion for humanity. Listen to the way these lines use alliteration to contrast human cruelty with Jesus's mercy:

He hears revilers, nor resents their scorn:
What matchless mercy in the Son of God!

Here, the gentle /h/ sounds of "He hears" confront the rough /r/ sounds of "revilers" and "resents"—and that meeting of soft and harsh sounds evokes exactly the Christly mercy and compassion these lines describe. That point only becomes clearer when the alliterative /m/ sounds of "matchless mercy" turn up: again, that humming, gentle /m/ sound contrasts with the snarling /r/ sounds.

All this vivid language and imagery is here to underline the speaker's major point: no education is worthwhile if it doesn't center on Christian faith. Christ's infinite goodness and selfless sacrifice should be, in her eyes, at the heart of any human effort.

LINES 17-20

When the whole human race by sin had fall'n,
He deign'd to die that they might rise again,
And share with him in the sublimest skies,
Life without death, and glory without end.

The speaker continues her retelling of the Christian story here, now moving from the crucifixion itself to Jesus's "redemption" of humankind: because Jesus "deign'd to die," all humankind can enjoy a "life without death."

Again, this story and these ideas wouldn't have been news to any of the students she's addressing in this poem. But that's exactly the point! By vividly retelling a story the students would already know by heart, the speaker is trying to make that story feel alive and important. What really matters in life, this speaker insists, is the central fact of Jesus's love and sacrifice—and any education should always be in service of that fact. In her eyes, it's important that the students keep their Christian faith front and center in whatever they do.

Just as she did in the previous four lines, the speaker uses powerful sounds to drive her point home. For instance, assonance in line 18 links Jesus's crucifixion with the salvation of mankind: the long /i/ sounds of "die" and "rise" chime together to make this clear. And when the speaker writes that humanity can now "share with [Jesus] in the sublimest skies," the sibilant /s/ sounds gives this description of heavenly eternity a hushed, whispery, awestruck tone.

The reference to the "skies" here recalls the earlier allusion to astronomy in lines 8 and 9, and the symbolism of the sky as a sacred realm. Once more, the speaker draws a connection between the literal "skies" as an object of study and the symbolic "skies" as an image of heaven. These two ways of looking upward, the speaker believes, are indistinguishable!

The end-stop that closes this stanza creates a pause for thought, and prepares the reader for the poem to shift direction. In the rest of the poem, the speaker will elaborate on why what she is saying about Jesus and the Atonement is so relevant to the students she addresses.

LINES 21-23

Improve your privileges while they stay,
Ye pupils, and each hour redeem, that bears
Or good or bad report of you to heav'n.

The speaker starts the final section of the poem with a set of clear instructions to the students.

Launching into a direct apostrophe, she warns them to "improve their privileges"—a line that, in this context, means that the students should make the most of their educations.

Remember, this poem was written in an era when few could attend university. And for a young Black woman like the speaker, that level of education was out of the question. But as this very poem demonstrates, this speaker is clearly learned beyond her years and has great respect and appreciation for knowledge and study. She speaks as someone who's just as capable as these students are, but doesn't have the same "privileges" that they do.

But the students also have to focus on being good Christians! They should make the most of "each hour" by "redeem[ing]" themselves—that is, by doing justice to the opportunities afforded to them. The word "redeem" also has pointed religious

connotations, gesturing towards the way that humankind was redeemed by Jesus's death on the cross.

The pupils' behavior, according to the speaker, will be judged by God—and so they should make sure that only "good [...] report" is sent to heaven about them.

LINES 24-26

Let sin, that baneful evil to the soul,
By you be shunn'd, nor once remit your guard;
Suppress the deadly serpent in its egg.

Continuing her instructions to the students, the speaker warns them to reject sin. Sin, she cautions, corrodes the soul, and will drag these students away from the heavenly and intellectual "heights" they aspire to.

The speaker implies that it's easy to give in to sin and that the students shouldn't let their guard down even for a moment. Perhaps the speaker is thinking of the way an academic education can lead to a position of influence over society—and of how this kind of influence can be a force for good or evil. Of course, having been enslaved as a child, Wheatley is well placed to testify to the kind of power that leads to tremendous evil.

And such evil is always waiting to pounce. In line 26, the poem alludes (again) to the Fall of Man. As told in the biblical book of Genesis, Adam and Eve bring about humanity's expulsion from the Garden of Eden when a serpent convinces them to eat fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil—the one thing God had told them not to do! The poem uses sibilance to evoke that serpent's sneaky scheming:

> Suppress the deadly serpent in its egg.

The line conjures the sound of a hissing snake—try saying it out loud!

As well as being an allusion, this is also a metaphor. Generally, it's about rejecting sin, but it also relates to youth and growing up. Like that snaky egg, these students are at an early but crucial stage in their lives. It's up to them whether they grow into sinners—or something better. The next lines will offer a more hopeful vision of growth.

LINES 27-28

Ye blooming plants of human race divine,
An Ethiop tells you 'tis your greatest foe;

The speaker now describes the students as metaphorical "blooming plants," blossoming young lives. In the previous line, the speaker warned students to "suppress" the serpent sin in its egg before it could grow; now, the poem offers a more positive image of growth and development.

Both sin and goodness can have humble, small beginnings, the poem suggests. This ties in with the speaker's earlier instruction that the students should "redeem" themselves in every hour—that is, make the most of every moment of their privileged education.

The metaphor also ties in with the sky symbolism that runs throughout the poem. Plants grow upwards, towards the celestial realm, towards God—and the students ought to do the same (rather than fall towards the serpent's sinful, lowly terrain).

Line 28 puts the speaker back on the poem's stage. Here, she refers to herself directly, calling herself "an Ethiop"—once a catch-all term for someone from the African continent. She has categorically *not* lived a life of privilege, unlike the students, so she feels well-placed to warn them against humankind's "greatest foe": sin.

This line can be interpreted in different ways:

1. Perhaps the speaker is being self-deprecating, saying that, as a woman from Africa, she has first-hand experience of the dangers of sin—having been born in a sinful place. Recall that many 18th-century white westerners saw all of Africa as backward and inferior. And some critics think Wheatley herself saw Africa this way, instructed in that belief by the family that both enslaved and educated her.
2. But on the other hand, perhaps the speaker is saying that she can speak about sin from first-hand experience—as one who has *suffered* from the sins of the powerful.

- As someone who has suffered oppression, perhaps she sees humankind's sinfulness and greed more clearly than those for whom life has been comparatively easy.
- And the students of Harvard at the time were very likely the sons of families who had benefited from trade and industry, including those active in the slave trade. Many wealthy people, whether directly or indirectly, benefitted from the mass incarceration and enslavement of Africans.

In other words, when the speaker refers to herself as "an Ethiop," she's cutting with a double-edged sword. On the one hand, she plays with her audience's expectations: those who would not expect an "Ethiop" to be versed in poetry, philosophy, and theology might feel especially abashed to be instructed in these fields by a young Black woman. On the other hand, she points out that, as an enslaved person, she understands the horrors of sinful power better than anyone: she's suffered from them directly.

LINES 29-30

Its transient sweetness turns to endless pain,
And in immense perdition sinks the soul.

The last two lines of the poem discuss the consequences of sin. Here, the speaker warns the students that, though sinful

behavior might offer temporary "sweetness" (for example, sensual pleasure), it ultimately ends up in "perdition" (or damnation).

The sibilant sounds she uses here might remind readers of the snaky perils of sin:

> Its transient sweetness turns to endless pain,

These hissing sounds remind readers of that biblical serpent, and the dangerous temptations it represents.

There's also a subtle metaphor here. Sin's brief pleasures are presented as "sweetness," a delicious but transient taste, melting away like sugar. Sin might look delicious at first, the speaker warns, but it won't last—and only rot will follow.

This sibilance continues in the last line, maintaining the same effect. In fact, the poem ends with alliterative sibilance, making the sound even more prominent:

> And in immense perdition sinks the soul.

Here, that hiss also draws attention to the metaphor of "sink[ing]." Education, this speaker has insisted throughout the poem, gives people a way to aspire to the "heights" of knowledge and virtue. Sin, by contrast, undoes all that upward growth, pulling one down to the ground—and eventually to eternal damnation in the pits of Hell.

This poem's message, in the end, is both conventional and revolutionary. On the one hand, this is a poem that reminds its intended audience—comfortable young white men, about to begin their Harvard educations—of things they would have already been likely to believe in, common 18th-century themes: the centrality of Christian faith, the glory of the intellect, the dangers of sin.

On the other hand, this is a poem that never lets those comfortable young white men forget its unlikely authorship. At the beginning and the end of the poem, this speaker reminds her privileged readers that she is an enslaved young Black woman—and that she has all the faculties, skills, and intelligence that her audience does. She's worthy of the inspiration of the muses; she's capable of deep faith; she's a skilled poet. In fact, this poem hints, she might get more out of a Harvard education than these complacent students can—and it's a sinful world that denies her that opportunity.

SYMBOLS

THE SKIES

The "skies," in this poem, symbolize holiness, aspiration, and wisdom.

On the one hand, the skies stand in for Heaven itself. Think about images of angels hanging out in the clouds; it's the same kind of thing here! So, on the one hand, the skies represent holiness, God's majesty, and the promise of the afterlife.

On the other hand, because the "heights above" also represent intellectual aspiration, they're also a symbol of the possibilities of learning. Getting an education means that one can reach beyond the earth into the "skies" of knowledge.

To the speaker, education and religion are complementary: the former only helps people to better understand the latter. That is, learning about astronomy, for example, should only make an individual appreciate God's incredible design skills even more.

Through this combination of intellectual and religious aspiration, the speaker suggests, students can grow like "blooming plants" *towards* the sky.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-9:** " Students, to you 'tis giv'n to scan the heights / Above, to traverse the ethereal space, / And mark the systems of revolving worlds."
- **Line 11:** "from heav'n,"
- **Lines 17-18:** "When the whole human race by sin had fall'n, / He deign'd to die that they might rise again,"
- **Line 19:** "And share with him in the sublimest skies,"
- **Line 27:** "Ye blooming plants of human race divine,"
- **Line 30:** "And in immense perdition sinks the soul."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

The poem uses alliteration to link words and concepts together, and to bring its images to vivid life.

One strong example turns up in line 10, when the speaker describes the students she addresses as "sons of science." Here, the alliteration works to make the students appear special—or, at least, especially privileged. The two /s/ sounds link the students to their studies, the phrase ringing out like a special title conferred only on a select few.

Later in the poem, alliteration dramatizes Christ's mercy. The speaker, in an almost preacher-like tone, talks to the students about Jesus:

> He hears revilers, nor resents their scorn:
> What matchless mercy in the Son of God!

The harsh /r/ sounds of "revilers" (or hateful people) and "resents" meet with the gentler /h/ sounds of "He hears"—a contrast between rough and soft that matches the contrast between Christ and his persecutors that these lines describe. The powerfully alliterative "matchless mercy" of the next line

speaks to the might of Jesus himself, and the magnitude of his sacrifice for humankind.

Later, the alliterative /d/ of "deign'd to die" in line 18 draws attention to the way that Jesus *chose* to save humanity through his own death, while the luxurious, silky /s/ sounds of "sublimest skies" in line 19 suggests the divine beauty that awaits Christians in the heavenly afterlife. (And for more on the poem's /s/ sounds, see the Sibilance section of this guide.)

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "prompts"
- **Line 2:** "promise," "pen"
- **Line 3:** "long," "left"
- **Line 4:** "land"
- **Line 10:** "sons," "science"
- **Line 15:** "He hears," "revilers," "resents"
- **Line 16:** "matchless mercy"
- **Line 18:** "deign'd," "die"
- **Line 19:** "sublimest skies"
- **Line 21:** "privileges"
- **Line 22:** "pupils"
- **Line 24:** "sin," "soul"
- **Line 26:** "Suppress," "serpent"
- **Line 30:** "sinks," "soul"

ALLUSION

The poem is full of allusion, which makes sense: the speaker is a Christian arguing in favor of Christianity, and she uses biblical allusion to make her case. But there are other allusions here, too, and the device also demonstrates the speaker's own intelligence and education.

The first allusion in the poem is also a poetic convention, known as an invocation. An invocation is a call to the "muses" or other deities, asking them for guidance and inspiration as the poet gets to work. This practice originates in classical literature (e.g., Homer's *Odyssey*)—and thus makes it clear that this speaker has had a solid education. In saying that the muses "promise to assist" her, Wheatley is also making a bold claim, saying that the spirits of inspiration will visit her—an enslaved Black woman—just as easily as they'll visit the white men who dominated the 18th-century literary world.

The other allusions in the poem relate to Christianity:

- The speaker often draws on the first chapters of the biblical book of Genesis. In this story, Adam and Eve, the first humans, are tempted by a serpent to eat the forbidden fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. This transgression is known as the Fall of Mankind, and it brings about all of humanity's troubles. The "deadly serpent" of line 26 and the sinful "fall[]" of line 17 both allude to this story.
- Humankind wasn't damned forever, though, because Jesus "deign'd" (decided) to die to atone for that original sin. Allusions to the biblical Gospels that tell the story of Jesus's redemptive death appear all through lines 10 to 20.

Together, these allusions form a powerful, sermon-like argument. The students of the university, this speaker argues, should never forget Jesus's sacrifice—and should devote their studies to the greater glory of a loving God.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "While an intrinsic ardor prompts to write, / The muses promise to assist my pen;"
- **Lines 10-20:** "Still more, ye sons of science ye receive / The blissful news by messengers from heav'n, / How Jesus' blood for your redemption flows. / See him with hands out-stretcht upon the cross; / Immense compassion in his bosom glows; / He hears revilers, nor resents their scorn: / What matchless mercy in the Son of God! / When the whole human race by sin had fall'n, / He deign'd to die that they might rise again, / And share with him in the sublimest skies, / Life without death, and glory without end."
- **Lines 24-26:** "Let sin, that baneful evil to the soul, / By you be shunn'd, nor once remit your guard; / Suppress the deadly serpent in its egg."

END-STOPPED LINE

End-stopping creates dramatic pauses throughout the poem. End-stops help the speaker find the right rhythms—and the right silences—to get her message across forcefully and passionately.

For example, the end-stop after "dark abodes" in line 6 lets that phrase linger just a beat longer. This creates a contrast between the speaker's experiences—being snatched from Africa and enslaved in America—with the relative comfort of the students at Harvard whom the poem will shortly address.

Many of the poem's other end-stops express a kind of religious wonder and majesty:

- The end-stop after "worlds" in line 9, for instance, evokes the awe the speaker wants the listening students to feel as they learn about the "revolving worlds." The splendor of the created universe demands that students pause to marvel at what they see!
- And the end-stop after "Son of God" in line 16 marks the line as the poem's rhetorical height, in which the speaker implores the students to try and comprehend the magnitude of Christ's sacrifice for humankind.

End-stops can also create a shift in direction. For instance, the brief pause at the end of line 20 encourages students to appreciate the "glory without end" that awaits Christians in the afterlife. But then, the speaker changes tack, telling the students that they must therefore be vigilant against sin throughout their studies.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "write,"
- **Line 2:** "pen;"
- **Line 4:** "gloom:"
- **Line 6:** "abodes."
- **Line 8:** "space,"
- **Line 9:** "worlds."
- **Line 11:** "heav'n,"
- **Line 12:** "flows."
- **Line 13:** "cross;"
- **Line 14:** "glows;"
- **Line 15:** "scorn:"
- **Line 16:** "God!"
- **Line 17:** "fall'n,"
- **Line 18:** "again,"
- **Line 19:** "skies,"
- **Line 20:** "end."
- **Line 21:** "stay,"
- **Line 23:** "heav'n."
- **Line 24:** "soul,"
- **Line 25:** "guard;"
- **Line 26:** "egg."
- **Line 27:** "divine,"
- **Line 28:** "foe;"
- **Line 29:** "pain,"
- **Line 30:** "soul."

METAPHOR

Metaphor helps to dramatize the speaker's argument for Christian virtue—and against sin.

The poem consistently links the sky/heights with wisdom and divinity, and its first metaphor introduces this idea:

> Students, to you 'tis giv'n to scan the heights
> Above, to traverse the ethereal space,

The "heights" here are both the literal heights of the sky and the metaphorical heights of human knowledge. Linking knowledge with the sky, the speaker suggests that the students will receive an education that "raises" them to new levels of understanding. This metaphor also suggests that such learning brings students closer to Heaven—often symbolized by the sky, too! Up there in the lofty reaches of scientific understanding, the students will get to know "the ethereal space" of the heavens: that is, their learning will bring them metaphorically closer to God.

The speaker then uses a metaphor to remind students of Jesus's love. Even when people were tormenting him, "compassion" "glow[ed]" from his "bosom" (line 14). In this image, Jesus's love for humankind is like a sun, giving out light and warmth indiscriminately.

The metaphors later in the poem, by contrast, evoke the dangers of sin. The speaker uses a whole sequence of metaphors in a row:

> Suppress the deadly serpent in its egg.
> Ye blooming plants of human race divine,
> An Ethiop tells you 'tis your greatest foe;
> Its transient sweetness turns to endless pain,
> And in immense perdition sinks the soul.

- The "deadly serpent in its egg" here represents the potential for sin (and alludes to the serpent in the Garden of Eden—see Allusion for more on that). The speaker wants the students to reject sin right away, before it can grow into something more terrible.
- But if the students are "blooming plants," they're *also* growing—and presenting a much more pleasant vision of what growth can mean! If the students are plants, they have the potential to reach up toward those heavenly skies—and to avoid creeping along the ground with that dangerous snake.
- Still, the students have to be ever-vigilant against sin: it's their "greatest foe," personified as a living and dangerous enemy.
- What's even worse, it presents itself as something "sweet[]"—a delicious taste that is nonetheless "transient," fading quickly and leaving only suffering behind.
- The consequences of such brief-but-dangerous pleasures are dire: sin "sinks the soul" in "perdition" (or damnation), an image that once again metaphorically contrasts the downward pull of sin with the upward pull of salvation.

Be a good Christian and head upwards for Heaven, the poem's metaphors thus argue, or sink into the belly of Hell!

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** " Students, to you 'tis giv'n to scan the heights / Above, to traverse the ethereal space,"
- **Line 14:** "Immense compassion in his bosom glows;"
- **Line 26:** "Suppress the deadly serpent in its egg."
- **Line 27:** "Ye blooming plants of human race divine,"
- **Lines 28-29:** "An Ethiop tells you 'tis your greatest foe; / Its transient sweetness turns to endless pain,"
- **Line 30:** "And in immense perdition sinks the soul."

SIBILANCE

The poem uses sibilance to warn the students against the dangers of sin. One vivid example occurs in line 26, in which the speaker instructs the students to:

> Suppress the deadly serpent in its egg.

This is an allusion to the Fall of Man, in which a trickster serpent tempted the first humans to eat the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. The sibilance here evokes the sinister hiss of the snake this line describes.

The last two lines of the poem pick up on the sibilance of line 26, further linking the /s/ sound with evil and pain:

> Its transient sweetness turns to endless pain,
> And in immense perdition sinks the soul.

The return of sibilant sounds here draws a connection between the "deadly serpent" of sin and the consequences of giving in to it. There is also something overwhelming about the sheer *amount* of sibilance here, as though the line is overpowered and sickened by the false "sweetness" mentioned in line 29.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "muses," "promise," "assist"
- **Line 10:** "Still," "sons," "science"
- **Line 11:** "blissful," "messengers"
- **Line 13:** "See," "stretcht," "cross"
- **Line 14:** "Immense," "bosom"
- **Line 19:** "sublimest skies,"
- **Line 26:** "Suppress the deadly serpent in its egg."
- **Line 29:** "Its transient sweetness turns to endless pain,"
- **Line 30:** "And in immense perdition sinks the soul."

APOSTROPHE

While apostrophe usually refers only to addresses to people or things that aren't likely to respond—a Grecian urn, for instance—it's still worth noting that this whole poem is an address, directed at a particular audience. In speaking directly to the students of "the University of Cambridge, in New England" (that is, Harvard undergrads), this poem's speaker isn't just encouraging a bunch of fresh-faced kids to make the best of their education. She's also making a claim for her own authority, knowledge, and skill.

This poem's speaker is a young enslaved Black woman—a person severely oppressed by the world around her. But against all the odds, she's become an educated and talented writer, able to allude masterfully to the Bible and to poetic tradition. By daring to lecture people the 18th-century American world would have considered her social superiors, she's boldly owning her own powers.

Writing this poem as an address, the speaker thus insists that she is a complete person in her own right: a person who demands (and deserves) respect.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "Students"
- **Line 10:** "ye sons of science"
- **Line 22:** "Ye pupils"
- **Line 27:** "Ye blooming plants of human race divine"

VOCABULARY

Intrinsic (Line 1) - Natural or instinctive.

Ardor (Line 1) - Passion, desire.

Muses (Line 2) - Goddesses from classical mythology who provide inspiration.

'Twas (Line 3, Line 5) - A contraction of "it was."

Thy (Line 5) - An old-fashioned way of saying "your."

Abodes (Line 6) - Dwelling places.

'Tis (Line 7, Line 28) - A contraction of "it is."

Giv'n (Line 7) - An abbreviation of "given," which makes the word into one syllable—the better to fit the poem's meter!

Scan (Line 7) - Survey or assess, with a possible pun on "scanning" lines of poetry (that is, marking out their meter).

The Heights (Line 7) - The heavens; the upper limits of human understanding.

Traverse (Line 8) - Travel through or across.

Ethereal (Line 8) - Heavenly and supernatural.

Mark (Line 9) - To notice, measure, and remark upon.

Ye (Line 10, Line 22, Line 27) - You.

Redemption (Line 12) - The salvation of humankind from evil and sin.

Bosom (Line 14) - Chest, heart.

Revilers (Line 15) - Hateful people who mock and insult something or someone.

Matchless (Line 16) - Unparalleled.

Fall'n (Line 17) - Fallen.

Deign'd (Line 18) - Chose—with connotations of choosing to do something lowly or beneath one.

Redeem (Line 22) - Make the most of (in this case by being a faithful Christian).

Report (Line 23) - Assessment, news. The speaker means that God will know if the students have been "good or bad."

Baneful (Line 24) - Destructive.

Shunn'd (Line 25) - An abbreviation of "shunned"—pushed away or rejected.

Remit (Line 25) - Let down.

Guard (Line 25) - Spiritual defenses; watchfulness against sin.

Suppress (Line 26) - Stop, repress, destroy.

Deadly Serpent (Line 26) - An allusion to the snake who tempts Eve to eat the fruit from the forbidden tree in the biblical book of Genesis.

Ethiop (Line 28) - An archaic catch-all term for "a person from Africa."

Foe (Line 28) - Enemy.

Transient (Line 29) - Short-lived, fleeting.

Perdition (Line 30) - Eternal damnation.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem doesn't use a standard poetic form, but it does use blank verse: lines of unrhymed iambic pentameter. (See the Rhyme Scheme and Meter sections for more on that.) This particular poem uses three stanzas of blank verse, with each new stanza marking a shift in the speaker's argument.

Blank verse is a form with a pretty grand pedigree in English-language poetry. Shakespeare uses blank verse throughout his plays, and Wheatley's major influence John Milton often wrote in blank verse. In choosing blank verse, Wheatley demonstrates her own familiarity with (and mastery of) poetic tradition.

The poem also engages with poetic tradition right at the start, when it calls on the "muses" (the ancient goddesses of inspiration) to "assist" the poet in her composition. Such a call to the gods is known as an invocation—and similar invocations turn up in the work of writers from Homer to Pope. By using an invocation, Wheatley demonstrates that she's educated and well-read—*and* implicitly questions whether it's only well-to-do white men who deserve the favor of the muses.

Written in the form of a speech to incoming Harvard students, the poem also resembles a sermon or a commencement address. Indeed, the Harvard tradition of a yearly commencement address might have inspired Wheatley to write this poem in the first place.

METER

The poem uses blank verse: lines of unrhymed iambic pentameter. In other words, each line uses five iambs, metrical feet with an unstressed-STRESSED (da-DUM) rhythm.

As one example, here is line 16:

What match- | less mer- | cy in | the Son | of God!

Blank verse creates a slow but steady momentum, giving the speaker's sermon-like speech force and authority. Indeed, by using blank verse, Wheatley insists on her own *poetic* authority.

Blank verse is an important and honored literary tradition in English-language poetry. Shakespeare uses it throughout his plays, and it's the form in which John Milton (one of Wheatley's major influences) wrote his magnum opus, *Paradise Lost*. By using blank verse here, Wheatley thus demonstrates her own poetic skill and an educated understanding of the form. Sadly, this very mastery is exactly why many of her contemporaries refused to believe that she, a young Black woman from Africa, could have written her poems.

Like many poets who write in blank verse, Wheatley also uses metrical variations. Sometimes, she inverts the first foot, turning it into a trochee (DUM-da)—for instance, in line 7:

Students, | to you | 'tis giv'n | to scan | the heights

The strong initial stress here makes the line more forceful, which fits with it being a direct apostrophe to the students of Harvard. It's attention-grabbing, like someone banging the lectern for emphasis while giving a speech.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem doesn't have a rhyme scheme, instead opting for blank verse throughout—which is, by definition, unrhymed. This offers the poem a little extra leeway to follow the logic of its philosophical and religious inquiry, rather than bending to the demand for a rhyme.

Unrhymed verse like this was a common and time-honored form during Wheatley's lifetime (and beyond). In choosing this form, she drew inspiration from her great hero John Milton, among others.

However, Wheatley does use an occasional rhyme for effect. The most significant is probably line 12's "flows" with line 14's "glows," which links Jesus's death on the cross with his "immense" love for humankind. In this important, heightened passage, in which Wheatley vividly imagines the Crucifixion, matching sounds help to draw even more attention to her powerful imagery.

SPEAKER

Given the amount of biographical overlap between the first-person "I" of the poem and its author, this poem's speaker is generally understood to be Phillis Wheatley herself: a young African woman enslaved in America. And that makes this poem remarkable! At the time Wheatley was writing, English-language poetry was almost entirely the domain of educated white men: but here is a Black woman instructing just such young men on how to be better Christians. By referring to her

African heritage, while simultaneously employing time-honored poetic conventions (e.g., blank verse and the opening invocation), the speaker claims authority as a person and a poet.

The speaker addresses the prospective Harvard students like a preacher, as though she is giving an introductory sermon to those newly enrolled at the university. As someone who has known true suffering—being kidnapped and enslaved, and never seeing her biological parents again—she is better placed than the students to understand the educational and spiritual value of a university degree.

She humbles herself in order to make her point more forcefully, referring to herself as an "Ethiop" (a general term for a person from Africa). This plays with the idea that she is the students' social inferior, while really gesturing towards the fact she has a more clear-eyed perspective on sinfulness—having witnessed it first hand as an enslaved Black woman.

SETTING

While this poem's speaker addresses students at a particular university—Harvard—the poem itself, written in the form of a speech or lecture, doesn't really have a setting. Still, it's easy to imagine the speaker standing at a podium as she addresses the students, banging her fist for dramatic emphasis.

The speaker does refer to other settings—her passage from Africa as a slave, and the sacred skies of heaven—but these brief references are more rhetorical than descriptive. They're all in service of her overall argument: that the students should appreciate the "privileges" afforded to them, and be thankful to God.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Phillis Wheatley was the first woman of African descent to be published in English, and it's hard to overstate just how exceptional a figure she is in the history of English-language poetry. She was enslaved in 1761, when only seven or eight years old, and taken from the west coast of Africa to America. There, she was purchased by John and Susana Wheatley, who—very unusually—gave her a classical education. She read writers like Milton, Pope, and Homer, and quickly mastered both the English language and poetry. "To the University" is thought to be her first poem, written when she was only a teenager.

At the family's encouragement, Wheatley was soon being published in newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic. Indeed, she became famous, in spite of the fact that many white people were unable to believe that *anyone* from Africa—let alone a young woman—was capable of writing such well-crafted poetry. When her first (and only) collection was published in 1773, her British publishers insisted that the book contain testimonials from prominent Americans to vouch for the fact that she really *had* written these poems. Thomas Jefferson reacted to Wheatley's poetry incredulously, saying that there was "no poetry [...] among the blacks." Others, like Gilbert Imlay, noted that Wheatley was clearly Jefferson's "superior."

While Wheatley was the first Black woman to be published in English, she was certainly not the first woman of African descent to write English-language poetry. Lucy Terry wrote "Bars Fight" in 1746, though it wasn't in print until 1855. Jupiter Hammon was the first African-American poet to be published in English; his "An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ, with Penitential Cries" first came out in 1761. Francis Williams was another well-known Black poet of the 18th century, though he, unlike Wheatley, had not been enslaved (he was born to free Black parents).

Though Wheatley was not the *only* poet of African descent in her time, she remains the most famous.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Wheatley's name is composed of two reminders of her life story: *Phillis* was the name of the slave ship that brought her to America, and *Wheatley* was the surname of the family who bought her. The *Phillis* was one of many ships that sailed from the West Coast of Africa to America, transporting kidnapped Africans to new lives of incredible hardship and misery. Wheatley's given African name is lost to history. She was probably born somewhere in the region of modern-day Senegal, Gambia, or Ghana—an area of Africa with strong oral traditions of storytelling and poetry.

Current research suggests that over 12 million Africans were kidnapped from their communities and forced to cross the Atlantic, held in awful and often deadly conditions on board cramped slave ships. Some, like Wheatley, would become domestic servants; many others were forced to labor on farms and plantations.

Wheatley's lifetime coincides with the beginning of the Abolitionist movement, which rejected and resisted slavery. One landmark court case in England ruled that slavery was incompatible with existing English law (with the judge coming to this conclusion with clear reluctance). Abolitionist Granville Sharp, who successfully argued the case and thus dealt a serious blow to the institution of slavery, met Wheatley when she visited England to seek publication for her poems. It is probably no coincidence that she was manumitted—released from slavery—on her return to America shortly thereafter, with Sharp proving a powerful ally.

Wheatley's visit to England took place two years before the American War of Independence, in which the issue of slavery

(and its abolition) was a major contributing factor. Wheatley could see the irony that some Americans would cry tyranny against their English oppressors while simultaneously making Black people perform labor for free. She wrote in one letter: "How well the Cry for Liberty, and the reverse Disposition for the Exercise of oppressive Power over others agree—I humbly think it does not require the Penetration of a Philosopher to determine." In other words: *you'd have to be especially ignorant not to see the contradiction in calling for liberty on the one hand while being an oppressor on the other.*

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Phillis Wheatley's Life — Watch a lively lecture on Wheatley's life from her biographer Vincent Carretta. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vS7LiMrUjCM)
- A Short Biography — Learn more about Wheatley's life and work at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/phillis-wheatley)
- Wheatley and Granville Sharpe — Read about Wheatley's influential meeting with abolitionist Granville Sharpe. (https://eastendwomensmuseum.org/blog/tag/granville+sharp)
- Letter to Rev. Occum — Read a letter in which Wheatley discusses slavery. (https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2h19.html)
- The First Edition — See images of the 1773 first edition of Wheatley's poems. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/phillis-wheatleys-poems#)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER PHILLIS WHEATLEY POEMS

- On Being Brought from Africa to America

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