

Phillis Wheatley

Brought from Africa as a child, Phillis Wheatley (1753–1784) was sold to wealthy Boston resident Susanne Wheatley and raised in a strict Christian household. Her education and her ability to write well meant she escaped the worst of slavery, and she was freed by 1773. Wheatley was first published when she was about thirteen, and her volume of poetry in 1773 is the first volume of poetry known to have been published by an African American. She wrote about patriotism, Christianity, and racial consciousness.

On Being Brought from Africa to America

'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^o race with scornful eye,
 "Their colour is a diabolic die."^o
 Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,^o
 May be refind and join th'angelic train.

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[1773]

Read

1. How does Wheatley use religion to explain her presence in America?
2. What word choices suggest to you Wheatley's position and the time period in which she is writing?
3. To whom is the poem addressed? How do you know?

Write

1. How does she call her new religion to account? Does she criticize it?
2. How do you characterize Wheatley's persona? Write a paragraph that describes her persona and if you find a difference from the beginning of the poem to its end.
3. How does the way the poem is set up, its lines and rhymes, contribute to its aim?

Connect

1. Does the tone of this poem seem similar to Franklin's tone in either of his pieces? Find some lines that suggest similarities.
2. How is Wheatley's use of religion in this poem like Occam's use of religion in his narrative?

sable: black, very dark

die: dye

black as Cain: After Cain had killed his brother, Abel, God placed a mark upon him, which some have interpreted to mean black skin.