

Teaching Phillis Wheatley Peters: “On Being Brought from Africa to America”

Prepared by: Shazia Khan, English faculty, Los Angeles Harbor College

1. Setting: online class/English 239 (Women’s Literature)
2. Reading: Phillis Wheatley Peters’ poem “On Being Brought from Africa to America”
3. Objectives:
 - a. Understand the historical backdrop of Wheatley’s childhood through adulthood: slave trade and capture, the American Revolution, continuation of the institution of slavery.
 - b. Understand Wheatley Peters’ background and upbringing.
 - c. Read “On Being Brought from Africa to America” and analyze Wheatley Peters’ tone and purpose through the diction and biblical references to Cain.
 - d. Read interpretations of other literary scholars of the poem.
4. Activities
 - a. Prereading:
 - i. Historical background of slave trade and American Revolution using the short expository essays contained in the Massachusetts Historical Society’s website entitled ["African Americans and the End of Slavery in Massachusetts"](#). Students will then complete an open-note online quiz.
 - ii. Online discussion #1: asking students to read [Wheatley Peters’ biography](#) and “imagine what they might write about if this was their life story” using the following prompt (Ulmer 23).

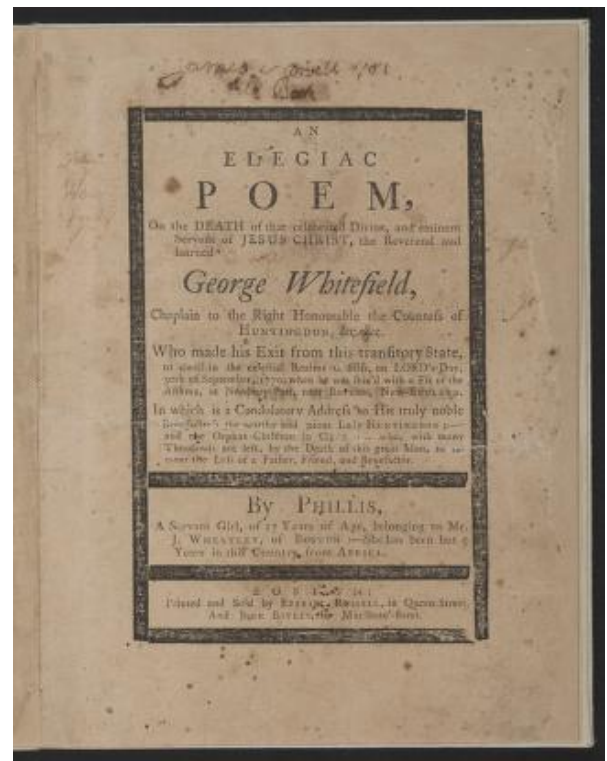
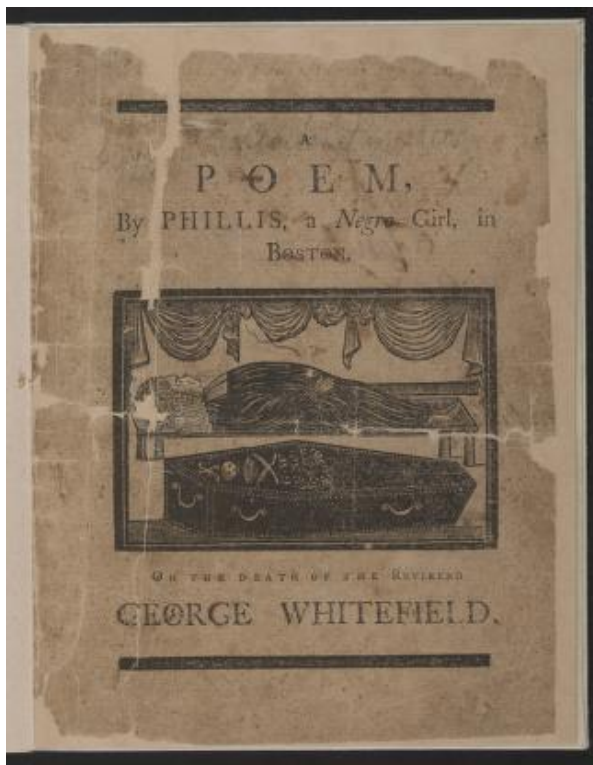
Prompt: You were purchased by Peter Gwinn as part of a cargo of slaves in a region his employer describes as ‘Sinagall,’ most likely today’s Senegal [Senegambia]. Your age was unknown when you were brought to Boston, but you were around seven years old. Diminutive and sickly, you were purchased at the slave market of John Avery by a Mrs. Susanna Wheatley. (Ulmer 23)

You came to the colonies speaking no English, but quickly learned to read and write Latin and English. You learn to read the Bible fluently in sixteen months. Susanna Wheatley and her daughter Mary do not have a scholarly interest themselves but foster your interest in Alexander Pope, Milton, and Homer. You join the Old South Meeting House in 1771, solidifying your [Evangelical] faith. The

Wheatley family takes pride in their “experiment” and show you off to other prominent families in the Boston area. (Ulmer 23)

Your role as a young person in the family is complex. You have few domestic tasks, but are still the property of the Wheatleys. You have privileges that most other slaves don't have, such as a lighted and heated room. You dine modestly apart from the rest of the company ... where you cannot give or receive offense. Your role is unclear in the family and in society in general: You inhabit a strange, ambiguous twilight zone between black society and white society, cut off from any normal contact with either, denied the sustenance of group identity. (Ulmer 23)

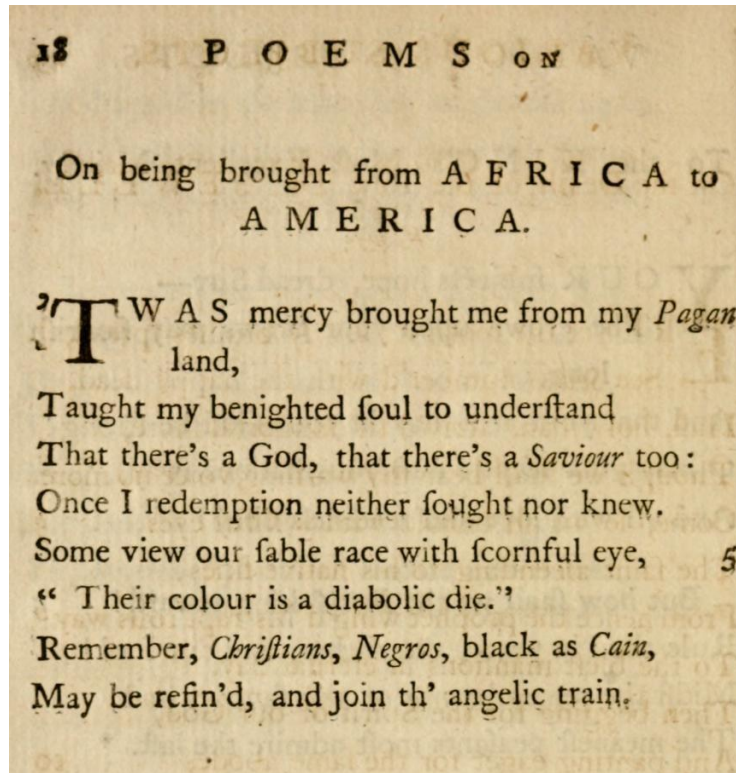
The year is 1765, you are now 18 and you have a desire to write poetry. Given your life circumstances and what is happening in the colonies, what do you want to write about? (“Phillis Wheatley Biography”) (Ulmer 23).



Wheatley, Phillis, and American Imprint Collection. *An elegiac poem, on the death of that celebrated divine, and eminent servant of Jesus Christ, the Reverend and learned George Whitefield, chaplain to the Right Honourable the Countess of Huntington, &c &c.* [Boston: Printed and sold by Ezekiel Russell, in Queen-street, and John Boyles, in Marlboro'-street, 1770] Image. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <www.loc.gov/item/06020401/>.

b. During Reading:

- i. Online discussion #2: read “On Being Brought from Africa to America.” Watch a video of a reading and brief analysis of Wheatley’s poem from the *Favorite Poem Project* in reference to vocabulary and biblical references and respond to any two of the following discussion questions.



From the first edition of Wheatley’s *POEMS*

<https://archive.org/details/poemsonvariousu00whea/page/18/mode/2up>



https://youtu.be/6QezAVP_HiY?si=2Zj9w2c47QXLyd2e

- What words and phrases in the poem could suggest additional aims?
- Does she do anything bold, or confrontational, particularly for her era and given her position as a black woman? (Loots)
- What elements in the poem might indicate there is a subversive narrative in her work? (Loots)

5. Assignments

- a. Literary Analysis Essay: present students “with quotes from four of Wheatley’s critics” and have them respond to the question “Do you agree with these critics? Why or why not?” (Ulmer 24). For example, “This negro poetess so well fits the Uncle Tom syndrome ... She is pious, grateful, retiring, and civil” (Gates, qtd. in Ulmer 24).
- b. Scholarly Research Article Analysis: Students will be asked to choose from a selection of academic research articles analyzing “On Being Brought from Africa to America” and write a thorough, objective summary and explanation of the claims in the article as well as a personal response. Sample articles include:
 - i. Holmes, Don. “Provocation: Diplomatic Negotiations in Phillis Wheatley’s Ambassadorial ‘On Being Brought from Africa to America,’” *Early American Literature*, vol. 57, no. 3, 2022, pp. 687-700.
 - ii. Loving, MaryCatherine. “Uncovering Subversion in Phillis Wheatley’s Signature Poem: ‘On being brough from AFRICA to AMERICA,” *Journal of African American Studies*, vol. 20, 2016, pp. 67-74.
 - iii. Mani, Manimangai. “Racial Awareness in Phillis Wheatley’s Selected Poems,” *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences*, vol. 56, 2015, pp. 74-79.
 - iv. Scheick, William J. “Phillis Wheatley’s Appropriation of Isaiah,” *Early American Literature*, vol, 27, no. 2, 1992, pp. 135-140.

Works Cited

“African Americans and the End of Slavery in Massachusetts.” *Massachusetts Historical Society Founded 1791*, <https://www.masshist.org/features/endofslavery>, Accessed 19 March 2024.

Loots, Christopher. “Unit 2 Lecture – Bradstreet, Mather and the Making of Americans.” 17 Sept. 2020. Course handout.

“Phillis Wheatley’s ‘On Being Brought from Africa to America’ Read by Cornelius Eady.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Tate Street, 26 May 2015, https://youtu.be/6QezAVP_HiY?si=SfCqv8pl5oi8loBr

Ulmer, Tisha. “Using Pre-reading Strategies to Provide Historical Context in a Literature Course,” *JAEPL*, vol. 22, 2017, pp. 19-32.

Wheatley, Phillis Peters. “On Being Brough from Africa to America,” *Internet Archive*, <https://archive.org/details/poemsonvarioussu00whea/page/26/mode/2up>, Accessed 20 March 2024.