

Lesson Plan (created by Dr. Cassander L. Smith, University of Alabama)  
A Poetry Re-Write (Undergraduate College Survey Course)

Overview: This lesson emphasizes the deliberate nature of text by helping students focus more closely on literature at the level of diction and denotation/connotation. This will prep them for the more complex task of close reading texts. Writers carefully craft their messages, and students will have to mimic that process of craft. Equally important, students will engage early American literature in a modern-day context. They use the words of early America to articulate the age in which we live.

Goals: To foster in students a greater appreciation for the deliberate nature of text and a greater appreciation for the continued relevance of early (African) American literature.

Objectives: Students

- read and analyze the early American poetry of Phillis Wheatley in conjunction with several poems from Honorée Jeffers's 2020 book *The Age of Phillis*.
- craft their own poems inspired by the work of Jeffers and Wheatley.
- identify denotative and connotative aspects in the poetry of Wheatley and Jeffers.
- discuss the relevance of Wheatley and her poetry within our 21st century context.

Outcomes: By the end of this lesson, students should be able to

- identify the denotative and connotative aspects of texts.
- analyze and manipulate words to construct messages with strong denotative and connotative meanings.
- articulate through verbal responses the significance of early American literature for our present age.
- articulate through verbal responses the deliberate nature of text.

Context: This lesson is designed for an introductory level undergraduate survey literature course in early American or early African American literature. These courses typically fill with non-majors who need the course to fulfill core requirements. Consequently, they usually have had little exposure to the course content. So, this lesson plan assumes that students have never read the work of Wheatley. This lesson plan also assumes that the students will not become literary scholars. The goals, objectives, and learning outcomes, then, are geared toward the development of critical thinking and reading skills, not the development of specialized knowledge of the field.

Materials:

- Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (free on Gutenberg.org)
- Jeffers, *The Age of Phillis* (Wesleyan University Press, 2020)

Prior to class, you will need to gather some supplies:

- Five pairs of scissors (you can make do with one or two)
- Twenty sheets of blank computer paper
- Five rolls of scotch tape or glue sticks (you can make do with fewer)
- Five Poetry packets (see below for content of packets)

NOTE: This lesson plan spans two class periods, each 75 minutes. Prior to the first class, students should have read for homework the following poems:

From Wheatley:

- “On Being Brought from Africa to America”
- “On Imagination”
- “To S.M. A Young African Painter, On Seeing His Works”
- “Liberty and Peace”
- (or any poems of your choosing)

From Jeffers:

- “An Issue of Mercy #2”
- “The Age of Phillis”
- “Lost Letter #8: Obour Tanner, Newport, To Phillis Wheatley, Boston”
- “(Original) Black Lives Matter: Irony”
- “The Death of Former President George Washington”
- (or any poems of your choosing)

\*\*NOTE: As an alternative text to the *Age of Phillis*, you could assign Jeffers’s article [“The Age of Phillis”](#) that appears in *Commonplace*. The article presents several of the poems and a brief critical discussion of Jeffers’s craft and interest in Wheatley.

### Presentation of Lesson

Class Period 1:

- 10 Minutes: Introduce students to Phillis Wheatley and her cultural significance. Use any of the resources available elsewhere on this website for guidance and inspiration. (Note: You might do this introductory work the class period prior, before they read the poems for homework.)
- 5 Minutes: Segue into a discussion specifically about Wheatley’s poetry. One way to transition is by asking students their thoughts about poetry. How do they define poetry? Who are their favorite poets? When was the last time they read a poem? Do they write poetry? Then home in on Wheatley and Jeffers by asking them what they thought about the poems they read for homework. Did they find the poems easy to understand? What was their favorite poem and why? What did they find most surprising or challenging about reading the poetry?
- 20 Minutes: From there, ask students to compare/contrast Wheatley’s poetic style with Jeffers. They might also discuss the extent to which Jeffers’s poems help us better understand Wheatley. They can interrogate Jeffers’s creative choices and her motivations for looking back to the 18th century. Why not write poems about issues affecting the 21st century? How might writing a book about Wheatley also be a project about issues affecting the 21st century? In other words, why and how does Wheatley work as a 21st century muse. For whom does she work as a present-day muse? (Note: These are suggested discussion threads. The main point is to get students thinking about how and why Wheatley shows up in today’s culture. Jeffers’s book illustrates the point and opens the door to that conversation.)
- 20 Minutes: Have students read aloud one of Wheatley’s poems, maybe “On Being Brought from Africa to America.” After they read the poem, allow students to make a

few observations about the poem. In particular, get them to identify words or references that they ‘don’t get.’ They might identify terms like *pagan*, *benighted*, *diabolic*, or the reference to Cain. Allow them as a class to figure out definitions and references. Then, ask them why Wheatley might have chosen those specific words and references. What, for example, is the difference between *benighted* and *unknowing* or *ignorant*? How does her reference to Cain help to render a particular representation of black Africans? Why not evoke Ham, instead, whose descendants were also said to be marked with black skin? Have them define denotation and connotation. Then, practice re-writing the first couple lines of Wheatley’s poem substituting several of the words to see how the meaning might change with the alteration of a choice word or two.

- 15 Minutes: Repeat the process with a Jeffers poem, maybe “An Issue of Mercy #2,” which offers a nicely ironic dialogue with Wheatley’s “On Being Brought...”
- 5 Minutes: You might wrap up this first day with a bit of signposting by explaining to students the point of the day’s discussion was to make them more aware of how words work at the level of denotation and connotation and to get them thinking about Wheatley’s significance in a 21st century context. This primes them for the in-class exercise they will complete the next class period.

#### Class Period 2:

- 5 Minutes: Recap the discussion from the previous class period and introduce the in-class exercise for this day, a poetry-rewrite. Working in groups of four or five, students craft their own poems using only lines from Wheatley’s poems. **See exercise assignment sheet below for more specifics.**
- 45 Minutes: Students complete in-class exercise.
- 10 Minutes: Students share group poems with the rest of the class.
- 10 Minutes: Discuss implications of the exercise. How difficult was it to use 18<sup>th</sup> century diction to describe modern-day issues? What kind of strategies did they use to achieve the goal? Is it any easier to do what Jeffers does by using modern diction to re-create the 18th century world of Wheatley? What words/phrases/allusions from Wheatley’s poetry became clearer once used in the students’ poems? Why/how do words matter? What did they learn about Wheatley’s poetical style that they didn’t realize before doing the exercise? Note: To raise the stakes, you might offer extra credit to the group that crafts the best poem -- as voted on by classmates. Or you can require that students *publish* their poems as a way to push the exercise beyond the classroom.
- 5 Minutes: Wrap up.

## Poetry In-Class Exercise

**Overview:** In this exercise, students are tasked with the challenge of crafting a poem that addresses a 21<sup>st</sup> century issue/topic using only the words found in the poetry of Phillis Wheatley.

### Task:

- Prior to class, you will need to gather some supplies. You will need scissors. You can make do with one or two pairs. You will need blank, computer paper, several rolls of scotch tape and/or glue sticks. Also, cut and paste into a Word document the four or five Wheatley poems you assigned to your students for homework to create a ‘poetry packet.’ You will print off and make photocopies of the poetry packet. You will need five or six poetry packets. Ideally, students won’t need pen, pencil, or their own paper for this exercise. TIP: When creating the poetry packets, it is a good idea to double space the lines of the poems and use a font size no smaller than 14 as students will be cutting lines from the packet to paste onto the computer paper to create their poems.
- On the day of class, arrange students into groups of four or five. Give to each group a couple sheets of blank computer paper and a poetry packet. Make sure that you photocopy enough poetry packets so that each group gets one packet. If you have enough, give to each group a pair of scissors and a glue stick or tape. If you do not have enough for each group to have tape/glue and scissors, they can share by passing around the supplies as needed.
- Once students are in groups and situated, give them the following instructions: *As a group, you will craft a single poem that addresses some current event or issue relevant to 2020. It can be an event or issue that has occurred within or beyond the borders of the United States. In crafting your poem, you must use ONLY lines taken from the poems of Phillis Wheatley that you read for homework. Those poems have been provided for you in the poetry packets you have in front of you. Here are the do’s and don’ts:*
  - *Do use only lines from Wheatley poems, even for your poem’s title. Cut lines from the poems in the packet and paste them onto your blank paper to craft your poems.*
  - *Do use as many lines as you want from as many of her poems as you want provided in the packet.*
  - *Do NOT use more than two consecutive lines at a given time from any one Wheatley poem. In other words, you cannot cut and paste into your own poem an entire stanza from a Wheatley poem.*
  - *Do craft poems on topics about some current event or issue.*
  - *Do NOT add your own words, lines, or punctuation.*
  - *Do look up words for which you do not know definitions.*
  - *Do NOT use partial lines or single words extracted from a line. You must use the entire line.*

*After all groups have crafted their poems, you will share with the rest of the class. (add any other modifications you choose.)*