

A Quick Reader's Guide to the Poetry of Phillis Wheatley Peters

The poetry of Phillis Wheatley Peters is among the earliest we have on record from a person of African descent living in the Americas and writing in English. She is most noted for her volume of poetry titled *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, published in London in 1773.

Chronology

175x: Wheatley Peters is born in the Senegambia region of West Africa

1767: Wheatley Peters publishes her first poem, "Messrs. Huffey and Coffin," in a Newport, Rhode Island newspaper.

1770-1783: American War for Independence.

1773: Wheatley Peters becomes the first person of African descent living in what would become the United States to publish a book of poems; *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* is published in England.

1778: Phillis Wheatley marries John Peters.

1779: Wheatley Peters publishes a proposal for a second volume of poetry, dedicated to Benjamin Franklin.

1784: Wheatley Peters publishes one of her last poems, "Liberty and Peace." She dies in Boston on December 5.

Aesthetics

Most discussions of Wheatley's poetics center on her short poem, "On Being Brought from Africa to America," which appeared as the fifth poem in *Poems on Various Subjects*. Some literary scholars point to the poem as an example of Wheatley's accommodationist attitude toward race and slavery. Others argue that the poem subtly critiques white, Christian Americans and their role in perpetuating slavery and racism. The scholarship, overwhelmingly, interrogates Wheatley's racial consciousness, the extent to which she actively embodied a Black identity and advocated on behalf of Black racial uplift. Placing the poem in context illuminates the complexities of Wheatley's creative, social, racial, and personal politics. As you read through her volume of poetry, you might pay attention to the following:

- Recurring themes, such as references to West African culture, spirituality, slavery, sexuality, religion, liberty, gender, race, death (infant mortality, in particular), and pleasure.
- Addresses to and poems about well-known figures, such as the Earl of Dartmouth and the Great Awakening evangelical the Rev. George Whitfield
- Addresses to and poems about other Black Africans
- Form, as Wheatley writes a number of odes and elegies. She often makes reference to Greek and Roman culture, employing a neoclassical style.