

Mr. George Whitefield: Political Statements through a Religious Poem

Phillis Wheatley's "On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield" was written in 1770. This poem talks about Whitefield who was a pastor as having a visionary idea about the colonies becoming independent. This new nation he describes believes in equality for all; Whitefield believes in this equality and he speaks on behalf of God. Therefore, God also supports this equality ideal and Americans should too. Wheatley uses this religious idea and poem as a politically revolutionary idea. These ideas are taking place before the American Revolution, and this poem can be seen as quite controversial in its time. Reverend Whitefield is described as the father of this new nation founded on the ideas of equality and is the vehicle in which Wheatley promotes patriotic and independent feelings in the nation. Word Count: 132

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Before the American Revolution took place there were feelings stirring in the colonies that craved independence and equality. Phillis Wheatley's poem "On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield" captures these politically controversial feelings through a religious and elegiac poem. Wheatley uses an if-then technique, effective diction, and syntax to make this religious poem and lament about Whitefield into a political statement about the colonies need for independence and equality as the colonies begin to form their identity as a nation.

Wheatley has makes an if-then argument in the poem which take the poem from being religious to political. She begins by saying, "Hail, happy, saint, on thine immortal throne" (1). Whitefield is a saint because he was a pastor in a former life and is now looking down on the people from Heaven alongside God. Being a saint also means that the person is inherently right. It is not too often that a person hears about a bad or evil saint. So far, Wheatley has established that Whitefield is now a saint and therefore good and right in his thinking. She then goes on to say, "He longed to see America excel" (21). Whitefield is a cheerleader for the colonies and their success. The underlying tone is that Whitefield wants America to succeed and Whitefield and Wheatley are aware of the building need for American independence. Wheatley goes on to describe Whitefield's description of the perfect identity of the new nation in stanza three when Whitefield is directly addressing the colonists. He calls upon the "wretched," "starving sinners," "thirsty," "preachers," "Americans," and "Africans" (27-33). From the holiness of preachers to the African slaves and from the starving sinners to the wretched, Whitefield has an all encompassing idea of this new nation. People should accept and love one another because

everyone is equal in the eyes of God. The if-then statement Wheatley is establishing is this: if Whitefield is a pastor and has as close relationship with God and thus inherently right then his view that America should be equal and free from England's rule is also right.

Wheatley uses effective diction to transition from a religious poem to her political persuasion. She opens the poem by saying, "Hail, happy saint, on thine immortal throne" (1). This juxtaposition of "saint" and "throne" already produces a tension between religion and politics. A saint is a religious figure and a throne is reserved for political leaders. However, by putting the saint in the throne Wheatley is putting political power into religious figures hands. Therefore, even though Whitefield was a reverend his political views and ideas should be taken with just as much weight as his religious expertise. Wheatley uses effective diction as a metaphor when she compares Whitefield to a father. She says that "New England deeply feels, the orphans mourn,/Their more than father will no more return" (40-1). As a religious leader Whitefield could be like a father because he provides guidance towards the people of the town, but on another level he is the father of the new identity America needs to encompass, an identity based on freedom and equality. The selection of the word "father" and the mourning orphans shows that Whitefield was the founder of a new idea and spirit of the country that is lost within his death, and that passion and view of life can only be maintained if people are around like Wheatley to care it on. The diction Wheatley uses makes connections between the obvious religious ties Whitefield has and the political ideals he has.

The final technique Wheatley uses to make the connection between the religious outer connotations with political sub-tones is through the syntax. The first and second stanzas are dedicated to praising Whitefield. He is described as being in heaven and in a place of holiness next to God. The following stanza is Whitefield directly addressing the reader; he articulates his

vision for the perfect nation that has obtained its independence and established equality within itself. The following stanza returns to Wheatley or the speaker's voice. Here she addresses the Countess that funded Whitefield's relocation from England to the colonies, and she tells the Countess that the work Whitefield has done has positively influenced and will continue to influence the nation. The ending stanza makes a religious reference to the resurrection of Christ. By beginning and concluding the poem with religious diction the political ideas between the two points seem natural, flowing, and more convincing. This outline provides a good support for the political messages underlying the religious poem.

Wheatley and Whitefield had revolutionary ideas of the time that preceded the American Revolution. Whitefield's vision of a equal and independent identity of Americans is a political view that has been tied in with his religious affiliations. In the early days of America it was not uncommon for church and state to go hand and hand, but such a controversial standpoint could be seen as heretical. Wheatley's idolization of Whitefield as a religious character translates into her support and persuasion of a political idea.

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Reading Response II-Works Cited

Works Cited

Wheatley, Phillis. "On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Seventh Edition: Volume A Beginnings to 1820*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2007. 756-7.