

## Reader Response Essay

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**Course:** ENGL 232

**Instructor:** Mr. Paul Crawford

**Essay Type:** Reader Response

Originally, I believed "On the Death of J.C. an Infant" to be merely another poem expressing a mother's pain and sorrow over the death of her infant son. Not surprising, many of my friends and relatives also felt this poem was about death. Death is definitely an aspect of everyday life, and often Death's "all-destroying Pow'r" leaves its observers both frightened and perplexed, especially when its victims are innocent children. Although it is extremely evident that death is an element within this poem, it is only one of numerous elements. The author, Phillis Wheatley, also deals with selfishness, lack of faith, blasphemy, and blind arrogance, all of which are also a part of everyday life.

The author begins the poem with a description of the family's initial response to the death of J.C. The family, realizing that the infant is dead, begins contemplating the effects of his death on their lives. Because he is dead, they can no longer enjoy the pleasures of having him in their world, where they feel he belongs. The author then describes how the family suffers so greatly that they are unable to comfort each other. From this suffering, then the questions to the Lord began to surface. Was not this child innocent? How is it your will that Death, your messenger, shall overtake him? How can you rightfully deny him his life on earth? How can you cause us to suffer like this? Next, the author contrasts the family's opinion of J.C. before his death with their opinion of J.C. after his death. Then as a subtle transition into the religious lesson of the poem, Wheatley has the parent cry out to an angel asking "Where flies my James?" The poem ends with the angel answering the mournful parent with words of wisdom.

After reading the response of the angel, the first half of the poem began to have a more significant meaning. Wheatley's description of the family's initial response, in reality, is a realization that we as humans react selfishly to the death of our loved ones. The family is overwhelmed by the sadness that James is no longer there for them. "No more the flow'ry pleasure rise/... No more with joy we view that lovely face". It is this selfish nature that overshadows the reality that heaven is a much better place for James than Earth. (The parent referring to James as a cherub, later in the poem, supports the idea that although she knows James is in Heaven, she is still saddened by his departure.)

The family's suffering, symbolic of the pain we experience as a result of our earthly traits, is due to their apparent selfishness and obvious lack of a strong faith. Wheatley first deals with the suffering. In the poem, the angel tells the parent that she should be intelligent enough to realize that one day she will be able to join her child again in heaven, and that she should be cheerful not mournful. Although the author uses the term 'intelligent', the understanding should be that this intelligence refers to religious knowledge and faith. It is this intelligence that should help the parent understand that death to the righteous is not a sorrowful thing. The angel advises the parent to treat Death "Not as a foe, but friend converse with Death, / Since to the port of happiness unknown/ He brought that treasure which you call your own." Translated: Death is merely a transport for the righteous into heaven. Wheatley then deals with the family's questioning of the Lord. Although the parent's questions stem from suffering, then the angel orders the parent to "Cease to accuse the Ruler of the sky." The message is: Regardless of the situation, blasphemy is not justifiable.

The author illustrates the arrogance of the family in several ways. One illustration is obvious in the family's changing view of James. Although they viewed the living James as a

source of pleasure and joy to them, after his death, they viewed him as a dead tree branch that "Falls prostrate, withere'd, languid, and forlorn" upon the ground. This arrogance of the family represents our belief as humans that we are the center of the world and that through us everything is defined. The author shatters this belief in the angel's description of the deceased James as a glowing seraph with numerous celestial charms, celestial suggesting that James is associated with the heavens. The angel also describes his charms as melodious. Just as a melody is a tone forming part of a larger piece of music, Wheatley is again suggesting that James is part of a larger heavenly work of art. Another illustration of the family's arrogance is their commonly shared misbelief that James is their treasure taken from them by God. The angel reminds the family that James was merely a gift to them from Heaven, and they have no right to question his return to Heaven. In ending the lines of the poem, the author deals with our greatest arrogance. We as humans try to describe and understand the world through our limited knowledge and wisdom. When there is a conflict between what we observe to be reality and what we feel should be reality, we assume reality is flawed. The angel instructs the parent: "Cheerful resign at the divine command: /Not at your bar must sov'reign *Wisdom* stand." This simply means that we should accept the works of God and realize that we do not have the Wisdom to pass judgment on his actions.

I was truly fascinated by the numerous religious lessons on faith and wisdom contained within the fibers of this poem. Although I am convinced that the essence of the poem lies within these fibers, I am still fascinated by the fibers themselves. For example, I find the use of the word cherub rather interesting. The family feels that James is no longer valuable, yet the mother refers to James as a cherub. The truth in this statement is that, buried in the depth of her heart, the mother realizes that James is still a cherub, just as he was before his death. (It is necessary for

the reader to realize that cherub also means beautiful child.) Even more significant is the angel's use of the word seraph, an angel of highest rank often represented by the winged head of a child, to describe James. Just the contrast between the words cherub and seraph suggest that James is more than just J.C.

Also intriguing is the line: "Not as a foe, but friend converse with Death." This quote can be rewritten in a less compact way as: "Not as a foe converse with Death, but as a friend converse with Death." In this one line, the word "converse" has two converse meanings. Not only does the word have its most common meaning, "to be opposed to", it also has the meaning "to maintain a familiar association with". The message is: We as humans, although not inviting Death, can still welcome it. Also for those who do not immediately realize the essence of this poem, the author fills the angel's reply with heavenly words and phrases such as: "heav'ns high palaces", "Ruler of the Sky", "Faith", "celestial", "soul-enchanting", "ethereal plain", and "divine." The author's intense desire to make it very obvious that this poem is associated with a religious lesson is comparable to humanity's intense need to receive and understand this lesson.

Although I found several moral and religious lessons in "Upon the Death of J.C. an Infant," my mother pointed out a now seemingly obvious lesson. Being a mother who has felt the pain, as most mothers surely have, of dealing with a sick child, she understands the pain of the mother and her extreme need to be comforted. She feels that the poem is about a mother, who suffering the unbearable pain of losing her child, looks to the heavens for comfort; and because God is a healer, he sends his angel to comfort and ease the pain of the mother. The angel delivers the message instructing the mother to keep her faith and look forward to seeing her child again in Heaven. (Although the poem does not specify that the parent is the mother, the poem has more meaning to my mother and I if the parent is the mother.)

My friend, Travis, feels that the poem is about a sorrowful parent who has reached the conclusion that God is not to blame for the death of James and that death must be accepted as an unavoidable part of life. Both Travis and I independently reached the conclusion that one of Wheatley's messages is: Do not treat death as our enemy because it is only a transition to a better place. Contrary to my conclusion, Travis feels that the parent's cry to the angel was an expression of trust that God will take care of the infant regardless of where he is. Interestingly, Travis also commented that the title, "The Death of J.C. an Infant," gave him the preconceived notion that the poem was about Jesus Christ. He felt that he was able to perfectly relate the words and imagery of the poem to the life of Jesus Christ, but after reading the line "Where flies my James," he abandoned this notion.

After reflecting on the opinions of other readers, I now realize that this poem has far more meaning and significance than any one person can comprehend. I also realize that each time I read the poem it becomes more and more meaningful and elaborate. Presently, I feel that Travis was correct in assuming that this poem is related to the life of Jesus Christ. Although Jesus Christ was not an "infant" upon his death, his time here on Earth was small in the grand scheme of things. Certainly, Phillis Wheatley could not have knowingly placed all this meaning and symbolism within this poem. This poem has transcended its author. In each reader, this poem leaves a seed of its essence that is capable of blooming into an existence all its own.

*Quincy Robertson is a Math and Physics major. Mr. Paul Crawford was his English instructor.*

**Mr. Crawford's Comments:** *A Reader-Response assignment requires that the student engage a literary work and to analyze both the writer's effort to transmit meaning and to impose meaning*

*from the perspective of the student. In order to do this, the student will necessarily have to rely on life experiences, education, and often a gender driven approach. Quincy has used all of these resources in his paper. Likewise, part of the assignment required that Quincy ask two other persons to read the literary work and to give him their analyzes of it. I encouraged my students to find other readers who differed in gender, age, or life experiences so that they could recognize how these factors play a significant role in any engagements with literature. Ultimately, I wished my students to discover the richness in meaning which characterizes "good" literature. I believe Quincy's decision to choose a female who had given birth was very wise because as a male he might see Wheatley's poem from a different perspective. I also believe his use of another young male as a reader was likewise a good decision (but if he had chosen an older male, he would also have learned something else valuable). Ultimately, the value of a Reader-Response assignment is to allow students to discover that the engagement of a literary text is as much an act of creating meaning as the writing of the text itself. Furthermore, it helps my students appreciate that literature has a multiplicity of potential readings and this recognition is clearly demonstrated in Quincy's paper.*