

Wheatley and Respectability | Lesson Plan

Lesson Overview:

This lesson will ask students to explore some early African American writing about Phillis Wheatley Peters and discuss the ways she is framed as a model of Black women's respectability.

Objectives:

Students will

- Read selections from nineteenth, early twentieth, and twenty-first-century writing about Phillis Wheatley Peters
- Identify common themes tying celebrations of Wheatley to notions of Black respectability
- Discuss how these themes contribute to understandings of Wheatley Peters life, her enslavement, her writing, and her importance in early understandings of African American literature
- Discuss how these themes contribute to contemporary "respectability politics"
- Compare earlier associations of Wheatley and respectability with Honorée Fanonne Jeffers' uses and critiques of respectability in her poetry collection *The Age of Phillis*

Learning Outcomes:

- Students will have become more familiar with early African American discussions of Wheatley Peters, either in the early African American press or in a variety of genres
- Students will be able to identify common themes relating respectability that have been associated with Wheatley
- Students will make connections between representations of Wheatley and contemporary "respectability politics"

Context and Adaptations:

This lesson can be adapted for students in a variety of course contexts and at a variety of course levels, by selecting which and how much additional readings will be assigned and how students will explore the questions posed, whether in conversation or in writing. Using shorter reading and abridged class discussion, the lesson can be compressed to a single class period; using the longer readings and extended discussions, the lesson can be extended to a full week.

This lesson plan is accompanied by

- Selections of brief mentions of Phillis Wheatley from the early African American press
- A short list of selected 18th-to-early 20th-century writing about Wheatley Peters
- ❖ Depending on course level and time allotted instructors might choose one or more of the longer readings to assign to the entire class, or they might assign or ask students to choose different readings from this list so that they might discuss them in class. The short list of newspaper excerpts would be appropriate to either assign as reading done in advance of class discussion or to use as an in-class reading activity to accompany class or small group discussion.

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- ❖ Questions provided can be used for class or small group discussion and/or adapted for informal writing assignments or short essay assessments.

Suggested Readings:

- The lesson assumes students will have already read some of Phillis Wheatley's poetry, but it does not matter which poems they may have been assigned.
- The later portion of the lesson asks students to engage with Honorée Fanonne Jeffers' poetry on Wheatley but the lesson could be performed with a selection of poems from (or even a single poem read together in class) and could easily be extended to include discussions of other African American women's poetry, particularly with that which Jeffers cites as inspiring her work in this collection.
- The latter portion of the lesson also asks students to reflect on [Honorée Fanonne Jeffers Statement of Poetic Research—"Phillis Wheatley's Word"](#) linked here from *Commonplace: the journal of early American life*. (This brief essay is accompanied by a small selection of some of Jeffers' early poetry on Wheatley, some of which would work well for a shorter engagement with her work for this lesson if not assigning the entirety of *The Age of Phillis*.)

Accompanying Materials:

- A short selection of brief passages from nineteenth-century African American newspapers that mention Phillis Wheatley Peters
 - See supplemental handout to this lesson plan for text selections from *Freedom's Journal*, *The Colored American*, *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, and the *Christian Recorder*
- A small selection of longer writing about Phillis Wheatley Peters from the late eighteenth through early twentieth centuries, each of which is linked here:
 - [Jupiter Hammon, "Address to Miss Phillis Wheatley"](#) (1778)
 - [Margaretta Matilda Odell, *Memoir of Phillis Wheatley*](#) (1834)
 - Essay on Phillis Wheatley from [Monroe Alphas Majors, *Noted Negro Women: Their Triumphs and Activities*](#) (1893)
 - ["The Story of Phillis Wheatley. A True Story" *Brownie's Book Vol 1 No. 8*](#) (August 1920): 251.
 - [Mary Church Terrell, "Phillis Wheatley, An African Genius" *Star of the West* 19.7](#) (October 1928): 221–223.
 - [Mary Church Terrell, "Historical Pageant-Play Based on the life of Phyllis \[sic\] Wheatley"](#) (1932-1933)

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LESSON PLAN

Introduction and Framing

- ❖ This lesson will ask students to explore some early African American writing and twenty-first century poetry about Phillis Wheatley Peters and discuss the ways she is framed as a model of Black women's respectability.

Reading

- ❖ The lesson assumes students will have already read some of Wheatley Peters' poetry, but it does not matter which poems they may have been assigned.
- ❖ Assigned reading for this lesson's accompanying materials will depend on the aims of the class in question, course level, and time allotted. The two-page handout of short excerpts is meant to facilitate an in-class reading and discussion exercise. Any of the longer readings might be chosen depending on the aims of the course, time allotted, and student interest and ability.
- If using the short list of newspaper excerpts (supplemental handout),
 - Instructors can either assign this as reading done in advance of class discussion or use this as an in-class reading activity to accompany class or small group discussion.
- If using any of the longer readings (linked above under **Accompanying Materials**),
 - Students will have read one or more readings in advance.
 - Instructors might choose one or more longer readings to assign to the entire class, or they might assign different students different readings from the list.
 - If assigning different readings, it may help to ask students to come to class with some brief notes summarizing these so that they are able to discuss them in a group of students who may have read other texts.
- ❖ The last portion of the lesson asks students to take up how associations between Wheatley Peters and respectability factor in Honorée Fanonne Jeffers' 2020 poetry collection, *The Age of Phillis* and in her reflection on her poetic research (linked above under **Accompanying Materials**). The lesson could be performed with a small selection of poems (or even a single poem read together in class) but could also easily be extended to include broader discussions of Black women's respectability in other African American women's poetry, particularly with some of the poems Jeffers cites as inspiring her work in this collection.

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In-Class Discussion / Activity

Part I [15-20 minutes]

❖ **Respectability and its Critiques**

In-class assessment/discussion

➤ **Phillis Wheatley and Respectability (a brief glance)**

- In an 1887 letter to the *Christian Recorder* (the official newspaper of the African Methodist Episcopal Church) Osceola F. Gordon, wrote
“Young ladies, remember Miss Phillis Wheatley, the colored poetess, whose ambition for reading and studying should be emulated by every colored woman.”
Osceola F. Gordon, “Alabama’s Appreciation of Literature” *The Christian Recorder* (June 16 1887)
- **Phillis Wheatley Clubs**
Originating from the Black Women’s Club Movement of the nineteenth century, the first Phillis Wheatley Club was formed in Nashville, Tennessee in 1895. The aims of local clubs varied, but these clubs generally brought local African American women together for purposes of personal and community improvement. Club activities included organizing social events, performing and raising funds for charity work, promoting Black businesses and services, and activist work such as education advocacy and promoting Black women’s suffrage. Some clubs remain active into the 21st century.
- Ask students first to discuss their familiarity with the concept of respectability politics.

Questions

- What are your impressions of how respectability politics operates in your daily lives? Can they provide examples from popular media? Are you familiar with common critiques of respectability?
- How do these understandings of respectability dovetail with notions of excellence, particularly with relation to representations of Black women? (Michelle Obama may be one readily available example, but there are many others.)

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- Share and discuss the following definitions and critiques of respectability.

What is respectability politics?

- ❖ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham theorized what she called the “politics of respectability” to which Black church women ascribed and which they promoted in their activism toward African American uplift, writing that “They felt certain that ‘respectable’ behavior in public would earn their people a measure of esteem from white America, and hence they strove to win the black lower class’s psychological allegiance to temperance, industriousness, thrift, refined manners, and Victorian sexual morals.”

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 14.

- ❖ Brittney Cooper calls respectability “one of the strategies that Black women used to navigate a hostile public sphere and to minimize the threat of sexual assault and other forms of bodily harm routinely inflicted upon Black women.”

Brittney Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 3.

Critiques of Respectability Politics

- ❖ Respectability is just one of many strategies
 - As Brittney Cooper and others have shown, adhering to a politics of respectability was only one of many strategies used by Black women. Disproportionate focus has been paid to respectability, to the exclusion of exploring more radical strategies Black women have used throughout history.
- ❖ Respectability is insufficient
 - Even as African American women used respectability politics as one strategy for their safety, they have always known that this is not a failsafe. Black activists from the eighteenth century to the twenty-first have, in various ways, argued that respectability will not save Black people from the violences of antiblack racism. Because adhering to the politics of respectability does not guarantee safety to Black women, many Black activists and other Black feminist critics have argued that, at best, it offers Black women a false sense of security and, at worst, it has been used to blame Black women for their own oppression.
- ❖ Respectability is heavily contested
 - Black feminists have argued that focusing on Black women’s behavior in discussions of white supremacist and sexist violence misrepresents where the power to prevent this violence lies, giving the false impression that Black women

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are, themselves, to blame for the violence they experience. Moreover, Black feminists argue that Black women deserve safety and respect regardless of whether they adhere to the politics of respectability.

- ❖ Black excellence, exceptionality, and respectability
 - Black people have long held up examples of Black excellence in order to counter racist notions of Black inferiority. However, discussions of Black excellence have tended toward focus on exceptionality rather than on a broad celebration of Black ability. For example, a small handful of figures in African American literature -- particularly authors who achieved African American historical “first’s” or who were exceptions in overcoming racist adversity -- have been given disproportionate attention, to the exclusion of other writers. Phillis Wheatley Peters has been regarded as such an exceptional figure.
 - Disproportionate attention to exceptional examples gives the false impression that Black excellence is rare or that only the exceptional are deserving of respect. Similarly to granting undue focus on “respectable” behavior, recognizing only those historical figures who were able to overcome racist obstacles gives the false impression that those who do not overcome such obstacles are to blame for their own oppression.
 - Focus on individual markers of excellence gives a skewed impression of work toward racial representation and racial justice, which was overwhelmingly collective, rather than individual.

Part II [10-15 minutes]

❖ Discussion of the Assigned Readings about Wheatley

Full class or small group discussion of readings

- Ask students to begin thinking about the connections the assigned readings make between Phillis Wheatley and respectability politics.
- If students are reading different pieces, they might briefly describe their assigned piece and then share their answers to the following questions with the group.

Questions

- Apart from the “ambition for reading and studying” that Gordon notes in the *Christian Recorder* excerpt (under **Introduction and Framing**) what qualities of Wheatley Peters or her work do the readings describe or suggest?
- What language is used to describe her or her writing? (Students might list these on the chalkboard or take notes if working in small groups.)
- What general impression of Wheatley Peters do you get from these readings?
- What qualities of Wheatley’s discussed here seem to fit with notions of “respectable” behavior or qualities that might garner “esteem from white America”?

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Part III [15-20 minutes]

❖ Discussion of Connections between Assigned Readings and Wheatley's Poetry

Full class or small group discussion of Wheatley's poetry

- Ask students to use their discussions of respectability to begin to make connections between Wheatley's poetry and the assigned readings discussing her.

Questions

- What qualities of Wheatley's poetry seem to fit with notions of "respectable" behavior or qualities that might garner "esteem from white America"?
- Are any of these qualities reflected by Wheatley's poetry?
- If we take seriously available critiques of respectability (critiques that were available to Black women in Wheatley's time), what should we also consider when discussing her writing?

Part IV [15-20 minutes]

❖ Discussion of Connections between Assigned Readings and Jeffers' Poetry

Full class or small group discussion of readings

- Students will have previously read (or the instructor may choose to read aloud in class) Honorée Fanonne Jeffers Statement of Poetic Research—"Phillis Wheatley's Word" (linked above under **Accompanying Materials**) and some selection of Jeffers' poetry.
- Ask students to make connections between Jeffers' discussion of her own preconceptions about Wheatley and her representation of the eighteenth-century poet in her own twenty-first century poetry.

Questions

- What preconceptions about Wheatley does Jeffers discuss? How do these relate to ideas of Wheatley as "respectable" previously discussed? Are these preconceptions similar to or different from your own?
- What parts of the research Jeffers cites address Wheatley's respectability?
- What elements of respectability can you identify in Jeffers' poetry?
- Using any one of Jeffers' poems, describe the general impression of Phillis Wheatley Peters you gain from reading this?

❖ (Optional) Assessment

Writing assignment

- Any of the above questions might be used (or revisited) for the purposes of student assessment, for a short in-class writing exercise, or to comprise a short essay question on a written exam.

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❖ **Conclusion [10-15 minutes]**

In-class assessment/discussion

- Ask students to use their understanding of the readings' uses of respectability to reflect upon discussions and impressions of Wheatley held in the present.

Questions

- Does the general impression given about Wheatley in these early African American examples match with the impression you believe is given about this author in the twenty-first century?
- What qualities of Wheatley Peters do you believe are still celebrated?

❖ **(Optional) Concluding Discussion and/or Assessment**

- This concluding discussion might also be used for the purposes of assessment, to ask students to apply some of the information learned and analytical skills they have gained to contemporary writing about Wheatley Peters.
- If reading from a scholarly edition or anthology, introductory materials are a good source for gleaning what qualities are still emphasized about Wheatley.
- Students' assigned paratextual materials might be read similarly to the reading examples provided for this lesson.

Questions

- What language is used to describe Wheatley or her writing here? (Students might list these on the chalkboard or take notes if working in small groups.)
- What general impression of Wheatley Peters do you get from these readings?
- What qualities of Wheatley's discussed here seem to fit with notions of "respectable" behavior or qualities that might garner "esteem from white America"?
- How might you rewrite these in light of common critiques of respectability?