Entry 1 on Phillis Wheatley

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and colonial officials lost the ability to coerce enslaved peoples.

Vestiges of slavery persisted, however, well into the 1950s. As in the United States after the Civil War, the power holders in West Africa limited access to economic resources in order to force former slaves to provide noncompensated labor. The crisis in the world market of the 1930s caused a resurgence in the pawning of humans. Pawn labor served as interest payments until the debtor redeemed them.

In some cases, the stigma of slavery remained long after the institution had disappeared. Even after slavery no longer played an economic role in West Africa, its status continued to be invoked to reinforce hierarchies of power and subordination.

_Teresa M. Van Hoy_

Further Reading

_Wheatley, Phillis (ca. 1753–1784)_

Known as the first black poet in America, the slave Phillis Wheatley wrote a number of poems that reflect the religious and classical influences of her New England upbringing. In her writing, she expressed a strong antislavery sentiment, stating in a 1774 letter published in the _Connecticut Gazette_, “In every human breast God has implanted a principle . . . it is impatient of oppression, and pants for deliverance.” Although she produced only one book of poetry, _Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral_ (1773), her work brought her fame, freedom, and the recognition of being the first African American of her time to publish a book of poetry in English.

Wheatley was born in Senegal, West Africa, in about 1753. On July 11, 1761, she was brought from Africa to Boston aboard the schooner _Phillis_. Later that month, Susanna Wheatley, the wife of John Wheatley, a prominent merchant from King Street, Boston, purchased the young woman and took her to their home. With the help of Mary, the Wheatleys’ daughter, she learned to speak English, Latin, and Greek. Sixteen months after her arrival in America, she was able to read passages from the Bible, the Western classics, and British literature, and she began to write letters and poems to her friends.

Wheatley wrote her first poem at about the age of thirteen. Dated 1765, the poem, titled “On Messrs Hussey and Coffin,” was published in Newport, Rhode Island, in December 1767. That same year, Wheatley wrote an elegy on the popular evangelical preacher George Whitefield, published under the title “A Poem by Phillis Wheatley, a Negro Girl, on the Death of Reverend Whitefield” in 1770. She became an overnight sensation in Boston.

Over the course of the next four years, she completed a full volume of poetry titled _Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral_. When her master showed her manuscript to Boston printers, they expressed doubts about Wheatley’s authorship. According to historian Henry Louis Gates, Jr., sometime in October 1772, eighteen men, including Thomas Hutchinson, the governor of Massachusetts, met with Wheatley in Boston’s Town Hall to “verify the authorship of her poems and to answer a much larger question: was a Negro capable of producing literature.” The book was published in England in 1773 with the assistance of Countess Selina Hastings of Huntingdon, a friend of Whitefield’s.

Wheatley’s poetry deals with a variety of themes, including slavery, Africa, and the right of African Americans to achieve freedom. In “To The Right Honourable William [Legge], Earl of Dartmouth, His Majesty’s Principal Secretary of State for North America,” she describes slavery as a system that is inimical to the ideals of justice and freedom that America represents.

No more, America, in mournful strain
Of wrongs, and grievance unredress’d complain,
No longer shall thou dread the iron chain,
Which wanton Tyranny with lawless hand
Had made, and with it meant to enslave the land.

In Wheatley’s view, ending slavery would allow America to become a free nation in which justice and law prevail. In making America’s freedom contingent on the emancipation of the slaves, she developed a rhetoric that appealed to clergymen and abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic.

In her writing, Wheatley also discussed her relationship to Africa. In poems such as “Maecenas,” “Afric,” “Hymn,” “Ethiop,” and “To The University,” she identified herself as originating from either “Ethiop” (Africa) or the “sable race” (Africans). This identification with Africa helped Wheatley oppose
Brought from Africa and sold into slavery as a child, Phillis Wheatley became the first black poet to be published in America. Her verse, which appeared in the 1770s, revolves around classical and Christian themes; slavery and Africa are also frequent topics. (Library of Congress)

the view that blacks were an inferior race. At the same time, her representation of Africa is ambiguous. In "On Being Brought From Africa to America" (1773), for example, she calls Africa a "Pagan land" with people who "May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train." A zealous Christianity thus tainted her views about Africa and, to some contemporary readers, her relevance to African American identification with the mother continent.

Wheatley was emancipated in 1773, and she married a free black man in 1778. Despite her talent and success, however, she could not support her family and died in poverty in Boston on December 5, 1784. Her memoirs were published in 1834, and the Letters of Phillis Wheatley, the Negro-Slave Poet of Boston appeared thirty years later.

Further Reading


Whitfield, James Monroe (1822–1871)

James Monroe Whitfield was a free black poet and author whose writings frequently appeared in leading abolitionist newspapers of the early nineteenth century. Politically and socially active in seeking equal