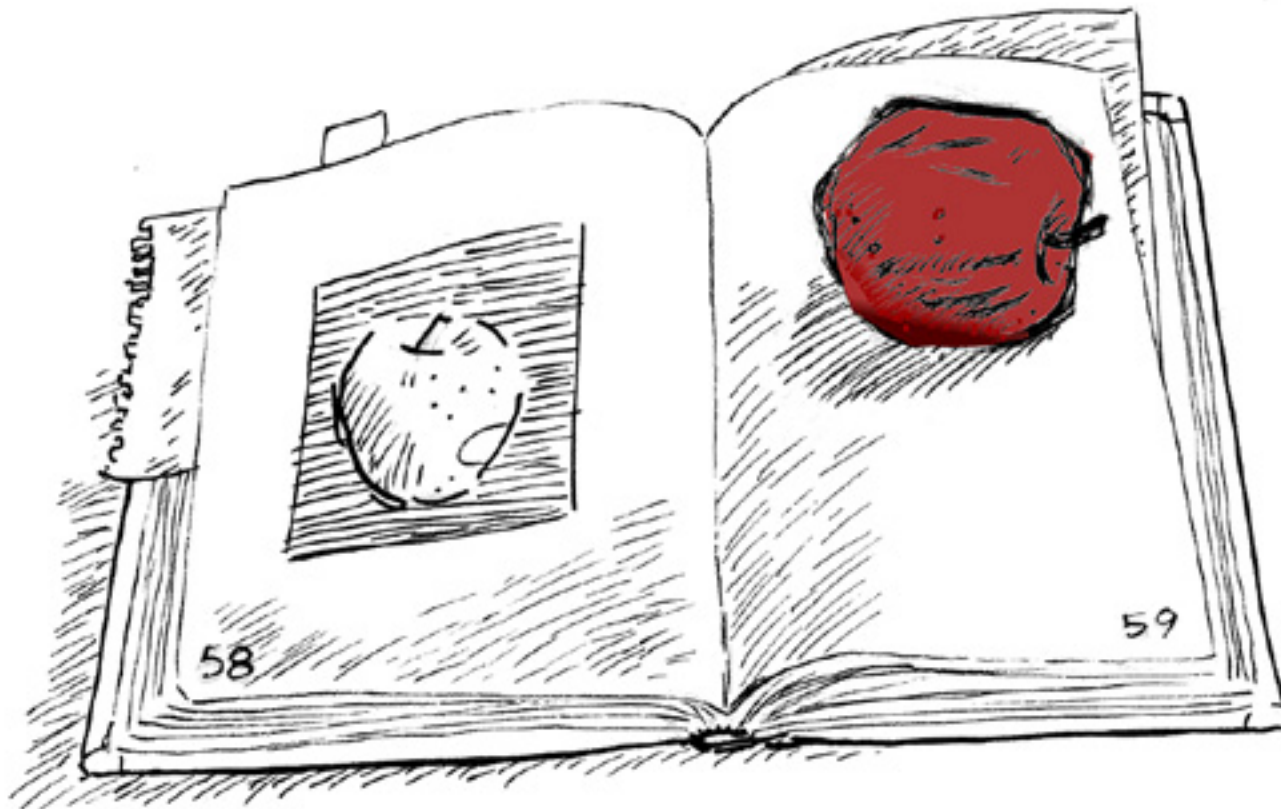


Phillis Wheatley



Time Line

- 1761 • Phillis Wheatley brought to Boston aboard slave ship Phillis
- 1770 • Boston Massacre; British soldiers shot at civilians
- 1773 • Wheatley's manuscript: *Poems on Various Subjects: Religious and Moral* published in London
- 1773 • Benjamin Rush, future signer of the Declaration of Independence, abolitionist, publishes *An Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements in America, Upon Slave-keeping*
- 1776 • Progressive signing of the Declaration of Independence
- 1789 • French Revolution begins
- 1791 • Slave Revolution in Haiti begins

- 1804 • The American South grows 60 percent of the world's cotton and provides 70 percent of the cotton consumed by the British textile industry.

Phillis Wheatley

General Information

Although often labeled as America's "slave poet," she is credited with beginning the African-American literary tradition and she is the only published female poet from the American colonies after Anne Bradstreet.

- in 1761 she was born in Africa, kidnapped, then brought to Boston around seven or eight years old
- she was named after the slave ship *Phillis* and her owner's last name
- John and Susanna Wheatley purchased her as a house servant and raised her in the Protestant faith in the same Boston church founded by John Winthrop in 1630
- within sixteen months she was reading English and by the time she was 12 she was reading Latin, translating Ovid

Slave Codes

It is important to remember that each colony, and later each state, dictated individual laws concerning the slave population.

During the end of the Eighteenth Century slave codes of the American Colonies *did not* prohibit education for those held in slavery.

- However, humanitarian ideas decreased further *after* the Revolution.

Slave Codes

- In 1833 for example, the state of Alabama declared:

31. Any person or persons who attempt to teach any free person of color, or slave, to spell, read, or write, shall, upon conviction thereof by indictment, be fined in a sum not less than two hundred and fifty dollars, nor more than five hundred dollars.

32. Any free person of color who shall write for any slave a pass or free paper, on conviction thereof, shall receive for every such offense, thirty-nine lashes on the bare back, and leave the state of Alabama within thirty days thereafter...

Any slave who shall write for any other slave, any pass or free-paper, upon conviction, shall receive, on his or her back, fifty lashes for the first offence, and one hundred lashes for every offence thereafter...

John G. Akin, *A Digest of the Laws of the State of Alabama - 1833*, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama. (<http://www.archives.state.al.us/teacher/slavery/lesson1/doc1.html>)

A Style of Restraint

As far as Phillis Wheatley was concerned however, she was somewhat fortunate to be brought into a “liberated” household. The Wheatley’s raised Phillis more as a house servant rather than as the typical slave.

It is hard to distinguish the poems without looking at the poet herself.

Her contradictory life and personal views take central stage in the discourse.

Three general questions exist regarding Phillis Wheatley’s work:

- Was her restrained style a natural style choice or was she merely imitating the popular poets of her day?
- —or was it due to her role as a slave that she could not express herself freely?
- Does a subtle critical undertone of abolitionist thought exist in her work—
in other words, does a subtle message lie hidden within the lines of her poems?

Language of the Times

Where further discussions can be developed is in the notions of the culture of 1776 itself. The common language of the Colonial people and the publications of the time all used frequent statements relating the bondage of the various colonies with slave-labor for the British crown; these items Wheatley would certainly be aware of, and would easily apply to her own situation.

Unfortunately, Wheatley does not openly state in any poem whether she did make such a connection of her own slave state to the notions of the beginnings of the colonial revolution.

On Being Brought from Africa

A few observations about one poem may demonstrate how to find a subtle critique of slavery within Phillis Wheatley's poetry.

In just eight lines, Wheatley describes her attitude towards her condition of enslavement and her attitude towards the dominant culture that considers her skin color a negation.

- The structure of the poem is with rhyming couplets, iambic pentameter, also known as **heroic couplets**.
- Wheatley begins by crediting her slavery as a positive, because it brought her to Christianity: “Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land”
- While her Christian faith is surely genuine, it is also a “safe” subject for a slave poet. Whereas expressing gratitude for her enslavement would prove to be an unexpected analogy for most readers.

On Being Brought from Africa

- In line 2 as well she uses the word “benighted” — an interesting choice: it means “overtaken by night or darkness” or “being in a state of moral or intellectual darkness.” Thus, she parallels her skin color and her original state of ignorance of Christianity, creating a subtle metaphor.
- The opening lines also downplay the violence of her kidnapping as a child and the subsequent voyage aboard a slave ship. By using the phrase “mercy brought me” and with the ‘soft’ title “on being brought” — she does not seem composing a criticism of slavery. At the same time she credits not the slave trade, but *divine* mercy with the act. This could be read as denying the power to those human beings who kidnapped her and subjected her to the voyage and to her subsequent sale and submission to the colonies.

On Being Brought from Africa

- She also credits her education in Christianity as a salvation, and *not* the human (caucasian) element. In her turning to God as a force of control, she reminds her audience that there is a power strong than the slave industry itself.
- Furthermore she cleverly distances her reader from those who “view our sable race with scornful eye” — *nudging* the reader towards a more plausible contradictory opinion of slavery, or at least showing a more positive view of those people who are forced into slavery.
- “Sable” in line 5 itself as a self-description of her color is an interesting choice of words. Sable is very valuable and desirable fur of dark color. This characterization contrasts sharply to the “diabolic die” of the next line.

On Being Brought from Africa

- “Diabolic die” may also be a subtle reference to another side of the “triangle” trade which includes slaves. At about that same time, the Quaker leader John Woolman is publically boycotting dyes in order to protest slavery. He would not purchase or wear clothing made from slave industries.
- In the second-to-last line, the word “Christian” is placed ambiguously. She may either be addressing her last sentence to Christians — or she may be including Christians in those who “may be refined” and find salvation. She reminds her reader that Negroes may be a part of those saved. The implication of her last sentence is also this: the “angelic train” will include both white and black regardless to their positions in society.

On Being Brought from Africa

- Finally in the last sentence, she uses the verb “remember” — implying that the reader is already with her personal convictions and just needs the reminder to agree with her point.
- In addition the word is delivered in the form of a direct command.
While echoing Puritan preachers in using this style, Wheatley takes on the role of one who has the right to command: a teacher, a preacher, or even perhaps a master or mistress.

On the Death of Rev. Whitefield

Most of Wheatley poems are considered occasional pieces:

work written on the death of some notable or on some special occasion.

- “On the Death of the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield” is a good example.
- She mirrors the typical poetry of the time by using strong regular rhythms of iambic pentameter and rhyming couplets just like “On Being Brought—.”
- Her choice of subject, Whitefield, was one of the first men to preach to the enslaved members of colonial America. He was a celebrity in his own right traveling America with open air sermons. He is considered the first celebrity evangelist in the Colonies.

On the Death of Rev. Whitefield

- **One irony** about this poem, he is known for his *advocacy* of slavery. Whitefield himself was a slave owner.
- As an illustration of his views, during the mid-1700s in Georgia, slavery was temporarily outlawed. However, George Whitefield campaigned for its return, under the premise that the colony would never be prosperous unless the agricultural system was able to use slave labor. In part due to his efforts, it was reinstated by 1751.
- When Whitefield died, he bequeathed his slaves to Selina Hastings, an Englishwoman, Countess of Huntingdon. **Second irony**, due to Wheatley's first poem's publication, it was noticed by the Countess herself in London who published the resulting first book.

On the Death of Rev. Whitefield

Looking at the poem's structure:

- It is composed of four stanzas, the first: 10 lines, the second 17 lines, and the remaining two stanzas ten lines each.
- The 10-lined stanzas have a rhyme scheme of rhyming couplets.
- In the longer second stanza however, she breaks the rhyme formula (due to the odd number of lines) so the opening tercet rhyme and the rest of the stanza returns to a rhyming couplet strategy. You'll notice the *Norton* places a bracket along the portion of lines which break the pattern.

Looking at the poem's themes:

- She escalates him to the status of prophet within this longer stanza, showing him climbing the skies almost as a rocket where he is received by “worlds unknown” —meaning the divine world is not known by the material world.

On the Death of Rev. Whitefield

- Throughout the verse she uses typical Christian allusions, comparing the Reverend to mystical experiences from the Bible, notably Jacob wrestling God in line 19. Plus what is important, she uses references to America throughout the piece, a promotion of the colonies in its own right.
- Later in stanza three she mentions Africans likewise which in itself acts as a paraphrase of the themes in his sermons.
- The closing stanza mentions the Countess of Huntingdon, she is the patron who in the near future will provide the funds for her work to be published in London.

Criticism of Her Time

Critics within her time period differed on the contribution of Phillis Wheatley's poetry to America's emerging literary tradition.

Most of her contemporary critics agree that the fact that a slave could write and publish poetry at this time and place is itself noteworthy in history.

- Some, including Benjamin Franklin wrote positive assessments of her poetry.
- Others, like Thomas Jefferson, ironically dismissed her poetry's quality.

He wrote:

Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry.

—Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry. Love is the peculiar oestrum of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Whately; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism. The heroes of the Dunciad are to her, as Hercules to the author of that poem.