

“Must our wants / Find their supply in murder?”: Intersectional Social Conscience in Ann Yearsley’s “A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade”

Boróka Andl-Beck

Abstract

For Ann Yearsley, issues like the abolition of the slave trade and the improvement of the working and living conditions of the English labouring classes were significant not only in her everyday life but also in her literary output. In the late eighteenth century, female writers had little chance to enter the public and literary discourse, but their voices were becoming gradually more audible, and the public literary and political platforms more accessible. Authors like Hannah More and Anna Laetitia Barbauld were at the forefront of the fight against slavery, but their backgrounds did not necessarily preordain their abolitionist positions—it was Yearsley whose social strata was the closest to the people whose liberation she advocated for. Rejecting the notion that the distance between Great Britain and its colonies where the slaves suffer most could be ignored by English authors and politicians due to geographical distance, Yearsley made a point that centuries later began to interest the likes of Judith Butler, who considered whether humans could ethically relate to human suffering at a distance. I would argue that Yearsley’s solidarity extended beyond the border of Britain and the continent of Europe precisely because she had experienced that proximity guarantees neither help nor compassion. Her general interest in politics, her radical, Protestant stance against exploitative practices, and her position as a woman intertwine and inform the rhetorical and poetical gestures present in her work “A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade” (1788).

Keywords: Early Romanticism, Ann Yearsley, intersectionality, slave trade, fellow-feeling

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Introduction

In the late 1700s, women born into the labouring class were not expected to take up an interest in reading and writing, much less in fine poetry or political debates. However, as she was growing up, Ann Yearsley (née Cromarti, 1753–1806) came into contact with Scripture, and from then on, her fate as a sentimentalist-moralist poet

was sealed. This article aims to examine Yearsley's abolitionist poem "A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade" (1788) through the lens of intersectional¹ identity and sympathy, while emphasising the unique position of the poetess as well as the rapidly changing attitudes of the society she inhabited.

Researchers like Moira Ferguson and Donna Landry view her as a resistance figure in literature and cultured society, while Mary Waldron claims Yearsley's aspirations took her far from her labouring-class roots (McDowell 259-60), thus providing a perfect example for social mobility in the eighteenth century. On the other end of the spectrum, upon close-reading Yearsley's poems, David Fairer argues that the idea of Ann Yearsley "the Bristol milkwoman" could divert us from considering her as a complex, philosophically inclined poet (19). I would argue that we do not have to choose between these two types of readings; instead, we should consider Yearsley's work along the same lines we would study her higher-class male contemporaries. Without considering her socio-cultural and historical context, the significance of Yearsley's poems might fade, just as William Wordsworth's (1770-1850) work could appear less colourful were we not to emphasise the unique, context-derived elements in his writing. Therefore, in this paper I endeavour to present the intersectional position of the Bristol poetess through one of her great poems, "A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade," while contrasting it with "To Indifference" (1787) and "Addressed to Sensibility" (1787), two more contemplative poems on the workings of sympathy. Both poems showcase an original perspective on the conundrums and contemporary understandings of fellow-feeling, especially concerning the sufferings of others and how we may or may not relate to them.

Twentieth- and twenty-first-century criticism on the evolution of moral philosophy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries often overlooks the female poets and authors active in these centuries, and the few to whom attention is paid—like Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784) or Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743-1825)—are often known for their roles in female suffrage rather than their literary achievements. This is especially puzzling when it comes to a lower-class woman, for her work may hold clues to how this social stratum might have experienced life in the heart of the ever-growing British Empire. Ann Yearsley lived her whole life in Bristol, the second largest slaving port in the nation after Liverpool, where the Dissenter population was twice the national average, and advocacy for the abolition of the slave trade was a significant part of political discourse. Hence, Yearsley had the opportunity to witness both the act and the arguments around it, while also being closer to the social stratum of these slaves, being a poor, working woman herself. At the intersection of life as a woman in eighteenth-century England and a person of the labouring class, as well as a Bristolian who could read and write, she was uniquely situated to join the lively discussion on the slave trade. Her addition to the increasing number of female poets addressing the issue

1 Intersectionality, as coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, is a term used to convey the multiple factors which determine one's social position, i.e., if they are discriminated against or privileged based on their religious, racial, ethnic, sexual, class, etc. identity. Originally created as a new feminist framework to address the black female experience, intersectional analysis provides scholars with a multi- rather than a single-axis view of social experience and position (Cooper 385).

is markedly different to the writing of her peers in its anti-capitalist stance, religious radicalism and graphic descriptions of brutality, but most importantly, it contains arguments that seek to appeal to the sympathetic disposition of her contemporaries and fellow Bristolians. Yearsley calls on readers and decision-makers to turn feeling into action: according to her opening words, she does not seek to cause “Anguish . . . which powerless Compassion ever gives,” pointing out that it is the rich and powerful who have the luxury to change course.

Her poem “To Indifference” might be more contemplative in nature, but its moral framework is very similar. In this article, the contrast between the two poems shall be examined to juxtapose Yearsley’s general argument for sympathy and her conviction that one cannot shy away from exposing oneself to one’s own woes or the plight of others. The wish for habitual indifference voiced in the poem is in earnest: Yearsley seeks a more peaceful state where she may “seal / The lids of mental sight” (52-53) so that she does not have to face pain and sorrow. “A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade” argues similarly, albeit from a more political point of view in which she contrasts religious and moral beliefs with economic gain. The most forceful lines in terms of rhetoric address the absurdity of the day’s conundrum in two rather provocative questions posed to the British socio-economic system: “Hath our public good / Fell rapine for its basis? Must our wants / Find their supply in murder?” (Yearsley, *A Poem* 26).

This paper attempts to present “A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade” with Yearsley’s views on sensibility and sympathy in mind, and for this, the moral philosophy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries must be considered. The likes of Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746) and David Hume (1711–1776) were wrestling with the same moral conundrums just a few decades before Yearsley published her poems, and thus their theories cannot go unnoticed in our discussion. Turning to thinkers more contemporary to us, Emmanuel Levinas’ thoughts on peace and proximity, as well as Judith Butler’s arguments about fellow-feeling and the precarity of life will help us reflect upon Yearsley’s compelling storytelling abilities as an intersectional poet, a literate woman of the labouring classes. However, before we can consider the moral contemplations offered by Yearsley, the social and economic context of her poetry shall be examined.

An Intersectional Poet and the British Economic System

The eighteenth century saw multiple female figures rise to positions of relative power: Hannah More (1745–1833), whose protégée is the subject of this article, was a highly influential Bluestocking whose Evangelical outlook and educationalist acumen impacted her writing and many other aspiring female writers, too. Anna Laetitia Barbauld, a radical thinker chastised by many of her peers, possessed such argumentative skill that her *Epistle to William Wilberforce* (1791) is remarked for its moral courage and forceful language. Mary Robinson (1757–1800), not so much as a writer but as a socialite, provided fodder for royal enthusiasts with her allegedly scandalous affair with the Prince of Wales, but used her fame for advancing her

literary career and with it the causes close to her including the abolition of the slave trade. Still, among these women, Yearsley, the least influential and little known poet gave the audience the most openly anti-capitalist work (and thus the most compelling argument based on the contrast of religious and economic beliefs), to address the issue of slavery. Therefore, before proceeding with Yearsley's take on the British economic system, this paper briefly examines the historical context and the growing restlessness around slavery, and considers her personal experience in society through how she was perceived and how her religious radicalism powered her writing.

By the end of the 1700s, Britain was second only to Portugal (and Brazil) in the number of slaves transported from Africa to the Caribbean and the Americas. Between 1662 and 1807, an estimated 3,415,000 people (Dresser) had to suffer the calamities of a journey under British coercion on the waves of the Atlantic Ocean and the subsequent violence on the plantations. Many newspapers informed the public regularly about shipwrecks as well as any development on the plantations, including fickle uprisings and curious incidents. The *Norfolk Chronicle*, for example, communicated the following news in 1778:

A letter [. . .] mentions the following melancholy affair: A ship in the slave trade [. . .] with 360 slaves [. . .] by some misfortune was driven on the rocks in the Bay, and beat to pieces; the slaves were under the hatches, which were fastened down, and all had perished except 17 white and about 12 slaves. ("Thursday's Post.")

A sympathetic (if condescending) tone toward slaves can be detected in some articles detailing debates in Parliament and the general political discourse around the issue too. Already in 1765, a decision in Parliament had passed that limited the "inhumanities be[i]ng practised," for they were "highly disgraceful to the reputation of the Kingdom" ("Monday's and Tuesday's Posts"), an argument that Yearsley wove into her religious reasonings two decades later. Approaching the 1780s, newspapers began to assume a more judgmental stance concerning the British slave trade, a fact that might signal the gradual shift in popular opinion and the impact of the trend of sensibility on British citizens. In 1771, the *Manchester Mercury* stated that, due to difficulties in the trade, "some very extraordinary event cannot be far distant in favour of a wretched race of individuals, whose complexions have, for centuries, exposed them to all the severities and indignities of servitude, that alone terminates with their lives" ("Saturday's and Sunday's Posts"), meaning a potential revolt in the colonies and eventual freedom for the enslaved. Yearsley herself calls for a kind of rebellion in her poem on abolition, stressing the huge gap between the exploiters and the enslaved; thus, her poem can be seen as a radical but in some ways unsurprising call for fundamental change (Ferguson 58).

It is easy to see how such reporting might have affected the literate population negatively: news that detailed the peril slaves had to suffer at the hands of the British government impacted the population, especially as sentimental literature and conduct books were very influential by the end of the 1700s. According to Carey, British citizens, due to their country growing more prosperous and stable, simply had more time to

contemplate the feelings of others and more means to help relieve their pain. As slavery was a “major branch of the national trade [that] was engaged in systematic torture and violence,” citizens, having grown more sentimental in their outlook, felt disdain and shame for the fact that they profited off the empire’s maltreatment of African men and women (Carey 20). Newfound prosperity also enabled for a greater distance between the lower and the upper classes, as those who felt sympathy lived far from those who were suffering. According to Butler (38), empathy for those close to us in terms of “common epistemological and cultural grounds” leads to a blindness towards the suffering of others, especially when their pain is inflected by bodies related to us, for one must turn to indifference to live their life without sorrow and guilt. In the case of Ann Yearsley, her social and geographical proximity (as a labouring-class woman in Bristol) to the enslaved provided her with a deeper understanding of their pain. Butler argues that proximity always has an impact on our ability to mourn our fellow humans—educational, cultural, linguistic, and geographical closeness determines a certain “we” that is necessarily different to what other groups identify as “we.” She, however, asks a poignant question: “at what cost do I establish the familiar as the criterion by which a human life is grievable?” (Butler 38). To Yearsley, human lives are all unified under the Christian God, and she is deeply offended by her countrymen because they go against the most basic tenets of Christianity by trading in “human cargo.”

To turn to a sharper critique of the hypocrisy of a Christian state built on economic exploitation and dehumanisation, R. H. Tawney’s (1880–1962) thoughts must be enumerated. According to Tawney, “Religion had not yet learned to console itself for the practical difficulty of applying its moral principles, by clasping the comfortable formula that for the transactions of economic life no moral principles exist” (188). This formulation may not be aligned with Yearsley’s views, for throughout his book *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* Tawney finds not only correlation but causation between Christianity and the pitfalls of capitalism, while Yearsley does not criticise Christian doctrines, and even takes the position of a kind of Christian missionary in the African colonies. Among the enslaved, she sees poor souls who could be saved from heathenism by missionary work, and she is disappointed about her nation exchanging moral victory for financial gain. Her concern is that Britain’s religious and charitable efforts will appear insincere when contrasted with their trade practices, thus rendering the very notion of Christianity not only foreign and hypocritical but also harmful in the eyes of the colonised. Yearsley’s religious ideals, then, cannot be reconciled with the ironically barbaric economic activity of the British Empire. It seems that when it comes to economic progress, no moral principles exist, every process is shaped by the kind of cynical realpolitik that so many abolitionists abhor, and influential Dissenters preach against. In her abolitionist poem, Yearsley attempts to call readers’ attention to a social crisis by providing us with sentimental yet graphic depictions of violence against body and soul. For her, religion—or rather, a Christian faith based on a universal belief in humanity—should be the foundation for all national and imperial considerations, for progress achieved through the destruction of others is in fact regressive and morally reprehensible.

Yearsley also came across money-related hypocrisy in wealthy intellectual circles during her time as the protégée of Hannah More. More was an influential Evangelical

educationalist who took a liking to Yearsley because of her talent for poetry that she found contradictory to her social station as a milkmaid. In Moira Ferguson's words, "with borrowed books, a sharp eye, and the Bristol world for inspiration, Yearsley infused her poetry with powerful feelings, a quest for justice, and an evolving ideological perspective" (47), although the latter characteristic of her poetry would bring her eventual demise, at least in More's eyes. The root of their quarrel was in the great social and cultural distance between the two women, as More perceived a lack of gratitude in Yearsley's conduct when the latter asked for money after her first volume of poetry was published with help from More. It must also be noted here that "even 'liberality' and 'charity' may be seen as calculated acts of class appeasement" (Thompson 150); thus, it is not surprising that the likes of More expected self-subordinating gratitude from a lower-class person in exchange for their good-natured condescension. More's view of Yearsley changed considerably when she detected a kind of base hostility in her wish to profit from her own poems, as this suggested a rebellious nature that conservative thinkers such as More could not abide. The threat of the lower classes' barbarity echoes in More's letters to the famous Bluestocking Elizabeth Montagu (1718–1800):

Nothing wou'd appease her fury but having the money to spend, and which she expected in a fit of vulgar resentment, I shou'd give her, but my sense of duty will not allow it. Her other charges against me are that I have spoilt her verses by my corrections, and that she will write another book directly to show I was of no use to her, that I have ruined her reputation by the Preface which is full of falsehoods, that it was the height of insult and barbarity to tell that she was poor and a Milkwoman. (Qtd. in Ferguson 50)

A labouring-class woman demanding money from a figure of such high social standing was frowned upon by even those who otherwise would have supported her, with her efforts seen as an overt attack on social and political order. Writing in an earlier letter, More argued that "taking her out of her station" would inevitably lead to a decline in the quality of Yearsley's output and make her "detestable" (More qtd. in Ferguson 47). Simply put, as soon as the myth of the natural, instinctual genius lays claim to what they judge to be their fair share of rights and capital, the upper classes must deny them attention and support; having lost sight of their "place," labouring-class people aspire to something that they cannot and should not be able to achieve. In other words, the charming milkwoman remains interesting (and useful) only if she climbs the ladder in a pace approved by her social superiors. Still, Yearsley's fall from grace let her lead with a different attitude in her later volumes: a tone of happy resignation can be detected in a provocative unpublished poem, "To Stella" (addressed to the intellectual star More from Lactilla, the milkmaid). Here, Yearsley reflects upon the class divide between the two poets, warning More that her hypocrisy will be revealed unless she refrains from insulting her. In a less furious turn, however, Yearsley proudly accepts the basic truth of More's arguments, namely that they do not belong in the same space: she reclaims her "rightful place down in the metaphorical 'vale'" (Ferguson 77). This showcases a certain labouring-class pride that may provide some insight when it comes to Yearsley's advocacy for the abolitionist cause.

Finally, the story of Yearsley's resistance teaches a more universal lesson to the likes of More and Montagu: even in their excitement for untrained talent, they should not lose sight of the inherent barbarity of the lower classes; in other words, the social and political boundaries must stay intact, and support must always appear condescending so as not to suggest equality in power or genius. The inherent threat of a Yearsley-like figure must be recognised, for her ascent can be read as an allegory for social change in general. According to Richard Brown, the transformation of Britain from a pre-industrial to an industrial society and the gradual evolution of a dominant urban society "led to existing forms of association and institutions being brought into question," resulting in a defence mechanism on the part of the elite. Their "resistance to logical change, the defence of the indefensible" was naturally a part of this mechanism as the wealthy and powerful sought to keep their status (Brown 3). Thus, although More was an advocate for the abolition of the slave trade, her perspective was fundamentally different to Yearsley's: she did not want to disturb the status quo due to the benefits she received within the existing social order. As such, any minor rebellion against her station had to be contained, and the "labour and practised craft" of the more fortunate classes of Britain could never be likened to the "untutored genius" (McDowell 259) of a labouring-class person.

The Shared Human Condition

Having enumerated some of the factors from Yearsley's biography which may help us understand the moral stance seen in "A Poem on the Abolition of the Slave Trade," it is now important to note that the work of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century moral philosophers influenced the *Zeitgeist* which Yearsley had to navigate. We know from More's letters that Yearsley had read Milton's *Paradise Lost* (Ferguson 47) before they met, but most of Yearsley's reading history—like other aspects of her life after the late 1780s—is unknown to us. Thus, this section endeavours to connect the dots between her poetic output and contemporary writings about sympathy that she may have come across, focusing on Yearsley's "To Indifference," "Addressed to Sensibility," and "A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade."

First, the influence of *Paradise Lost* on Yearsley's thinking must be considered, as it is a work that deals with the issue of relatedness and sympathy through the concept of consolation. Leila Watkins (416) emphasises that after the Fall, Adam and Eve do not possess the "automatic, magnetic sympathies with the natural world;" however, they have a newfound ability of "building such ties with each other," a development that may have influenced how Yearsley saw the human potential for fellow-feeling. As the two fallen humans console one another after what initially seems their complete demise, they engage with each other and their environment consciously and actively, providing future society with a blueprint for what moral philosophers of the 1700s will call sympathy. Social relatedness, then, is a basic condition of fellow-feeling: a common problem or cause for happiness must connect individuals for sympathy to arise.

It is not Yearsley's argument, however, that such a cause must be identified in the present, for her cries for sympathy for the slaves are anchored in her religious

outlook on society. She marks as our basic common denominator the shared condition of living under God, and thus she appeals to “social love,” urging her audience and decisionmakers to “make a fellow-creature’s woe / His own by heart-felt sympathy” (*A Poem* 30). She stands against “remorseless Christian[s]” (18) as a remorseful Christian herself, one who cannot turn to indifference due to her fundamental belief in a condition which binds us together. This shared condition is twofold: the implications of the Fall all humans inherited, and our being God’s creatures in general, meaning that “whatever is in creatures proceeds from God” (Goclenius, qtd. in Mercer 124). This is why the imprisonment and enslavement of our fellow humans should—according to Yearsley—appear so abhorrent to those who follow Christian morality.

In *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*, Judith Butler argues in a similar, albeit not religious fashion. Human vulnerability—which, if we follow Christian doctrine, is a consequence of our being excluded from Paradise—is something that we all have in common: “our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure” makes a “tenuous we of us all” (Butler 20). Our grief as well as our ability to love cements the notion that there are no different races within humankind—the only way we may not be included in society, then, is if we are dehumanised by our fellow humans, i.e., if our very humanity is taken away from us through violence, degradation, and wilful ignorance. Following such dehumanisation, slaves become, to follow Butler’s terminology, un-grievable. Two centuries earlier, in much the same manner as her fellow early Romantic poetess Mary Robinson (see: “The Negro Girl,” 1800), Yearsley uses the enslaved Luco’s story in her efforts to argue for sympathy for all slaves:

By nature fierce; while Luco sought the beach,
And plung’d beneath the wave; but near him lay
A planter’s barge, whose seamen grasp’d his hair
Dragging to life a wretch who wish’d to die. (*A Poem* 19)

This element of the narrative is particularly powerful because of the clear dehumanisation Luco must endure: the slave traders refuse him the basic human right to self-inflicted death, and even before the narrative begins, his right to self-determination is taken away as he is unjustly sentenced to life-long, unpaid hard labour. The human condition binding us together does not escape Robinson either. Her poem utilises some of the scientific and political arguments popular in intellectual circles of the 1700s with several allusions to racist theory, which Peter Kitson (12) summarises the following way: “those theories of human difference which indicate a biological element to racial difference, empirically determined.” Robinson, like Yearsley, albeit in a more sentimentalist fashion, calls on the British to feel for their fellow humans by refuting the importance of racist arguments: “Whate’er their tints may be, their / Souls are still the same” (“The Negro Girl” line 54). This points to the fact that while racist theories and economic greed were the leading factors of British trade policy, several female poets and intellectuals recognised the shared human condition of vulnerability and argued for its significance.

On a slightly different note, it is French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas who contemplates the meaning of the religious doctrine “thou shalt not kill” in relation to empathy in a similar fashion as Yearsley. He argues that “[i]n ethics, the other’s right to exist has primacy over my own, a primacy epitomized in the ethical edict: you shall not kill, you shall not jeopardize the life of the other” (Levinas qtd. in Butler 132), and still, Christian nations systematically erase people’s right to a free and safe life. Levinas examines this conundrum from the perspective of religious beliefs, and much like Yearsley, he argues that Europe turned its back on such principles in its pursuit of prosperity. In his influential essay *Peace and Proximity*, Levinas discusses the paradoxical nature of European historiography and the hypocrisy of a European identity built upon the pillars of peace and freedom. Here, he claims that “this history [of Europe] does not recognize itself in its millennia of fratricidal, political, and bloody struggles, of imperialism, of human hatred and exploitation.” Interestingly, albeit great historic and political shifts separate them from each other, Yearsley and Levinas both construct their cases around the basic tenets of European (British) identity and religious ethical principles, with Yearsley going so far as to accuse slave traders of robbing God of worshippers (*A Poem* 22). Levinas, of course, references world events that the poetess could not have predicted: the Napoleonic Wars, the Victorian age, the First World War, the Holocaust, and Stalin’s regime stand between the two thinkers. Their focus is, nevertheless, very similar: prosperity built upon murder cannot be construed as triumphant in our historiographies. The potential impact of religion-based arguments such as Yearsley’s may be summarised with some help from Spinoza: prophets’ words “echo in the hearts of men” (Spinoza qtd. in Juffé 155), they “communicate an ethical message, a practical rule of life, precepts one follows for ‘motives of an affective order” (Juffé 155). Thus, such ethical principles, when employed in abolitionist arguments, may influence readers and decisionmakers on the level of their Christian identity and make them recognise their hypocritical behaviour.

Turning away from the overtly religious aspects of this poem, we may gain further insight into Yearsley’s ethical stance by looking at the ethical aspects of two other poems, *To Indifference* and *Addressed to Sensibility*. Both works consider the concept of indifference and how it might help the speaker lead a more peaceful life, arguing that sensibility is a harmful habit that brings about constant unhappiness as well as dishonest affectations (McDowell 262). In the latter, Yearsley concludes that personal experience with sensibility is necessary for fellow-feeling: “Does Education give the transport keen, / Or swell your vaunted grief? No, Nature feels / Most poignant, undefended” (78–80). As a ‘natural poetic genius’ who did not receive the type of education that Hannah More, Elizabeth Montagu, Anna Barbauld, or even Mary Robinson did, Yearsley is understandably drawn to the idea of natural feeling. The poem begins with the speaker’s lament that the pain she witnesses affects her so deeply that she herself feels wounded:

For, oh, my bosom bleeds, while griefs like thine
 Increase the recent pang. Pensive I rove,
 More wounded than the hart, whose side yet holds
 The deadly arrow (“Addressed to Sensibility” 3)

Such fellow-feeling, which we for the purposes of this article define according to David Hume and Adam Smith's (1723-1790) frameworks (i.e., "any occasion when one person feels as another does, because the other feels that way" [Sayre-McCord 212]), is also articulated in "A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade". However, "Addressed to Sensibility" discusses sympathy as a universal feeling rather than one related to a specific issue. Towards the end of the relatively short poem, Yearsley, in agreement with Hume and Smith (Sayre-McCord 211), shifts her tone in her request to feel not only others' woes but also their joy. "To Indifference" takes a different road in addressing sensibility, asking "What's the vain boast / Of Sensibility but to be wretched? (51)" and begging for indifference to obliterate her sympathy towards others' suffering. She laments that sensibility succeeds only in enhancing the feeling of wretchedness, an argument that may be linked to her words of address at the beginning of "A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade". There, she speaks of "powerless Compassion," alluding to the fact that although she is powerless, those addressed in the poem are not. The realisation that fellow-feeling does not necessarily produce action is a vital aspect of Yearsley's view on sympathy, and it could be read as a rebuttal of the abolitionist writings of the likes of More, who construct a melancholy narrative around the enslaved but do not call for action as directly as Barbauld or Yearsley (see More's *Slavery: A Poem*).

Yearsley's contemplation of sensibility is mostly aligned with the general discourse on the subject in the late eighteenth century. In an article about late-1700s authors Jane Austen (1775-1817) and Ann Radcliffe's (1764-1823) discussions of sensibility, Ashly Bennett quotes the title of a 1796 *Monthly Magazine* article: "Ought Sensibility to be cherished or repressed?" (377). In the article, whose resemblance to then-popular conduct books must also be noted, the author concludes that one should feel ashamed of "sensibility's 'ridiculous' excesses and the 'contrary extreme of affected insensibility,' a 'freezing air of indifference' constituting 'a rude and vulgar kind of stoicism'" (Bennett 378). Simply put, the author advises individuals (presumably female readers in particular) to abstain from any extreme feelings in a way that does not produce indifference, a sort of middle ground both in terms of feeling and morality. The same conundrum can be found at the core of Yearsley's "To Indifference," a poem that relates the mental struggle of a person who is naturally oriented towards fellow-feeling. This poem does not reflect upon contemporary social or political issues at all, but it is precisely what is needed to complement the ideas of the more activist-minded "A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade". It provides us with clues to the reasons behind Yearsley's advocacy for sympathy as well as her conscious consideration of sensibility's flaws; indifference is tempting for Yearsley, for in it she sees a more peaceful mode of existence:

Of Pain, or Joy,
 She gives too large a share; but thou, more kind,
 Wrapp'st up the heart from both, and bidd'st it rest
 In ever-wish'd-for ease. By all the pow'rs
 Which move within the mind for diff'rent ends,
 I'd rather lose myself with thee and share

Thine happy indolence, for one short hour,
 Than live of Sensibility the tool
 For endless ages. ("To Indifference" 51–52)

However, she clearly finds this solution unsatisfactory: in both poems discussed above, Yearsley concludes that sensibility, however tiresome and disturbing, is crucial to a well-rounded social experience. Indifference, then, results in a dull, if in some respects blissful life, one that is devoid of fellow-feeling and thus not natural to her and perhaps not appropriate for a poet.

The most significant discussion of fellow-feeling in the decades before Yearsley contemplated the issue comes from David Hume and one of his contemporary critics, the Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713). While there are countless aspects in which the two thinkers differ, both present the reader with theoretical frameworks for sympathy that are built around the notion of social relatedness. Due to the limitations of this article, only this aspect of Hume and Shaftesbury's respective moral theories is in focus here; as a literary example, I would argue that Yearsley's poems complement the work of these moral philosophers in a way that sheds light on the significance of social relatedness in the abolitionist discourse. According to both Hume and Adam Smith, "our capacity to make moral judgments plays a vital role in strengthening and supporting the bonds of community that sympathy makes possible" (Sayre-McCord 210), and Yearsley is urging her fellow Brits to do just that. The sort of fellow-feeling explained in Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) is conditioned upon a certain relatability between individuals within a society, meaning that relatability is in fact necessary for sympathy. If we add to Hume's theory Shaftesbury's argument that our human experience is incomplete if we do not participate in a sympathetic relationship within a community, it is obvious that both philosophers emphasise the importance of community. Yearsley sees the enslaved Africans torn from their natural community in which they can relate to their fellow humans and thrown onto the margins of a community that will inevitably hurt, coerce, and dehumanise them. Slavers, then, rob not only God of worshippers, but also African men and women of the human experience of belonging. Even more, if we consider philosophers of universal sympathy in the seventeenth century from the perspective of abolition, we may argue that humanity itself is robbed of unity when individuals are dehumanised; for thinkers like Van Helmont and Gangloff, universal unity is only achieved if all agents can feel for and relate to the other agents (Mercer 123).

To complement Hume and Shaftesbury's arguments, we must turn to Francis Hutcheson's theory of sentiment. In his classification of senses in the 1742 *Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions with Illustrations on the Moral Sense* (22), Hutcheson identifies five senses, including three which have an affective (i.e., it is consequential to others) aspect: a public sense (which may be interpreted as fellow-feeling), a moral sense, and a sense of honour. Hutcheson also lists an external sense where he locates our ability to identify others' feelings and feel their pain and joy, i.e., sympathy. The senses are imagined as both active and reactive, generating positive and negative will on the one hand and reflecting upon outside influence on the other.

However, Affection (less intense) and Passion (more intense)—as Hutcheson terms the two culprits for action—operate based on reflection and are therefore rational (31). This, again, aligns with what Yearsley is aiming to do in the poems examined above: by contemplating the very feelings of indifference and sympathy, she argues for a heightened sense of awareness when considering the feelings of others and concludes in a rational manner with the inevitability of fellow-feeling and a warning against extreme sensibility.

According to Hutcheson, moral judgments rest upon rational approval or disapproval which we arrive at through reflective evaluation; however, the basis for this process is not reason, as that is only a means to consider affections which constitute the true culprit of moral judgment. Interestingly, Hutcheson also makes a point of limiting the society within which sympathy may arise, using a Hume-like argument for relatability, but making it dependent on the objects of sympathy being “sensitive or rational Beings”:

A painful Sensation dictates nothing of itself; it must be therefore some Reflection or Instinct, distinct from the Pain, which suggests the Remedy. Our Benevolence and Compassion presuppose indeed some Knowledge of other sensitive Beings, and of what is good or evil to them: But they do not arise from any previous Opinion, that “the Good of others tends to the Good of the Agent.” They are Determinations of our Nature, previous to our Choice from Interest, which excite us to Action, as soon as we know other sensitive or rational Beings, and have any Apprehension of their Happiness or Misery. (91)

Throughout his *Essay*, Hutcheson discusses the concept of the moral sense as a natural human trait, and Yearsley’s status as a natural (rather than learned) poetic genius grants her discourse on sympathy a certain authenticity that is unrivalled by other abolitionist poetesses. Because of her self-aware approach to the observation of others’ suffering, Yearsley’s account of her experience with sympathy does not take on a voyeur-like position; in fact, she overtly rejects the pitiful gaze as unnecessary and superficial. In her “A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade,” Luco’s plight is not seen from a sentimental point of view. Instead, Yearsley seeks to confront her audience with a harsh reality: like she writes in her address, she hopes to make readers feel as she does, urging them to act upon feelings of sympathy that may arise as they read of slaves’ woes. Thus, the poem gives space for rational consideration within the religious framework accepted as the basis of everyday eighteenth-century moral judgment, but it also provides us with a narrative that helps us immerse ourselves in the other’s feelings. Yearsley’s narrative position makes the reader feel that they share Luco’s tale by being implicated in his suffering and the poem depicts British power as an overwhelmingly negative element of the narrative. The natural reaction is affection, and the rational consideration of this feeling can lead to nothing but abolitionist action.

Finally, Yearsley’s argument against the slave trade is made even more powerful when we recognise that a new sort of community is built through Yearsley’s narrative. Sympathy appears when there is social relatability present—the reality of a position for

slavery and the slave trade looks insensitive and inhumane as soon as the reader can immerse themselves in the narrative.² A new ‘we’ is constructed by Yearsley, and with the narrative existence of unity between the enslaved and the British reader, one may be compelled to bring this new ‘we’ into reality. The arguably politicised grief that citizens are thus made to feel for the enslaved allows for a new sense of political community. To end with Butler’s words: with grief, “the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility” are brought to the fore with the recognition that this ‘we’ “is traversed by a relationality that we cannot easily argue against; or, rather, we can argue against it, but we would be denying something fundamental about the social conditions of our very formation” (Butler 22–23).

Conclusion

This article attempted to examine Ann Yearsley’s “A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade” through both a historical-political and ethical lens. The biographical details of Yearsley’s life provide historical context for her resilient literary attitudes, but it is her progressive contemplation of fellow-feeling that would rightfully captivate scholars of politics, philosophy and poetry alike. As one immerses oneself in her ethical considerations, Yearsley’s output raises a few questions worth considering for the future study of eighteenth-century female writers as well as social relations and sympathy in general.

Having alluded to some of the most important theories of sympathy by seventeenth-century thinkers in this article, the overarching question for future research relates to the limits of fellow-feeling and social relatability. Who belongs in the society within which fellow-feeling is possible, and on what grounds are certain groups excluded from sympathy? Naturally, special rules apply to Africans enslaved and coerced by the British—they could never really belong in a society where they do not have access to even the most basic means and ideas of life, such as earning money for themselves and freedom to spend it on what they like. They are, both socially and geographically, in a different space, quite separate from the society which debates the abolition of their systematic coercion and trade. But how do we see quasi-marginal figures such as Yearsley in this equation? What sort of space does she occupy?

Ann Yearsley’s position as an intersectional poet, a woman of the labouring class living in Bristol, is rather unique in the 1700s; still, she does not make shockwaves with her writing and, soon after the Bluestocking support evaporates, she is quickly forgotten by her contemporaries. As seen in the critical opinions quoted in this article, interest in her work started to increase in the 1980s and since then many other British female poets came to the fore of academic research. Among these authoresses, Yearsley’s self-aware argument for belonging and remaining in the “metaphorical ‘vale’” (Ferguson 77) could be instructive in further considerations of class representation in the literary canon, especially because we rarely see such open, confrontative style in the 1700s.

2 For further reading on the power of sympathetic imagination see Nussbaum.

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