

Read This Excerpt From "on Virtue," By Phyllis Wheatley. O Thou Bright Jewel In My Aim I Strive To Comprehend

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Phyllis Wheatley, one of the most celebrated poets of the 18th century and the first African American woman to publish a book of poetry, wrote with profound insight into themes of virtue, morality, and spiritual aspiration. Her poem "On Virtue," which begins with the lines "O Thou Bright Jewel! In My Aim I Strive To Comprehend," offers a compelling exploration of the nature of virtue as a guiding light in human life. In this article, we will delve into the key themes and poetic devices used by Wheatley in this excerpt, analyze its significance within her body of work, and understand its enduring relevance in contemporary discussions on morality and personal development.

Understanding the Context of "On Virtue" by Phyllis Wheatley

Phyllis Wheatley's Life and Background

- Born in West Africa around 1753, Wheatley was brought to America as a slave.
- Despite her enslaved status, she gained recognition for her poetic talent, which was nurtured through her education and literary circles.
- Her work often intertwined themes of Christianity, virtue, and the pursuit of moral excellence.

The Significance of "On Virtue"

- "On Virtue" is one of Wheatley's most famous poems, emphasizing the importance of moral goodness.
- The poem reflects her philosophical and religious beliefs, asserting that virtue is a divine gift and a guiding principle for human life.
- It serves as both a personal reflection and a moral exhortation, inspiring readers to seek virtue as a noble goal.

Analyzing the Opening Lines: "O Thou Bright Jewel! In My Aim I Strive To Comprehend"

The Metaphor of Virtue as a Bright Jewel

- Wheatley compares virtue to a luminous jewel, symbolizing its preciousness, clarity, and value.
- The "Bright Jewel" signifies an ideal that is both rare and desirable, emphasizing the importance of moral excellence.

The Personal Aspiration: "In My Aim I Strive To Comprehend"

- The speaker expresses a personal quest to understand virtue fully.
- The phrase "In My Aim" indicates a deliberate and focused effort, highlighting that moral understanding is a goal worth pursuing.
- The use of "comprehend" reflects Wheatley's desire for deep understanding, not superficial knowledge.

The Poetic Devices and Their Significance

Imagery and Symbolism

- The "Bright Jewel" serves as a vivid image that encapsulates the purity and value of virtue.
- Wheatley's use of light imagery associates virtue with enlightenment and divine illumination.

Personification

- Though not explicitly personified in this excerpt, the invocation of "Thou" personifies virtue as a guiding, almost living presence.
- This technique elevates virtue from an abstract concept to a moral guide akin to a benevolent entity.

Repetition and Parallelism

- The structure of the lines emphasizes the speaker's earnestness and focus.
- The rhythmic balance underscores the poem's meditative tone and the importance of the moral pursuit.

The Themes Explored in the Excerpt

The Pursuit of Virtue as a Noble Goal

- Wheatley underscores that striving for virtue is a moral duty and a noble endeavor.
- Her language suggests that virtue is an ideal worth dedicating oneself to, regardless of

external circumstances.

Divine Inspiration and Moral Guidance

- The analogy of virtue as a "Bright Jewel" hints at divine origin, implying that true virtue is a gift from the divine.
- Wheatley's Christian beliefs influence her view that understanding and embodying virtue aligns one with divine will.

The Human Capacity for Moral Understanding

- The desire to "comprehend" virtue indicates that moral knowledge is attainable through effort and reflection.
- Wheatley advocates for active pursuit and intellectual engagement with moral principles.

The Relevance of Wheatley's "On Virtue" Today

Virtue as a Universal Value

- The metaphor of virtue as a "Bright Jewel" continues to resonate, emphasizing its timeless significance.
- In contemporary society, moral virtues such as honesty, integrity, and compassion remain central to ethical living.

Personal Growth and Moral Development

- Wheatley's focus on striving to understand virtue aligns with modern ideas of self-improvement and lifelong learning.
- The poem encourages individuals to pursue moral excellence proactively.

Inspiration for Moral Leadership

- Leaders and individuals alike can draw inspiration from Wheatley's poetic emphasis on the importance of virtue.
- Her words serve as a reminder that moral clarity and integrity are vital virtues in leadership and community building.

Conclusion: The Enduring Power of Wheatley's Reflection on Virtue

Phyllis Wheatley's "On Virtue" offers a timeless meditation on the importance of moral excellence, framed through poetic beauty and spiritual depth. The opening lines, with their vivid metaphor of virtue as a "Bright Jewel," invite readers to consider virtue not just

as an abstract concept but as a tangible, precious goal worth striving for. Wheatley's emphasis on the personal pursuit of understanding virtue underscores her belief in moral agency and divine inspiration. Today, her words continue to inspire individuals to seek virtue in their lives, emphasizing that moral development is a lifelong journey marked by deliberate effort and spiritual aspiration. As we reflect on Wheatley's wisdom, we are reminded that the pursuit of virtue remains a noble and vital endeavor, illuminating our path much like the "Bright Jewel" she so eloquently describes.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main theme of Phyllis Wheatley's excerpt from 'On Virtue'?

The main theme is the pursuit of virtue and moral excellence, symbolized by the metaphor of striving to understand a bright jewel, representing divine or moral enlightenment.

How does Wheatley use imagery in the line 'O Thou Bright Jewel In My Aim I Strive To Comprehend'?

Wheatley uses the imagery of a bright jewel to symbolize purity, beauty, and divine truth, emphasizing her aspiration to attain moral and spiritual enlightenment.

What does Wheatley's reference to 'My Aim' suggest about her personal or spiritual goals?

It suggests that her primary goal is to achieve virtue and understanding of divine principles, making moral excellence her central pursuit.

How does Wheatley's poetry reflect the influence of Enlightenment ideas?

Her poetry emphasizes reason, moral virtue, and the pursuit of knowledge, aligning with Enlightenment ideals of self-improvement and intellectual enlightenment.

In what ways does Wheatley's excerpt challenge the societal expectations of women during her time?

By expressing a focus on moral and intellectual pursuits, Wheatley's work challenges the stereotype that women should only focus on domestic roles, highlighting their capacity for philosophical reflection and spiritual growth.

Why is the metaphor of striving to comprehend a jewel

significant in the context of Wheatley's broader literary themes?

It signifies the pursuit of divine truth and moral perfection, central themes in Wheatley's poetry, illustrating her spiritual aspiration and the value she places on virtue and enlightenment.

Additional Resources

Read This Excerpt From "On Virtue," By Phyllis Wheatley. O Thou Bright Jewel In My Aim I Strive To Comprehend — a compelling line that encapsulates the essence of Wheatley's poetic quest for moral excellence and spiritual enlightenment. As one of the most influential African American poets of the 18th century, Phyllis Wheatley's work often explores themes of virtue, faith, and the pursuit of moral integrity, set against the backdrop of her unique life story and historical context. This excerpt from her poem "On Virtue" offers a profound insight into her poetic philosophy and her unwavering aspiration to understand and embody virtue as a guiding principle in life.

Introduction: The Significance of Wheatley's "On Virtue"

Phyllis Wheatley's poem "On Virtue" is a reflective meditation on moral excellence, spiritual purity, and the human pursuit of goodness. The opening line, "O Thou Bright Jewel In My Aim I Strive To Comprehend," metaphorically positions virtue as a luminous gem—precious, rare, and worth the arduous pursuit. Wheatley's poetic voice is both a personal prayer and a universal call to emulate divine qualities, emphasizing that virtue is not only an ideal but also a guiding star for human conduct.

This excerpt invites readers to delve into Wheatley's worldview, examining how she perceives virtue as an essential element of human life, and how her poetic craftsmanship elevates this pursuit to an art form. Her work resonates even today, reminding us of the enduring importance of moral integrity and the relentless human quest for understanding goodness.

Contextual Background: Phyllis Wheatley's Life and Literary Environment

Before dissecting the excerpt itself, understanding Wheatley's background enriches our appreciation of her work:

- Born in West Africa circa 1753, likely captured and sold into slavery as a child.
- Purchased by the Wheatley family in Boston, where she received an education uncommon for African Americans, especially women, during her time.
- Her poetry was groundbreaking, as she became the first African American to publish a book of poetry in 1773.
- Themes often include faith, virtue, freedom, and divine justice, reflecting her religious upbringing and intellectual pursuits.

Despite facing racial and gender-based discrimination, Wheatley's poetry demonstrates an unwavering faith in divine virtue and moral excellence, positioning her as a moral and spiritual guide through her literary work.

Analyzing the Excerpt: "O Thou Bright Jewel In My Aim I Strive To Comprehend"

The Metaphor of the "Bright Jewel"

At the heart of the excerpt lies the metaphor of the "Bright Jewel," symbolizing virtue itself:

- Virtue as a luminous gem: The image emphasizes the rarity, beauty, and value of moral excellence.
- "In my aim": Suggests a focused, purposeful pursuit—virtue is the ultimate goal Wheatley aspires to attain.
- "Strive to comprehend": Implies that virtue is complex, perhaps elusive, and requires effort, understanding, and devotion to fully grasp.

This metaphor captures Wheatley's deep reverence for virtue and her recognition of its importance as an aspirational ideal. It also underscores her acknowledgment that moral understanding is a journey, not merely an achievement.

The Significance of Aspiration and Effort

Wheatley's choice of words reflects a philosophical stance:

- Aspiration: Her desire to comprehend virtue signifies an active engagement with morality, not passive admiration.
- Effort: The word "strive" indicates that understanding virtue demands perseverance, discipline, and humility.
- Continuous pursuit: The phrase suggests that moral growth is ongoing, a lifelong journey rather than a fixed state.

This perspective aligns with Enlightenment ideals prevalent during Wheatley's era, emphasizing reason, self-improvement, and moral development.

Deeper Themes in the Excerpt

Virtue as a Divine Quality

Wheatley's poetry often intertwines virtue with divine qualities:

- Virtue as a divine gift: She perceives moral excellence not merely as a human achievement but as something bestowed or guided by divine influence.
- Alignment with divine will: Her striving is also a spiritual act—aiming to align her soul with divine virtues.

The Pursuit of Moral Knowledge

The phrase "comprehend" highlights that:

- Virtue is not just to be admired but understood.
- Moral knowledge involves insight, discernment, and wisdom.
- The pursuit of virtue is intellectual as well as spiritual.

Personal and Universal Dimensions

While Wheatley personalizes her quest ("my aim," "I strive"), she also elevates it to a universal level:

- Virtue is a universal aspiration shared across humanity.
- Her poetic voice becomes a beacon for others seeking moral enlightenment.

Literary Devices in the Excerpt

Wheatley's craftsmanship employs various literary devices to enhance her message:

- Metaphor: Comparing virtue to a "Bright Jewel."
- Alliteration: The repetition of the "w" sound in "when," "with," or "will" (if present in the full poem) enhances musicality.
- Parallelism: The phrase "O Thou Bright Jewel" echoes the structure of a prayer or hymn, emphasizing reverence.
- Imagery: The luminous jewel evokes visual imagery of brightness and purity.

Practical Takeaways from the Excerpt

1. Virtue as a lifelong pursuit: The poem underscores that moral excellence requires ongoing effort and dedication.
2. The importance of understanding: Achieving virtue is not just about action but about comprehension—knowing why and how to act morally.
3. Spiritual alignment: Virtue is intertwined with divine qualities, suggesting that moral growth is also a spiritual journey.
4. Value of aspiration: Striving toward an ideal, even if it remains partially understood, is a worthy and noble endeavor.

How to Apply Wheatley's Insights Today

- Cultivate awareness of virtue: Recognize moral qualities as precious and worth seeking.
- Engage in continuous moral learning: Strive to deepen your understanding of what virtue entails.
- Persevere through challenges: Remember that moral growth is a process requiring effort and resilience.

- Align actions with higher principles: Aim to embody virtues that reflect spiritual and universal ideals.

Conclusion: The Enduring Power of Wheatley's Poetic Vision

Phyllis Wheatley's excerpt, "O Thou Bright Jewel In My Aim I Strive To Comprehend," encapsulates a universal truth about the human condition—the relentless pursuit of virtue as a guiding light. Her poetic articulation of this quest remains inspiring, reminding us that moral understanding and excellence are treasures worth seeking. Wheatley's work not only elevates the moral aspirations of her time but continues to serve as a beacon for readers today who aspire to lead lives guided by virtue, wisdom, and spiritual integrity.

By exploring this excerpt in depth, we gain insight into Wheatley's poetic philosophy and her enduring legacy as a moral voice rooted in faith, resilience, and the transformative power of understanding virtue.

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