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her reputation suffered decline after her death, as critics charged her work with being out of touch with modern American literature and life. Studies in the 1970s, including those inspired by the women’s movement, once again brought her fiction to the attention of readers. Numerous reprints of her books, film adaptations of her novels, and critical as well as popular commentaries have secured Wharton’s position as a preeminent American author.

[See also Literature, subentry Fiction and Poetry.]

BIBLIOGRAPHY


CAROL J. SINGLEY

WHEATLEY, PHILLIS (1753–1784), the first African American to publish a book in English. Phillis Wheatley was born on the Senegambian coast, from where she was kidnapped when she was seven years old. She arrived in Boston on 11 July 1761 on a ship called the Phillis. Susanna Wheatley, the wife of a rich merchant from Boston, bought her that year. Thanks to her precocious mastery of the English language and of major biblical texts, Phillis Wheatley began to write poetry at an early age. At fourteen she composed her first elegy, “On Messrs Hussey and Coffin,” which was published in December 1767 in Newport, Rhode Island. That same year she wrote a dirge that was put to press under the title “A Poem by Phillis Wheatley, a Negro Girl, on the Death of Reverend Whitefield” in 1770. At the age of seventeen Wheatley was already a local celebrity in Boston. However, she was subjected to the acerbic and racist scrutiny of eighteen white Boston dignitaries, who summoned her to the courthouse one day in the spring of 1772 to question the authenticity of her poems. Wheatley came out victorious from this examination with a document that attested her ability to write literature.

Thanks to the support of Susanna Wheatley, Phillis Wheatley traveled to Britain and published her verse under the title Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral in 1773. Poems is “the first book of poetry published by a person of African descent in the English language, marking the beginning of an African-American literary tradition” (Gates, p. 31). In England, Wheatley was received by dignitaries such as Lady Huntingdon and Lord Dartmouth and was on the point of meeting the young monarch George III when she decided to return to Boston so that “she might once more behold her beloved protégée [Susanna]” (Thatcher, pp. 25–26). The dignified welcome Wheatley received in England contrasted with the shameful manner in which she was treated in North America.

A recurrent theme in Wheatley’s poetry is the pain of separation from loved ones that slavery caused in the lives of enslaved Africans. For example, attacking the immorality of slavery, she described, in “To the Earl of Dartmouth,” the agony her parents felt when she “was snatch’d from Afric’s fancy’d happy seat” by tyranny (Wheatley, p. 218). By writing in such emotional and personal ways, Wheatley reconnected with Africa spiritually while initiating a linguistic form of denouncing injustice in America. Through her writing she passed to future generations of African American writers a shared knowledge of black experience, history, and language that deserves more attention than it has received. Specifically, the last years of Wheatley’s life are important to study, since they were marked by a blend of happiness, sorrow, and tragedy. Sometime between 13 September and 18 October 1773, she was freed by Susanna Wheatley who died on 3 March 1774, leaving her in a mix of despair that was outweighed by her joy at being free and her future marriage to John Peters on 1 April 1778 (Mason 1989, pp. 8–10). Unfortunately, Wheatley’s career suffered from Susanna’s death since America was not ready to accept a free black writer, especially one who was no longer sponsored by her elite white owners. During the final years of her life, Wheatley suffered from poverty and the death of two of her children. She and her third child died in a boarding house in Boston on 5 December 1784.

[See also Angelou, Maya; Brooks, Gwendolyn; Morrison, Toni; Truth, Sojourner; and Walker, Alice.]

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