



To S. M., a Young African Painter, on Seeing His Works

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The poem opens with praise for the art of Scipio Moorhead, slave of a Presbyterian minister, who was both an artist and a poet. It was he who drew Wheatley's portrait which appeared in her book of poems. As a fellow artist, she strives to comprehend the creative process that achieves his purposes and also gives her, as the audience of his work, such pleasure. The artist's pencil gives life to figures born of his imagination and intent, and the speaker praises the power of imagination which bestows on the painter and the writer the ability to transcend the limitations of their world. For these two slave artists, those limitations would have been great indeed.

She encourages Moorhead to make the most of his gifts and to enjoy any fame that comes to him, but at the same time she fixes her thoughts on the afterlife, suggesting that what the earth offers as glory is paltry by comparison to Heaven's glory. In paradise, where they will both be free, their celestial gifts will be nobler and purer, and they will no longer write about or paint "Damon" or "Aurora," subjects that are worldly as well as being products of Western culture rather than the artists' African culture.

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