

Wheatley and Respectability | Lesson Plan

Handout - Early African American newspaper selections mentioning Wheatley

Selection I

Letter, No. V. to Rev. Samuel E. Cornish, *Freedom's Journal* (November 2, 1827)

Writing against racist ideas of "African inferiority" and sending news regarding fundraising for schools for Black children in Boston, the author writes:

Boston is the place where that sweet poetess of nature, Phillis Wheatley, first tuned her lyre under the inspiration of the Muses, putting to shame the illiberal expressions of the advocates of slavery to all parts of the globe. So incredible were the public concerning the genuineness of her poems, that they are ushered into the world with the signature of the Governor, Lieutenant Governor, and other distinguished men of Massachusetts affixed to them. O Liberality, thou art not certainly a being of this lower sphere! for why should the natural powers of man be rated by the fairness of his complexion?

"Colours may be white or dark,
"For the body is a clod;
"'Tis the intellectual spark,
"Shows the lineaments of God."

This is not the time nor place to enter into more particulars concerning her. She has left behind her a small volume of poems, as a rich legacy to our race; and in the language of Horace, "monumentum aere perennius, regalique situ pyramidura aetius." To our shame I write it, "our Poetess lies buried in the Northern Burying Ground, without a stone to mark the spot, where repose African genius and worth. This, I hope, will not be long the case: if our brethren here, do not feel able or willing to erect a monument, let a general contribution be made by us through the Union - let us evince to the world that we are not insensible to the fame and renown which her writings have conferred upon us - that we are proud of them.

Selection II

Joshua Coffin, Letter. *The Colored American* (June 8, 1839) Reprinted from the Pennsylvania Freeman

Writing on a letter from Wheatley to Rev. Mr. Samuel Hopkins, Coffin writes:

Having had the pleasure, during the past during the past year, of examining the rich and valuable collection of pamphlets, manuscripts, and autographs, in the possession of Rev. Wm. B. Sprague, D.D. of this city, I was gratified with the perusal of a letter in the hand-writing of the celebrated Phyllis Wheatley. It is beautifully written, and with the comment of the good Doctor, I herewith send you a copy, verbatim at literatim, from the original.

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Selection III

H.N.G., Letter to the Editor, *Frederick Douglass' Paper* (August 31, 1855)

Reprinting some stanzas from "On Being Brought from Africa To America," "An Hymn To Humanity. To S.P.G., Esqr.," and "Ode to Neptune. *On Mrs. W---'S, Voyage to England. Boston, October, 1772.*" the author writes:

MR. EDITOR: - I have just come across a little book of poems, written in the year 1773, by Phillis Wheatley, Negro servant to Mr. John Wheatley, of Boston, and printed by Archibald Bell, Bookseller, No. 8, Aldgate Street, London. The style and typography of the book is peculiar to this early day, which alone would make it an interesting relic to the past. But there is something about the poetry which is very fine. The book contains some rare genus of thought, and displays a remarkable knowledge of history and literature, for one whose advantages had been so limited. The poems are mostly of a moral and religious nature. Perhaps a few words concerning the author may not be uninteresting to a portion of your readers, at least.

Phillis was brought from Africa to this country, in the year 1761, and was between seven and eight years of age. She was a perfect stranger to books and letters; but, without any assistance from school education in sixteen months time from her arrival, she had learned the English language to such an extent as to read the most difficult parts of the sacred writings with fluency. As to her writing, her own curiosity led her to it, and this she learned in so short a time, that in 1765, when she was only eleven years of age, she wrote a letter to the Rev. Mr. Lecom, the Indian Minister, while in England. "The Poems," we learn from the Preface, "were written originally for the amusement of the author, as they were the products of her leisure moments." But her friends seeing in them rare merit, induced her to furnish them for publication. In the fore part of the book is an attestation of the genuineness of the poems, signed by the Governor, Lieut. Governor, Hons. Hubbard, Erving, Pitts, Hancock, Revs. Elliot, Cooper, Cheney, and some dozen more dignitaries of Massachusetts.

Selection IV

Everett, "What are the Elements of True Womanhood?" the *Christian Recorder* (March 9, 1882)

Writing on Mary Somerville's self-education in mathematics, Everett writes:

It was a perseverance like hers that Phillis Wheatley numbered with her other virtues. Born as she was in Africa, taken away from her parents while young, she studied day and night that she might gain knowledge. "As the heart panteth after the water brook," so panted her soul after knowledge. Each branch mastered only served as an impetus to strengthen her perseverance; and we read how that slave girl, set free, was received as the honored guest of the nobility in England, a position gained through diligence and perseverance. We have a living example of this elements in Sojourner Truth, a woman without education who today still preserves and is building a monument whose top will reach the highest heaven. But few men will leave a record so bright as here in good works done, good words spoken and always as a living illustration of what may be done by trying.