America's First Black Poet

A Biographical Sketch of

Phillis Wheatley

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Compiled and annotated by Eric L. Pfeiffelman
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Preface

This biographical sketch of America's first black poet is not intended to be a definitive work. Rather, it is designed to be a starting point for someone who intends to study, or write a report on, this famous historical figure.

Written at a fourth to sixth grade level, the following story highlights the major events of Phillis Wheatley's life in an engaging way, including the effect God had on her. Additional details that might detract from the flow of the story are added through endnotes. Also, select poems (those referenced in the story) have been added so the reader can actually "taste" the thoughts and feelings of the poet herself.

Vocabulary words that might be unfamiliar to the student are defined throughout the story and each of the poems, and comprehension questions (with answers listed separately) are included to ensure the reader understands the material. Finally, source references are listed—many of which can be found on the Internet—so the student is able to easily expand on the material contained in the booklet.

We hope you find this sketch to be not only enjoyable and informative, but also useful as you and your student grow in the understanding of how God has been, and still is, involved in the history of America.

Eric Pfeiffelman
February 2012

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The Story of Phillis Wheatley

Phillis Wheatley: Poet and Slave

Phillis Wheatley may have had a short life, but it was filled with accomplishments and praise for God. She used the talents He gave to her despite the injustices of the world in which she lived.

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Phillis Wheatley: Poet and Slave

On July 11, 1761, the ship *Phillis* sailed into Boston Harbor, spilling her cargo out onto the dock.

But her cargo was not tea or fabrics or molasses from England.

Her cargo was men, women, and children—slaves, captured in Africa and stolen away from their homeland.[1]

Only some of the slaves had made it to America. Many had died on the crowded, stinking ship where they had very little to eat.

One of the remaining slaves was a shivering little girl wearing a scrap of dirty carpet as a dress. Her mother and father were not with her—she had been taken from them. She was skinny and looked sickly, as though she should not have made it there alive.

Yet God had preserved her. He had prepared a life for her that was far different from anything Americans at that time might have expected for a slave.

Meanwhile, John and Susanna Wheatley read a newspaper ad announcing the **slave auction**.

Mr. Wheatley was a tailor who also owned a shop, merchant ship, houses, and warehouses. He had a lot of money, and he and his family lived in a mansion.

Mrs. Wheatley wanted a strong, young girl to help her with all the work in that big house. She and her husband decided to buy a girl.

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slave auction: an event at which slaves were sold to the highest bidder

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Mrs. Wheatley's eye landed immediately on the sickly girl dressed in carpet. The girl had lost her front baby teeth, so Mrs. Wheatley **estimated** she was about seven years old.[2] That is how old the Wheatley twins, Nat and Mary, had been when they started losing their baby teeth.

The scrawny girl was not the strong house help Mrs. Wheatley wanted, but she took her out of pity. The couple paid ten pounds for the little girl—about the cost of a small silver cream pitcher.[3]

Slaves always took the last names of their owners, so it went without saying that the girl's last name would be Wheatley. But she could not tell Mrs. Wheatley her first name. She did not speak any English at all, and she could not understand what anyone was saying to her in this strange land. So Mrs. Wheatley glanced at the slave ship and saw that it was called *Phillis*. From then on, the little girl would be known as Phillis Wheatley.

When the Wheatleys got home with their new slave, eighteen-year-old Mary took Phillis under her wing. Mary wanted to be a teacher, so she practiced on Phillis. Mrs. Wheatley taught Phillis, too.

At first, they tried to teach her a few words of English. She caught on quickly, so they kept teaching her. Amazingly, after just sixteen months, she had learned to both speak and read English. Within four years, she could write it well enough to send letters to statesmen.[4]

This might seem normal to us, but it was not normal for a slave. In the Southern colonies, it was against the law to teach a slave to read or write. In the North, where Boston was, it was not illegal, but no one ever did it. People thought slaves were just supposed to work. They did not even think slaves were smart enough to learn from books.

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estimated: guessed

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Phillis proved them all wrong. She read every book in the Wheatleys' big house. Then she borrowed books from the Wheatleys' friends, including Massachusetts Governor Thomas Hutchinson. After she had mastered English, she learned Latin, Greek, geography, and mathematics.

But what she loved best was poetry. She loved the way the words flowed together to create grand pictures and beautiful sounds.

It was not long before the other slaves began to notice that Phillis was different. Suffering from **asthma**, she was allowed to spend more time reading than working. She was even sent to the country to rest—a popular way of treating sick people back then.

One time, the Wheatleys' carriage driver, who was also a slave, gave Phillis a ride home and let her sit right beside him on the front bench. When Mrs. Wheatley saw them, she exclaimed, "If he hasn't the **impudence** to sit upon the same seat with my Phillis!" She could not believe the carriage driver would treat Phillis like a common slave.

But she *was* a slave; she was never quite part of the family. The Wheatleys' other slaves lived in a carriage house behind the mansion, but Phillis had her own room inside the mansion—but it was in the attic, away from the rest of the family. And she ate her meals at her own table in the dining room—not with the slaves in the kitchen, but not at the Wheatleys' family table, either.

Her learning was what isolated her the most. She was allowed to study more than the other slaves could have dreamed of, so she did not fit in with them. But her dark skin was a constant reminder that she did not fit in with white people, too.

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asthma: a condition that makes it difficult to breathe at times
impudence: boldness; rudeness

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While Phillis was studying in the Wheatley mansion, history was being made outside. More and more, she started using those important events as subjects for her poems, which she was now writing as well as reading.

Many citizens of Boston were tired of what they considered England's unfairness. England had imposed the Stamp Act, taxing any pieces of paper—newspapers, legal documents, and even decks of cards—delivered from England to the colonies. When England finally **repealed** the hated law, Phillis wrote a poem praising the king (see poem on page 19).

But her pro-British ideas did not last long. In September 1768, British soldiers arrived in Boston to keep the colonists from rebelling. The "redcoats," as the soldiers were called because of their red military jackets, stayed in rooms in houses all over Boston—even the Wheatleys' house. This did not make the colonists very happy.

They were even angrier in February 1770, when some boys **vandalized** a British informer's house and the owner came out and started shooting. In the **fray**, eleven-year-old Christopher Snider[5] died. Phillis attended his funeral and wrote a poem calling him the "first **martyr** of the Revolution" (see poem on page 20).

The true Revolution was still five years away, but everyone sensed it coming.

Two weeks later, only a few blocks from the Wheatleys' mansion, some boys threw snowballs at the redcoats, who started shooting. Five people died as a result of this event,

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repealed: to do away with

vandalized: to destroy or damage property

fray: a disorderly fight or struggle

martyr: a person who suffers death for a cause

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The Poetry of Phillis Wheatley

Selected Works

The poems contained here are those that are mentioned in the story Phillis Wheatley: Poet and Slave*.*

Minor changes in punctuation and spelling were made to the poems to make them easier to read only; these changes should not affect the cadence or flow of the poems themselves.

Unless otherwise noted, all poems listed can be found in Phillis Wheatley's published book, Poems on Various Subjects: Religious and Moral.

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To the KING's Most Excellent Majesty. 1768.

Your subjects hope, **dread** Sire—
The crown upon your brows may **flourish long**,
And that your arm may in your God be strong!
O may your **scepter** numerous nations sway,
And all with love and readiness obey!

But how shall we the *British* king reward!
Rule thou in peace, our father, and our lord!
Midst the remembrance of thy favors past,
The **meanest** peasants most admire the last.*
May *George*, beloved by all the **nations round**,
Live with heaven's choicest constant blessings crowned!
Great God, direct, and guard him from on high,
And from his head let every evil fly!
And may each **clime** with equal gladness see
A monarch's smile can set his subjects free!

* The Repeal of the Stamp Act

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dread: inspiring awe, and possibly fear
flourish long: to last a long time in a good way
scepter: the staff of a ruler that is a sign of his authority
meanest: poorest and/or least "important"
nations round: the other, or surrounding, nations
clime: region; in this case, each level of society

On the Death of Mr. Snider Murder'd by Richardson*

In heaven's eternal court it was decreed
How the first **martyr** for the cause should bleed
To clear the country of the hatred **brood**
He **whet** his courage for the common good.
Long hid before, a **vile infernal** here
Prevents **Achilles** in his mid career
Where'er this fury darts his Poisonous breath
All are endangered to the Shafts of death.
The generous **Sires** beheld the fatal wound
Saw their young champion gasping on the ground;
They raised him up, but to each present ear
What **martial** glories did his tongue declare.
The **wretch appalled** no longer can despise
But from the Striking victim turns his eyes;
When this young martial genius did appear,
The **Tory** chiefs no longer could forebear.
Ripe for destruction, see the wretches' doom,
He waits the curses of the age to come;
In vain he flies, by Justice Swiftly chased
With unexpected **infamy** disgraced.

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martyr: one who suffers or dies for his beliefs in a greater goal

brood: the children of a family (or country); in this case, the British

whet: sharpened

vile infernal: hated evil

Achilles: A hero in Greek mythology who could not be injured anywhere on his body except for a spot on his heel—the spot that eventually led to his downfall

Sires: fathers or leaders; those who led the fight in the freedom of America

martial: relating to war, soldiers, or military life

wretch: a miserable person or one who is pitied for his misfortune

appalled: to be filled with fear or unease

Tory: an American supporter of the British cause

infamy: evil fame

Be **Richardson** for ever banished here
The grand Usurpers' bravely **vaunted** Heir;
We bring the body from the watery **bower**
To lodge it where it shall remove no more.
Snider, behold with what Majestic Love
The **Illustrious retinue** begins to move;
With Secret rage fair freedom's foes beneath
See in thy **corse** even Majesty in Death.

* Some spelling and punctuation were modernized, and some paragraphing and formatting were added by the National Humanities Center for clarity.

Written in 1770, but reportedly not published until 1970 in *The New England Quarterly*. Also appears in the National Humanities Center Resource Toolbox, *Making the Revolution – America 1763-1791* "the Blood of our Fellow Citizens running like Water"

[BACK]

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Richardson: the man who murdered Mr. Snider
vaunted: to speak boastfully, or to brag about
bower: a resting place
illustrious: glorious or great; distinguished
retinue: a group of people who accompany an important person
corse: corpse; a dead body