

PROMOTING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL – THE PHILLIS WHEATLEY LEGACY!

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the life and contributions of Phillis Wheatley. She is a prime example of an individual who used the opportunities provided to her to seek knowledge and how she used that knowledge to improve her status in society. Her writings of poetry and recognition in the United States and Europe as an accomplished scholar show that she was able to overcome the prejudices and slave position of her era to show that African Americans were and are very capable of creative thinking, accomplished scholarship, and being contributing members of society in similar ways to all members of our global society.

This paper will specifically call attention to Phillis Wheatley's life, education, and writings of poetry. She is the first African American to become a published poet. Her journey from Senegal to her new life as a slave in the New World will be highlighted. Finally, her success as a poet and contributor to African American literature and heritage is an accomplishment that shows what a person can do when provided with the freedom to think and contribute.

INTRODUCTION

Phillis Wheatley is known as one of the most highly regarded poet dating back to colonial America. Her status as an accomplished poet is defies the fact that she was an African American slave. Because of that distinction, she shares an important place in the history of African Americans who have been discriminated against as not being capable of such high magnitude of literary accomplishment. She stands as an example of what a person can accomplish, regardless of race or status of servitude, when provided with the opportunity to learn and apply one's intelligence and creative thinking to become an educated and contributing member of any society.

HISTORY

Phillis Wheatley was born in 1753 in the West African nation of Gambia (Senegal). At the age of eight, she was kidnapped and sold into slavery. She was brought to Massachusetts and was sold to the Wheatley family of Boston in 1761. The Wheatleys, some research states, adopted her and Mrs. Wheatley wanted to educate her so that she would be beholden to her and remain loyal to the family. Phillis, as a result, learned to read and write and proved to be extremely intelligent and creative. She took up writing poetry and found the writing experiences refreshing and worthwhile. It's her poetry that allowed her to be noticed. The Wheatley's daughter, Mary, taught Phillis how "to speak English and then tutored her in reading and writing" (Robinson, n.d.). The Wheatley's son, Nathaniel was also involved in teaching Phillis Latin and by the age of twelve, Phillis was able to read and write and study "the Greek and Latin classics" (Robinson, n. d.).

The Wheatleys realized Phillis' interest in poetry when they noticed her writing with chalk on a wall and were surprised but interested in the discovery to find that she was talented. So, they

encouraged her writing and in fact, the Wheatleys daughter taught Phillis to read “English literature, Latin, and the Bible” (americaslibrary.gov). The Newport Mercury newspaper did publish her first poem in 1767.

In 1773, she was diagnosed as asthmatic and her physician recommended that she take a voyage to improve her health. As a result of this diagnosis, she joined her adopted brother for a trip to London, England. Historians say that because England had a law that stated that any slave came to England would be free, it is assumed that Phyllis won her freedom in that matter. However, others say that Mrs. Wheatley wrote for Phillis to come back to Boston because she was ill and needed her help. As a result, Phillis again became a slave servant (college.hmco.com). (Phillis Wheatley was manumitted or freed by October 18, 1773 according to some accounts).

According to some researchers, Mrs. Wheatley had written in her will that when she died Phillis should be freed. However it happened, it is true that Phillis did win her freedom and was able to wed a black freeman named John in 1778. Her husband was very poor and could not provide adequately for her. Given her success at writing poetry, Phillis was also not successful at providing for her and her husband. Her husband had to dodge creditors because he could not find enough work to pay his debts. As a result, Phillis and her children suffered in poverty. She and her family were forced to move into an African-American boardinghouse where her children died from illnesses and made her very sick. She was abandoned by her husband and she died very young on December 5, 1784, at the age of 31!

While in London, England, Phillis met an influential lady named Selina Hastings who was the Countess of Huntingdon. The Countess was very impressed with Phillis and her poetry and used her influence to get the poems printed and published in book form (Alward, 2004). The book’s title was: Poems on Various Subject, Religion and Moral. The publication of this book in Europe provided Phillis with a European exposure that made her well known in this continent.

Although Phillis’ poems reflected her orthodox piety and is best known for her Christian verses, her poems included a variety of topics. She wrote many political oriented poems which dealt with events that happened in Boston during the American revolution but were ignored. Because of the numerous political poems that she wrote, Phillis is seen as having a real interest in the political goings on of her time. Additionally, critics believe that her political poems heaped lots of praise to well known political leaders like George Washington, Ben franklin, and Thomas Paine, among others, because she felt safe to do so and avoided confrontation. As a result, her poems were recognized and accepted, even though they were written by an African American slave.

CONCLUSIONS

Phillis was a strong woman as shown by her ability to override the beliefs of that time about slavery and black Africans. Her poetry had to be examined by influential white men in order to be recognized and given their due notice.

It is the determination of researchers that Phillis was able to be successful at a period of our country’s history when the color of a person’s skin decided whether or not a person was a piece of property or not and whether a person was worthy of notice or not based on the same premise. Since color was what was used to determine how a person was looked upon, Phillis was an exception. She used her recognition to her advantage and submitted her poems to publishers based on her talent and intellect (onlineessays.com).

Phillis proved that a slave was able to use her intellect to read, write, and publish at a most difficult time in history. That alone is noteworthy in history. In fact, she was able to convince the

likes of Benjamin Franklin and Benjamin Rush to give her public support. She was not without critics, just like other writers of her time. Thomas Jefferson, for example, did not prize the quality of her poems. However, modern critics cannot dismiss the fact that she was the first African American to publish a book of poems, being recognized both in the United States and Europe as an accomplished poet, and, finally, being one of the first women writers of that early period of time in American history.

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