

Phillis Wheatley

Faith, Freedom, and the Promise of America



Phillis Wheatley, engraving by Scipio Moorhead, 1773. Frontispiece to *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London, 1773).

WHO WAS PHILLIS WHEATLEY?

Phillis Wheatley (c. 1753–1784) was an enslaved African girl brought to Boston as a child. There she learned to read and write and became the first published African American author—and one of the first American women—to publish a book of poetry. In 1773, at about age twenty, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* appeared in London and introduced her to readers on both sides of the Atlantic.

Her poetry drew on classical learning, the Bible, and the language of the American Revolution. It challenged prevailing claims about the intellectual capacities of Black people and exposed the contradiction between a society that proclaimed liberty and one that upheld slavery. A preface of testimonials from prominent Bostonians attested that she was the author of the poems.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Wheatley wrote in the 1770s, as colonists spoke of natural rights, liberty, and equality—and as slavery remained central to the Atlantic economy. Her work uses Christian language familiar to colonial readers to argue that Africans are fully human and capable of faith, virtue, and salvation.

She did not call for immediate emancipation, and she wrote within the Christian framework of her society. Yet an enslaved African woman who could master European learning and speak with moral authority complicated ideas about race, intelligence, and gender. Her poems and letters circulated in the same intellectual world that produced revolutionary arguments about liberty.

PRIMARY SOURCE · THE POEM

From *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London, 1773). The complete poem is eight lines.

*'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.*

*Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic die."
Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.*

—Phillis Wheatley, "On Being Brought from Africa to America" (1773)

ANALYZE THE POEM

1. According to Wheatley, what is the purpose of her enslavement and her education?
2. How does she challenge racist beliefs in this poem? Point to specific words ("sable race," "diabolic die," "black as Cain," "refin'd").
3. In what ways does the poem use the language of Christianity? How might those same ideas have sounded in the revolutionary debate over liberty?
4. Who do you think Wheatley's intended audience was? What does that choice tell us about the limits and opportunities facing an enslaved woman writer in 1773?
5. How does this poem complicate our understanding of freedom, religion, and slavery in the eighteenth century?

*"Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train."*

—the closing couplet, used in the 1773 volume itself

Wheatley and the Love of Freedom

Letter to Samson Occom, February 11, 1774

THE LETTER IN CONTEXT

In February 1774 Wheatley wrote to Samson Occom, a Mohegan Presbyterian minister and fellow Christian intellectual. She had recently gained her freedom. Occom had criticized Christian ministers who kept people enslaved. Wheatley agreed—and went further. She took the era’s language of liberty and turned it against slavery itself, claiming that enslaved people shared the same God-given love of freedom that patriot colonists celebrated for themselves.

PRIMARY SOURCE • THE LETTER

Published in the *Connecticut Gazette*, 11 March 1774, as “a Specimen of her Ingenuity.” Spelling lightly regularized for classroom reading.

Rev’d and honor’d Sir,

I have this Day received your obliging kind Epistle, and am greatly satisfied with your Reasons respecting the Negroes, and think highly reasonable what you offer in Vindication of their natural Rights. ... Otherwise, perhaps, the Israelites had been less solicitous for their Freedom from Egyptian slavery; I do not say they would have been contented without it, by no means, for in every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance; and by the Leave of our modern Egyptians I will assert, that the same Principle lives in us. God grant Deliverance in his own Way and Time, and get him honour upon all those whose Avarice impels them to countenance and help forward the Calamities of their fellow Creatures. This I desire not for their Hurt, but to convince them of the strange Absurdity of their Conduct whose Words and Actions are so diametrically opposite. How well the Cry for Liberty, and the reverse Disposition for the exercise of oppressive Power over others agree,—I humbly think it does not require the Penetration of a Philosopher to determine.

—Phillis Wheatley to Samson Occom, 11 February 1774

READING CLOSELY

- 1. She universalized the love of freedom.** By writing “In every human Breast,” Wheatley argued that the desire for liberty belongs to all human beings, not only to white colonists.
- 2. She used the Bible strategically.** Calling enslavers “modern Egyptians” invoked the Exodus story and identified slaveholders with the oppressors whom God judged. In 1774, patriot preachers already compared Britain to Pharaoh. Wheatley turned that comparison onto American slavery.
- 3. She claimed authority in her own voice.** The phrase “I will assert” is bold. She did not merely repeat other people’s ideas; she declared a truth about human nature and slavery.
- 4. She exposed a revolutionary contradiction.** Patriots celebrated liberty yet denied freedom to enslaved people. Wheatley turned the era’s most powerful political language against slavery itself.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why does Wheatley begin with the claim that love of freedom exists in every human breast?
2. Who are the “modern Egyptians,” and why would that biblical comparison have been especially powerful in 1774?
3. How does the phrase “I will assert” change the tone of the passage?
4. In what way does Wheatley both share and challenge the language used by patriot revolutionaries?
5. What does this letter suggest about who gets to use the word *liberty* in the revolutionary era?

THINK LIKE A HISTORIAN

Short writing prompt. In 4–6 sentences, explain how Wheatley transformed the colonists’ language of liberty into an argument against slavery. Use at least one phrase from the letter and one phrase from the poem.

Why this matters. Wheatley shows that enslaved people were not passive observers of the revolutionary crisis. They listened to the language of liberty, tested it, and used it to challenge the society that enslaved them. Her poetry did not end slavery, but it gave a public voice to the humanity and intelligence of African Americans. The promise of liberty in the American Revolution was contested and incomplete—and enslaved people were active participants in the era’s intellectual and moral debates.