

LEARN

Phillis Wheatley: Poet

Learn about Phillis Wheatley in *From Slavery to Freedom*

April is National Poetry Month. Wheatley's story is highlighted in this exhibit on the third floor. Can you find it? (Hint: search the the Transatlantic Slave Trade section of the gallery)

More to the story...

Early 20th-century critics were not very kind to Wheatley because of her supposed lack of concern about slavery. However, she did have a statement to make about the institution of slavery, and she boldly made it directly through the influential institutional church. These lines in her eulogy to General David Wooster criticize patriots who confess Christianity yet oppress her people:

*But how presumptuous shall we hope to find
Divine acceptance with the Almighty mind
While yet o deed ungenerous they disgrace
And hold in bondage Africa: blameless race
Let virtue reign and then accord our prayers
Be victory ours and generous freedom theirs.*



Image: Phillis Wheatley, Negro servant to Mr. John Wheatley, of Boston. Source: Library of Congress.

Wheatley wrote perhaps 145 poems, most of which are now lost. However, scholars have uncovered poems, letters and more facts about her life and her association with 18th-century Black abolitionists.

ON BEING BROUGHT FROM AFRICA TO AMERICA

By Phillis Wheatley

*'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 race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic die."
Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.*

Reference: poetryfoundation.org/poets/phillis-wheatley

The Power of Poetry

Poems of Protest, Resistance and Empowerment

“From the civil rights and women’s liberation movements to Black Lives Matter, poetry is commanding enough to gather crowds in a city square and compact enough to demand attention on social media. Speaking truth to power remains a crucial role of the poet in the face of political and media rhetoric designed to obscure, manipulate, or worse.”



Scan this code with your phone camera to visit poetryfoundation.org for a selection of poetry that “rails against complacency and demonstrates why poetry is necessary and sought after in moments of political crisis.”

Find Your Voice

We hope your visit to The National Underground Freedom Center inspires you to find your voice and to write a poem about inclusive freedom and social justice for all. Here are simple poem formats to get you started:

Cinquain Poems

Line 1: One word (a noun, the subject of the poem)

Line 2: Two words (adjectives that describe the subject)

Line 3: Three words (-ing action verbs that relate to the subject)

Line 4: Four words (a phrase or sentence that relates feelings about the subject)

Line 5: One word (a synonym for the subject or a word that sums it up)

Alternative Line 5 for older poets: Five words (a phrase or sentence that further relates feelings about the subject)

Example:

FREEDOM'S VOICE

Freedom

Liberated, limitless

Unshackle, empower, energize

Make your own choices

Power / Use your voice for freedom

Acrostic Poems

1. Choose the word you want to write about.

2. Write that word vertically on your page, one letter per line.

3. Think about phrases that work with your chosen word.

4. Write one phrase for each letter of your chosen word. The phrases should begin with each of the letters from your chosen word.

Example:

Many people called me Moses

Obtaining the name rightfully so

Saving as many slaves as possible

Even though I was putting my own life in danger

SLAVE – my name would be no more

Source: htravis.wordpress.com/multi-genre-project