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***Phillis Wheatley Peters***

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revolution”*

Relatrice:

Prof.ssa Renata Morresi

Laureanda:

Mejrema Fetoska

Matricola: 2045834

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*A coloro che non hanno avuto la strada spianata  
e hanno coraggiosamente spezzato le catene degli  
stereotipi per correre verso la propria libertà.*

*To those who did not have their path paved and,  
they fiercely broke the chains of stereotypes to run  
towards their own freedom*



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## Introduction

“In every human Beast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance.”

— Phillis Wheatley

The abolition of slavery and the change of perspective regarding African Americans is a hotly debated topic and one of the most studied ones in schools. However, it would be interesting to ask ourselves: “How is it taught?” “Is this the right way?”

The key points which are always reiterated are dates, laws and politicians. Nevertheless, little attention is paid to the actual protagonists behind the scenes; the ones who provided food for thought not by raising their voice in the streets but by raising awareness on the words they were using.

Phillis Wheatley Peters is a highly significant name in this context for she was the first African American woman to publish a book of poems. Her aulic style with clear classical and neoclassical techniques aroused the astonishment of the literary critics, most of whom did not even believe the poems were indeed written by her.

Thus, Wheatley not only appears as a remarkable poet but a crucial figure who, through her extraordinary life and character, started to break down deeply rooted stereotypes about enslaved people. This is the part in which the cultural revolution was made possible since it was the first step: offering new perspectives with which to look at the African American people and re-establish a new relationship with them after the slavery era.

The poet participated in the fight for equal rights by epitomizing intellectual grace. She proved to the white racist sector of the population that black people had a refined aesthetic sense and were capable of creating art because they were human beings just like everyone else.

Accepting this simple concept was, however, very hard especially back then when many white ‘intellectuals’ perpetuated racist ideologies and for this reason cast doubt on her authorship. As a result, her fight was double; on one hand she had to defend herself as a writer and give proof of her literary skills and on the other hand she had to stand up for her people.

The aim of this thesis is to put the spotlight on how the fight for freedom resorted to different means of communication and behaviors. Phillis Wheatley was an astonishing model running

against the current with her poetry that will be analyzed in the last part of this academic work after discovering first her biography and her literary modus-operandi.

Consequently, the first chapter will be entirely dedicated to her as a slavery survivor. A special outlook will be provided to the Middle Passage and what it meant to embark on a journey which was both physically and mentally challenging.

Then the attention will be paid to the family that bought her when she was still a little girl but allowed her to study and develop important academic skills. This was a crucial event of her life that helped her pave the path towards her future career.

Secondly, the following chapter will focus on her style and how it experienced an evolution as she grew older and started to gain experience in those days and face the public opinion, which was not ready to accept her as a poet.

Lastly, the third chapter will offer an in-depth analysis of one of her most known poems, i.e., “On Virtue”, which contains her famous quote: “Wisdom is higher than a fool can reach” and which perfectly encapsulates her poetics.

This is also why I am firmly convinced that Phillis Wheatley is a name that deserves the spotlight even today, after so many years. She is the clearest example of how lessons should be taught, i.e., by embodying them. The writer never hid nor denied her African origins but quite the opposite, she organized a spiritual journey towards faith with them.

Religion in fact was one of the main pillars leading her to artistic freedom and as a consequence it also became one of the main themes in her poems. Not to mention that it is also what connected her to the African American fight for freedom and largely influenced her literary works.

Thanks to her talent in writing, she molded the ideas into poetic words that have entered the history and the hearts of the people who come across her poetry.

Today, her collection of poems helps us not to lose this rare lesson of grace and it offers us new perspectives on how to deal with difficulties when all that we have is our voice and knowledge, which is all that we need, as this thesis will try to demonstrate.



# Chapter 1

## 1.1 The Middle Passage and the Wheatley's: The beginning of her life as a slave

Phillis Wheatley Peters was born around 1753 in West Africa, and she grew up there until 1761, the year in which she was kidnapped by slave traders to be taken to America. She was only eight years old when she found herself forced to deal with the atrocities of the Middle Passage. This was one of the legs of the triangular trade route, i.e., an economic system which organized the exchange of goods among Europe, Africa and America.

The beginning of the path was marked by European manufactured goods, e.g., ammunition, textiles and alcohol which were then brought to the western coasts of Africa in exchange for slaves. This area was later in fact named "The Slave Coast" and it referred to the territories near the Gulf of Guinea<sup>1</sup>.

The major ports of departure were London, Bahia and Liverpool but a central role was also played by some western cities such as Rio de Janeiro and Barbados<sup>2</sup>.

It is estimated that approximately two fifths of the transatlantic slave had its roots in America which means that the three continents were collaborating simultaneously even though as regards the African case, slave trade was geographically more concentrated in one area, i.e., from Grand Popo to the west of Lagos<sup>3</sup>.

As for the arrivals, South America was the main protagonist especially the area from Cuba to the north of Rio De Janeiro witnessing the entrance of almost 90% of the Africans coming to America<sup>4</sup>. The second option were the central states and the last was the northern part of the continent which absorbed less than 3% of the incoming slaves<sup>5</sup>.

Around 12.5 million Africans between 1517 and 1867 were captured and forced to embark on the dangerous journey across the Atlantic Ocean by both European and American slave dealers<sup>6</sup> and this represented the backbone which fueled the brutality of slavery.

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<sup>1</sup> Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopedia. "Triangular Trade". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/money/triangular-trade>, accessed 10/03/2024.

<sup>2</sup> Source: W.B.B. Du Bois Institute slave ship data set.

<sup>3</sup> Diedrich, Louis Gates Jr., Pedersen, *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*, chapter 1, p.24-25.

<sup>4</sup> Id. p. 27

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Slavery and Remembrance, "Middle Passage", <https://slaveryandremembrance.org/articles/article/?id=A0032>, accessed 10/03/2024.

Facing this voyage had a serious material and especially psychological cost. It is estimated that more than a million people died during the crossing<sup>7</sup>. As a matter of fact, enslaved individuals were exposed firstly to extreme levels of stress and anxiety since they did not know where they were headed and what was expecting them.

Secondly, not only were they abused physically and sexually but they also risked their lives due to the dreadful living conditions in the ships. Storms, sicknesses and pirate attacks worsened what already felt like a nightmare and marked just the beginning of the slave life for the innocent captives.

This was the first chapter of their new destiny, which presented them the nefarious behavior and violence they would have to endure later on but most importantly, it marked the erasure of their identity as human beings. Africans were stripped of their dignity and treated less than animals, chained in positions that would hurt their body and often make them unable to stand or walk properly.

The whole atmosphere was dominated by terror which was exacerbated by the fact that the prisoners received zero information about what was expecting them during the trip. Many believed that they would face cannibalism by the people on board and so death started to be less tamed than the unknown atrocities of the Middle Passage<sup>8</sup>.

Countless hostages living the dehumanization process chose suicide as an escape option, and this largely contributed to increase the mortality rate<sup>9</sup>.

A key aspect of the life on board was the “Slave Ship Dance” or “Limbo” as it was called in the Caribbeans. Captives were whipped to dance in front of all the individuals there.

This practice was adopted to distract the prisoners from their suicidal instinct but also to use them as a source of entertainment.

However, it was clear to everyone that the amount of fear reigning on the ship was dangerous. In fact, soon, even the captains and slaveholders started to live with a constant state of anxiety about the status of the slaves and their possibility to resort to the dancing gestures as a sign code to escape or organize an attack. Therefore, weapons were always pointed at them, and threat was the only constant<sup>10</sup>.

Another tactic was offering them alcohol after a good performance, and it was a clear way of teaching them obedience.

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*, chapter 2, p.34

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*, p. 36

All these subtle strategies played an important part in the big constellation of a manipulative system that was having irreversible effects on the captives.

If we were to stop and think about what this journey really meant, it would become clear that indeed it was a passage, but not only towards the “New World”, also to a “New Era”.

The powerful white individuals started to engrave the notion of Africans as racially different. So, while taking them from their motherland by force and holding them as hostages chained in a 6 feet long space<sup>11</sup>, they reinforced through actions the concept of “inferior races” and emphasized a similarity with animals instead of human beings.

Phillis’s identity was even more connected to that voyage since they named her after the ship in which she was being taken to Boston<sup>12</sup>.

Many scholars, when analyzing the biographies of African slaves, focus more on their life with the masters, but the truth is, slavery began long before encountering the family who would buy them. At the point of meeting the masters, the survivors of the Middle Passage were already carrying with themselves a baggage of traumas and a developed habit of docility which provided a fertile ground for their submission.

This brutal voyage not only brought workforce but also a trained one: they were trained to suffer, survive but most importantly obey. It was an unforgettable experience which shaped their personality whether they were aware of it or not.

Even Wheatley had the tendency to be docile but in many situations this characteristic hid itself behind the education of “grace” which her enslavers taught her.

Indeed, she was luckier than many other slaves with the family who bought her but still, this did not save her from the perils and injustices of slavery.

After arriving in the New World, Phillis was sold to John Wheatley, as a servant for his wife, Susanna, who luckily grew fond of her and offered her the possibility to study. This was a pivotal moment of her life because after becoming able to read, she got so familiar with the classical arts that during the early teenage years, she started writing her own poems<sup>13</sup>.

Thankfully, Wheatley was lucky enough to have masters who encouraged her as she was discovering and exploring her talent as a writer, but it must be pointed out that her story was the exception. In fact, countless other slave children who wished to learn how to read were

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<sup>11</sup> Lewis, Thomas. "transatlantic slave trade". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 29 Feb. 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/transatlantic-slave-trade>. Accessed 11 March 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Chicago - Michals, Debra. "Phillis Wheatley." National Women's History Museum. 2015. [www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/phillis-wheatley](http://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/phillis-wheatley). Accessed 8 March 2024

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

teared down for that and even punished as in Frederick Douglass's case for example. He entered history as one of the most important African American abolitionists, but he had to build his career as an activist through a hidden plan. The orator in fact narrates in his autobiography "Narrative of Life of Frederick Douglass", that he mainly learned on his own, without letting anyone know since the slaveholders knew very well that educating slaves meant giving them the possibility to be free. They were the first ones to be fully aware that the key to reach liberty was education. This is also why they were so hostile to the idea of letting any papers or documents around their servants. The proof lies in an anecdote related by Douglass in his autobiography about his master saying: "if you teach that nigger how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave"<sup>14</sup>.

It is also important to underline that not only slaves were not taught to read but they were barely given any information about their origins, and this is how the erasure of their identity continued: everything was connected.

Frederick Douglass did not know the day in which he was born nor who his father was. On the other hand, Phillis Wheatley did not even know what her proper name was: she was given a new one, based on the journey towards slavery.

Even if children asked questions about their past, their age or their life, they did not receive answers because it was the umpteenth dehumanizing tactic.

What people often do not realize is that this was not just an economic model but firstly and most importantly an epistemic cage, which settled the ground for such a brutal injustice. This is why in order to destroy it; it was necessary to first escape the mental manipulation they were being subjected to.

Phillis Wheatley had the luck to rebuild and discover her personality and identity through the pursuit of her intellectual gift but as we will see even further in this thesis, she was given a specific path, with white beliefs and examples.

The Wheatley family played a crucial role in influencing the little girl's beliefs and perspective on life. Susanna Wheatley was extremely religious, and she passed this characteristic on to her young servant <sup>15</sup>.

The entrance of faith in Phillis Wheatley's life was another turning point for two main reasons: on one hand it offered her hope and resilience and on the other hand it improved her as an artist.

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<sup>14</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (New York: Clydesdale Press, 1845).

<sup>15</sup> Rawley, James A. "The World of Phillis Wheatley." *The New England Quarterly*, vol. 50, no. 4, 1977, pp. 666-77. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/364254> . Accessed 13 Mar. 2024.

It is common knowledge that believing in a Higher Power guiding us through life offers a sense for the hardships we are facing and the pain we are enduring.

However, although the spiritual element proved to be helpful throughout her career and life, it must be said that it was not just a general mystic belief, but it was a specific one: it was Christian.

Very little is known about Phillis Wheatley's life in Africa, but it is narrated that she had just one precise memory of her childhood and her family and that was her mother kneeling down during the morning to start the day<sup>16</sup>.

From this imagery, it can be deduced that she was probably born a Muslim but later in her life she did not find again the opportunity to explore this idea or her original religious creed.

Nevertheless, while growing up, Wheatley did become more aware of her past and cultural African roots, so she started playing with scenarios of captivity and freedom, destruction and reconstruction<sup>17</sup>. She intertwined the juxtaposed scenes with a religious voice offering a tone of optimism which would promise the light at the end of the tunnel just as religion does.

Maybe another key factor which helped her strengthen this vision was the Wheatley family in themselves. By being kind, attentive and supportive, they taught her the actual religious values by embodying an example of mercy. In this way, it was easier for the young poet to believe in salvation. As a consequence, people reading her poems could perceive this touch of grace in a more profound way. This is also what helped her gain respect from the public opinion: the talent was undeniable.

## **1.2 The arrival in London and the start of her career**

It must be pointed out that what excluded Phillis Wheatley from hard work as a servant was also her fragile health. In the moment she landed in Boston, her physical condition was documented as very fragile<sup>18</sup>. She needed medical treatment and was unable to execute all the chores that other slaves were used to doing daily but, this unlucky hurdle offered her the opportunity to show herself as a companion and display her personality. Wheatley demonstrated that she had a lot to give since the very beginning, but it was a different service

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<sup>16</sup> Max Tensing, *The Life of Phillis Wheatley*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt School Publishers, p. 4

<sup>17</sup> Bennett, Paula. "Phillis Wheatley's Vocation and the Paradox of the 'African Muse.'" *PMLA*, vol. 113, no. 1, 1998, pp. 64–76. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/463409>. Accessed 13 Mar. 2024.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

than physical work. This created a gap between her and the other domestics in the house<sup>19</sup> that immediately highlighted the fact that the little prodigy possessed something special.

Therefore, 1773 was a crucial year for the little girl, who was sent to England to recover.

It was a blessing disguised as a tragedy. Here she had the opportunity to change the scenario she was witnessing day by day and have new stimuli but most importantly, meet more career opportunities. Indeed, what she found was a plethora of important names who got in touch with her and were helpful for publishing her works<sup>20</sup>.

The aristocratic circles in London represented a fervid intellectual atmosphere which inspired the young literate who was only 20 and enabled her to pursue her career more seriously.

So, not only did she become wide known as the first African American woman to have her own book published but, she was also extremely young when she succeeded in doing so.

After all that she had gone through in her early childhood and the constant changes in her life, she succeeded in becoming famous in another country and she managed to handle the situation gracefully.

Being taken seriously was not a foregone conclusion at that age, especially with her social status despite the encouragement of the Wheatley family.

Nevertheless, her genius did not go unnoticed among the important figures of the British Society, such as the Lord Mayor of London and even George III. The king in fact, had read her works and was fascinated by them to the point that an audience with her was arranged even though it did not take place in the end since Mrs. Wheatley had to go back home to America.

It is important to underline the fact that this was not only a significant milestone in Phillis Wheatley's career, the first out of many, but also for the prevailing mentality of the time.

Publishing for the first time a book written by a poet with African origins meant firstly involving them in the literary world and academic circles. By doing that, a new idea going against the current was inevitably starting to rise: even slaves could be poets.

Anyone who had the talent and the opportunity could pursue this path, despite their biographical background.

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<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

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Robinson, William H. "PHILLIS WHEATLEY IN LONDON." *CLA Journal*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1977, pp. 187–201. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44329344>. Accessed 21 Mar. 2024.

In this way, Phillis Wheatley offered a glimmer of light with the start of her career. It was a new page for her and for her people. This is how she became a leader in the artistic world and in the path towards freedom.

Undoubtedly, it was an unconventional road as an abolitionist, but her story teaches us that there are different solutions for a problem, and they are all equally important and necessary.

The abolition of slavery and most importantly, the change in the way the African Americans were perceived has always been a very complex debate, especially during the Slavery Era.

If activists fighting in the streets were needed, showing their strength and resilience, figures such as Phillis Wheatley were vital since they demonstrated what the militants were fighting for. The battle for emancipation and for a world free of prejudices had to be fought in two different but complementary battlegrounds.

The book which Phillis Wheatley got to see published in 1773 was titled *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. On the frontispiece, after her name, there was a significant inscription, i.e., “Negro Servant to Mr. Wheatley of Boston”<sup>21</sup>. This brief sentence showed that the writer still had a long way to go towards liberation, but it was only the start.

However, Phillis Wheatley’s genius but most importantly, her grace made her pleasant to the eyes of the white sector of the population. Her calm personality and noble behavior changed the minds of the people who met her but still, this was absolutely not sufficient.

The young writer wanted to extend “the privileges” she was being offered also to the rest of her people, so in her book she addressed the problem regarding captivity.

In one of her poems, she wrote:

I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate  
Was snatched from Africa’s fancy’d happy seat. . . Such, such my case.  
And can I then but pray  
Others may never feel tyrannic sway?<sup>22</sup>

This is a brief excerpt of the poem “To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth”. She was referring to William Legge, the Secretary State to the Colonies during those years<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London: A. Bell, 1773).

<sup>22</sup> Phillis Wheatley, *To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth*

<sup>23</sup> Sudip Das Gupta, "To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth by Phillis Wheatley", Poem Analysis, <https://poemanalysis.com/phillis-wheatley/to-the-right-honorable-william-earl-of-dartmouth/> . Accessed 25/03/2024.

The writer states clearly that she yearns freedom for she had been living for years in an enslaved status and she would not wish anyone to have her same faith for this. The statesman she is mentioning is portrayed as a savior who could change the narrative of the country and put an end to slavery or at least, these were her hopes.

In the poems she repeats her love for independence, born from the fact that she lost it too soon when she was bought by the Wheatley family.

This eulogy is crucial since it makes it clear that the poet never forgot nor accepted her position as a servant although she possessed multiple rights that other slaves could not even ask for.

The subjugated status had always been there, since the day in which she sat on the boat that gave her the name. Regardless of the type of masters that an individual could meet, those people were never their family, nor could they become it. No matter the circumstances, no slave was able to sit quietly in a state of subjection because it was simply unnatural.

This is why, when Phillis Wheatley went back home to America, she finally got to taste freedom which Nathanael, John Wheatley's son, promised to grant to her<sup>24</sup>. She fought for it, despite it all, and since then she strengthened her career as an abolitionist with a more delicate approach until reaching the fame of a moderate revolutionist.

However, what made this path difficult was the fact that even though she discussed freedom and tyranny, she never completely focused just on the anti-slavery theme. Consequently, many literary critics doubted her impact on the social progress regarding abolitionism and some even declared that she was not worthy of being remembered as a significant member of Black Literature<sup>25</sup>.

At this point, the difficulties to be recognized as a significant writer and seminal artist started.

### **1.3 The hardships of being a pioneer**

Even nowadays her impact over the black community is a topic which often divides opinion. Many literary reviewers point out the fact that her aulic terminology and neoclassical style leave no space for her African identity to emerge in the poems, nor even just some influences coming from her biological roots<sup>26</sup>. But then again, how was it possible for her personality to display if she was oriented towards a specific white education since she was a little child?

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<sup>24</sup> Mosvick Nicholas, "Forgotten Founders, Phillis Wheatley, African American Poet of the Revolution", <https://constitutioncenter.org/blog/forgotten-founders-phillis-wheatley-african-american-poet-of-the-revolution>, Accessed 25/03/2024.

<sup>25</sup> Casey J. Smith "Phillis Wheatley: Simple Imitator or Cunning Abolitionist?", Journal of Student Research at Indiana University East

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*



This is another important aspect to underline which provides food for thought because it explores the slave status. Phillis Wheatley was definitely encouraged in pursuing her literary dreams, but the path which was offered to her was one and it was linear, with a strong Euro-American imprint.

As I mentioned before: she was taught to read the Bible, she assimilated some beliefs and she was introduced to classical literature with central figures like Alexander Pope and Thomas Grey. If this, on one hand, was a huge privilege, on the other one, it was an erasure for her identity as the human being she was before being named “Phillis”.

She was allowed to read, to study, to write, but not to explore her origins and roots: this was a ban on every African American with no exceptions.

Blacks were denied the possibility to keep or remember any sort of African cultural pattern which would still remind them of their motherland. The aim behind this denial was to help slaveholders strengthen the relationship of utter dependance the slaves had with them<sup>27</sup>.

However, it is impossible to declare now whether this was a completely harmful choice since firstly, the young literate did not have many African ancestors in the literary field she could look up to. On the other hand, classic authors represented an important source of inspiration.

As a consequence, Phillis Wheatley became the pioneer of the Black Literature of that time.

At this point, it becomes obvious that in her journey to become a writer, she had another extremely complex hurdle: the difficulty of being the first one in a new field.

Poets always existed but each one of them sang their inner world and how was it possible for Phillis Wheatley to explore her own subjectivity when she barely knew who she was?

This is why poems like the one mentioned above, *To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth*, or other ones dealing with slavery, which are going to be discussed in the next pages become even more poignant: Phillis Wheatley was alone in her journey.

Despite all the encouragement she had the luck to have and all the people she met, in reality, she was paving her path completely lost in a new territory which she was trying to call her own. Nevertheless, after discovering her own talent and becoming aware of the fame she could reach, she relied on herself and fought concretely also for the same topics she was presenting in her poems.

So, after coming back from England, she made Nathaniel Wheatley promise to grant her the freedom and he did. The young poet finally broke her chains after that but on the other hand, it

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

is also true that they had represented a financial support in her previous years. So, inevitably her emancipation turned out to be freeing at first but felt lonely and scary after a while.

This difficulty became even harder as in the next five years she witnessed the death of both of her ex-masters<sup>28</sup>.

This time not only did she lose a financial support but also a moral one.

In 1778, now a freedwoman, she married John Peters, who shared her African American origins but as love entered her life, so did other umpteenth difficulties related to racism<sup>29</sup>.

Unfortunately, the writer had to endure extreme poverty and this did not allow her to have the sufficient funds for a second book to be published.

The ghost of abandonment seemed to haunt her since she even lost three children when they were still very little<sup>30</sup>.

At this point, the young woman found herself forced to work as a maid and meanwhile continue to pursue her passion for writing, even though she did not possess many funds to support her dreams.

The main topics she developed in her writings were the brutality of slavery and the biblical dimension<sup>31</sup>. It is very likely that the unfortunate events of her life were inspiring her but despite the importance of her words in these major themes, she did not gain the same attention of the past.

This is why she has been revalued as an activist only later on, when scholars started to focus on deep research regarding Black Literature and abolitionism.

The last years of her life have represented a main missing piece in her biographies. What is well known though is the three challenges she was trying to fight: poverty, racism and mourning.

Her children were probably suffering the same delicate conditions which she had when she was a little girl coming from Africa but in this situation, Wheatley Peters did not possess a good financial stability to help them. In fact, the whole family was living in destitution which just exacerbated the illnesses and took the children away from Phillis Wheatley, one by one.

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<sup>28</sup> Aaren Hanson, Steve Yernberg, "Voices from the Gaps: Phillis Wheatley", University of Minnesota, updated by Maria Zavialova, <https://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/166356/Wheatley,%20Phillis.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>, Accessed: 27/03/2024.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>30</sup> Stefanie Sheridan, "Phillis Wheatley: Her Life, Poetry and Legacy", <https://npg.si.edu/blog/phillis-wheatley-her-life-poetry-and-legacy#:~:text=The%20couple%20struggled%20with%20extreme, support%20herself%20with%20these%20writings>. Accessed 27/03/2024.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid*.

The young poet who fought so hard to distance herself from the position of a dependent servant and conquer a prestigious and respected fame was forced back to a place lower than the starting point.

However, her resilience is shown exactly here: she never gave up.

The poet kept working on her profile as a writer and still hoped that her American audience together with her circle of friends and acquaintances would support her dream to see a second volume finally published<sup>32</sup>.

She kept on hoping and she kept on writing up until her death in 1784, when she succeeded in seeing her poem “Liberty and Peace” published. It was a work celebrating her nation’s independence with an optimistic and relieved tone.

The theme represented what Phillis Wheatley knew best: the fight for freedom.

Woefully, the talented writer died in the same year while giving birth and her newborn followed her on the same day. She died alone and abandoned since her husband left and was then incarcerated due to several debts.

The fact that she never put the writing aside shows not only her dedication but her real personality as a poet. She was really born for it and dedicated herself entirely to the literary world firstly because it was her vocation. She never started the career for money or fame, but purely out of love for what her instinct was suggesting, and these pure intentions were what led her to become so authentic and revolutionary.

She was only 31 when she passed away and still to this day, it is uncertain where her burial place is. There are different speculations saying she was buried next to her masters whereas others do not agree with this version and suggest Copp’s Hill Burying Ground instead<sup>33</sup>.

The problem lies in the fact that she was buried in an unmarked grave as countless other black people at that time, but this did not deny her the possibility to be remembered.

Her hard work was impossible not to recognize, so exactly 50 years after her death, *Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley* was finally published and in 1864 also *Letters of Phillis Wheatley, the Negro Slave of Boston* was made known. These are also the years in which her name started to become central for abolitionists, who tried to fight the racist beliefs of African Americans not being able to reach the same intellectual levels of the whites<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> Sondra A. O’Neale, Emore University, “Phillis Wheatley”, Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/phillis-wheatley>, Accessed 27/03/2023.

<sup>33</sup> Phillis Wheatley Historical Society, “Later Life and Death”, <http://www.phillis-wheatley.org/after-life-death/#:~:text=No%20one%20knows%20for%20sure,in%20Copp's%20Hill%20Burying%20Ground>. Accessed 07/03/2024

<sup>34</sup> J.E. Luebering, Britannica, “Phillis Wheatley-Scholars”, <https://kids.britannica.com/scholars/article/Phillis-Wheatley/76745>, Accessed 07/03/2024.

Phillis Wheatley entered history, influenced and inspired numerous other aspirant writers who tried to pursue the same path she paved in the past for them.

Honoré Fanonne Jeffers, poet, novelist and essayist stated: “I would not be here, a Black female poet in the academy, at the highest rate that one can ascend to (...) I stand upon her sacrifice, I stand upon her model”<sup>35</sup>.

Many other scholars and writers like Jeffers spent their life studying Wheatley’s biography and poetry to understand her more deeply, follow her steps and not let her hard work be forgotten. This journey of rediscovery took years and even today, professors keep searching for anecdotes of her life which are already very scarce to explore her personality more.

An example is Wendy Robert, professor at the University of Albany, who recently discovered an elegy written by Wheatley Peters titled *On the Death of Love Rotch*<sup>36</sup>, probably written when she was only 15.

What is interesting about this piece of news is that it demonstrates the fact that Phillis Wheatley is still a significant name among the scholars. No matter how many centuries have passed by, she conquered the pedestal and remained on it.

By looking at her biography, and especially at her death and the last years of her life, it might seem that she tried to reach for freedom and fame but did not really achieve it when actually it is quite the opposite. Her odds never stopped her, since the beginning, and this is the umpteenth proof.

Finally, after her little recognition, the abandonment and the poverty endured in her life, she managed to make her poetry win and be seen.

Nowadays she is worldwide known as one of the pillars of Black History, Afro-American Literature but also for the global literary dimension since through her art and life, she offered an extraordinary example of grace, resilience, talent and dedication.

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<sup>35</sup> Ainsley Cromar, 25 February 2021, “The mother of African American Literature: Remembering the poet Phillis Wheatley Peters”, <https://www.boston.com/news/history/2021/02/25/phillis-wheatley-peters/>. Accessed 28/03/2024

<sup>36</sup> Bethany Bump, 17 January 2023, “UAlbany Professor Finds New Poem By Famed Early American Poet Phillis Wheatley”, <https://www.albany.edu/news-center/news/2023-ualbany-professor-finds-new-poem-famed-early-american-poet-phillis-wheatley>, Accessed 28/03/2024.

## Chapter 2

### 2.1 A multifaceted artist

Ever since her first book was published in 1773, Phillis Wheatley experienced a never-ending evolution as an artist considering that she started to understand what being put under a spotlight meant. Facing the public opinion made her grow both as a writer but also as a human. In fact, if on one hand the literary critics represented a good source of inspiration and guidance, on the other hand, the mentality at that time was far from open-minded and supportive towards African Americans.

Despite what scholars argued about the poet not being too explicit as an abolitionist, Wheatley demonstrated to be fully aware of her origins and of the meaning of slavery.

With her astonishing linguistic skills, she resorted to her multifaceted biography to create an artistic persona who experiments with different scenarios<sup>37</sup>.

What emerges is that she started from the early moments of her career as a very exploratory literate. Then, throughout the years she followed a path to discover how to intertwine all her facets into the writer she was meant to be.

In her poetry however, many times her persona seemed to be in contrast with the topics she was presenting to the public<sup>38</sup>.

Some examples are *To His Excellence General Washington*, where she describes the United States as “The land of freedom”<sup>39</sup> and *To The King’s Most Excellent Majesty*, which also has been considered a very controversial and ironic composition. In fact, the monarch, George III was admired by Phillis Wheatley and the respect was definitely mutual.

However, it might appear unclear why the poet was deciding to honor in her poems these authorities who certainly did not share her same ethical code. Indeed, it is very well known that the British Crown, as well as the American officials participated in the colossal structure of exploitation.

This is the reason why many scholars noticed that in Wheatley’s poetry there is a complex expression of her ideology. The subjects in her poems are being taken and molded into a literary

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<sup>37</sup> Levernier, James A. “Style as Protest in the Poetry of Phillis Wheatley.” *Style* 27, no. 2 (1993): 171-172.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Phillis Wheatley, *To His Excellence General Washington*, 1775.

character which partly obscures the position of the historical protagonist that is being presented<sup>40</sup>. Nevertheless, the writer knew very well what she was doing.

The advantage she gained from this tactic was firstly a larger audience: Wheatley was fully aware of the power of the subjects she chose to eulogize in her literary works. It was a path towards a bigger sector of the population, reaching an international scale.

In this way, her voice had a higher probability to be heard among the countries but most importantly among different social classes and enter the more privileged ones. They were the target since they had the power in their hands to change the social and political dynamics.

From this perspective, the choice of her addressee does not seem irrational anymore, but it turns out to be a very well-studied and sagacious strategy.

Secondly, if she had to establish a dialogue regarding sensitive topics with the most powerful personalities, she needed a graceful tone.

The summits of the political scheme in the 19th century were barely accepting the first African American writer to appear in the literary world and break down deeply rooted prejudices.

It was a delicate moment for everyone; entering the elitarian circles of that time with a loud and pugnacious voice would have simply blown her chance to keep building her career and most importantly, the path she was paving for the next generations.

As aforementioned, she was a pioneer in the Black poetic world and with this came a high level of responsibility. She had to take small and very careful steps because the luck to be there could have vanished in any second.

The fame is too fragile as we noticed in her biography; the political and economic contexts in which she wrote strongly determined her possible success or failure.

So, while writing and making her way in front of the public opinion, she started to know what being a writer meant: a professional figure.

There was an artistic side, which she had, but it had to be balanced with an insightful and skillful profile to keep standing under the spotlight.

As a result, Phillis Wheatley gave proof to be a complete writer, so aware of how to handle her pen that the audience did not even realize her full capabilities<sup>41</sup>.

In fact, this was exactly what enabled her to keep writing about sensitive issues but to avoid as much as possible censorship. The stylistic subtleties in her poems were there and as the

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<sup>40</sup> Burke, Helen M. "The Rhetoric and Politics of Marginality: The Subject of Phillis Wheatley." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 10, no. 1 (1991): 31–45.

<sup>41</sup> Levernier, James A. "Style as Protest in the Poetry of Phillis Wheatley." *Style* 27, no. 2 (1993): 174-175.

historian David Grimsted pointed out, “No one read closely because they did not any more than we, expect a teenage slave girl to be stylistically and rhetorically aware of the potential of poetry to speak at different levels as Wheatley was.”

On the other hand, it is also true that if she had not been a clever writer she also would not have been able to meet with such powerful authorities in person while still being a slave on paper and even so be taken into consideration and admired.

However, despite the infinite stylistic strategies she adopted in order to present her themes, her main concern was to always speak about freedom<sup>42</sup>: She often experimented with her style to find her literary persona but not with her themes because she already knew very well what her focus was.

## **2.2 Becoming a writer in a multi-stimuli environment**

Wheatley also resorted to cultural and religious means by establishing strong bonds with some abolitionists such as Samuel Hopkins, one of the most authoritative activists of the time together with Dr. Benjamin Rush<sup>43</sup>. The writer attended Hopkins’ Church in Rhode Island, listening to his speeches about slavery as the most nefarious form of evil and the necessity to see the African population finally free. His dream was to see the young poet become a leading missionary, return to Africa and follow his project<sup>44</sup>.

However, even though Wheatley found herself highly involved in the ideologies, she was more present in the literary world and decided to follow her own path by using the word.

Indeed, as a slave raised in America, her main battleground was a continent she knew very well from a close outlook and consequently she felt closer to African Americans being enslaved in her similar conditions rather than entering once again an almost forgotten motherland<sup>45</sup>. Hopkins’ ideas were crucial for her as a writer but by being one, it was more difficult for her to pause her literary career to pursue one as a proselytizer.

Nevertheless, these chapters and voices in her life still had a great impact on her poetry.

Phillis Wheatley was conscious of the weight of the Christian narratives in people’s beliefs so in her works she started to operate with these images as a means of communication of her ideas.

In *On Being Brought from Africa to America*, her most famous poem, she wrote:

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> O’Neale, Sondra A. “Challenge to Wheatley’s Critics: ‘There Was No Other ‘Game’ in Town.’” *The Journal of Negro Education* 54, no. 4 (1985): 500–511.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Silverman, “Four New Letters”, pp. 259-260.

'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, Negroes, black as Cain,  
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train<sup>46</sup>.

Here, the author clearly uses Christian myths and a significant one that stands out is Cain's narrative. Cain and Ham's story had been used for centuries in America to reinforce the idea of racial hierarchies by promoting the idea that Africans descended from the former. As a consequence, black skin was an evident inheritance of a sin.

But, by representing this old misconception and putting the emphasis on the Saviour's mercy towards everyone, she puts Blacks and Whites on the same level, making the former fully fledged human beings just as the latter. In doing so, she disarms the readers who are against this idea because contradicting her would mean denying the power of God<sup>47</sup>.

The literate proved herself bright enough to turn the religious rhetorics on her favor. She understood that the strongest resource to create a misconception was religion, so she did the same to present her ideologies.

The spiritual realm becomes a safe and useful place to set her poems and change deep-seated misapprehensions. In *An Address To The Deist*, written when she was only 14 years old, she wrote:

Must Ethiopians be employ'd for you?  
Much I rejoice if any good I do.  
I ask O unbeliever, Satan's child  
Hath not thy Saviour been too much revil'd<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>46</sup> Phillis Wheatley, *On Being Brought from Africa to America*, 1773.

<sup>47</sup> O'Neale, Sondra. "A Slave's Subtle War: Phillis Wheatley's Use of Biblical Myth and Symbol." *Early American Literature* 21, no. 2 (1986): 144–150.

<sup>48</sup> Phillis Wheatley, *An Address To The Deist*, 1767.



Firstly, what immediately stands out here is the more bitter tone of voice. It is evident that the calm touch of grace that is omnipresent while dealing with such delicate themes had been developed throughout the years with experience.

The young poet here ruthlessly calls the white non-believers “Satan’s children” and she does not mold the words to make them more pleasant. The idea here is to express her ideas directly, without the mediation and as a consequence, the poem is known as one of her less-skilled ones but certainly as one of the most courageous. In fact, for many years this production was hidden and therefore there have been speculations about a suppression due to political reasons<sup>49</sup>.

In that case, it probably was the lesson that Wheatley kept in mind and one of her infinite experiments of showing her ideas and exercising in how to formulate them.

However, what makes this poem so poignant is that it fully expresses the writer’s piety and vindication of her roots: it is an exceptional tone which the poet never adopted again while dealing with her African origins.

It could also be pointed out that this somehow even became her weakness; several militant critics in fact, accused her poetry of lacking race consciousness and pride in her heritage<sup>50</sup>.

It is undeniable that in her later poetry she presented herself as detached from Africa.

As a matter of fact, in her most famous poem *On Being Brought From Africa*, she shows gratefulness to have been taken from a Pagan Land to arrive in America where she was introduced to the Protestant belief<sup>51</sup>.

This is a sign of how important faith was to her. Believing in God granted her a peace internally with which she was able to present certain treacherous topics with such calm and grace. Nevertheless, if on one hand it led her to an astonishing success, on the other one it cost her the credibility.

### **2.3 Phillis on Trial**

Being in the position she achieved; many doubts arose among the critics: How did a slave manage to arrive to that level? Why was she so detached from her African origins? Why wasn’t she adopting an irate tone while talking about the condition she was in?

But most importantly, all these questions converged into one in particular: Was it really her, the one who wrote all of these poems?

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<sup>49</sup> Lapsansky, Phil, and Phillis Wheatley. “Deism-An Unpublished Poem by Phillis Wheatley.” *The New England Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (1977): 517–20.

<sup>50</sup> Jamison, Angelene. “Analysis of Selected Poetry of Phillis Wheatley.” *The Journal of Negro Education* 43, no. 3 (1974): 408–12.

<sup>51</sup> id. 412.

In order to find the answer, Wheatley was put on trial. It seemed that her multifaceted personality and the multi-stimuli environments she grew up in also became her major challenges.

In 1772 she stood in front of a semicircle of renowned thinkers and politicians who were ready to question the authorship of her publication<sup>52</sup>.

To this day, it is not known what happened exactly inside the room; there is no transcript of the questions she had to answer or the discussions which took place. The only certainty is that she was examined, and she passed the test successfully<sup>53</sup>.

This is a crucial event of her life since it represents the apex of her career. Surely it must have been a scary confrontation, but it reveals on one hand, what levels she had reached with her words and on the other, it confirms the narrow-minded beliefs reigning at that time.

For once, it was fair to declare that her talent was unbelievable, but being obliged to face a plethora of influential politicians also meant not being taken seriously.

Nevertheless, the fact that she succeeded in demonstrating the authorship of her poems just makes her victory more admirable. She vindicated for once and for all the intellectual potential of her people and from that moment, not only did this trial open the doors to her career but also to her fight.

As there are no details about what was said to her on that day, there is also no information about her feelings while facing this challenge, but this might be a good opportunity to make the readership reflect upon it.

Let's not forget that she was being judged by a group of white male thinkers. The arbiters were 18. Among them there was no one of her age and especially, no black example to look up to. Some of the important names witnessing the debate were: Andre Olivier, the colony's lieutenant governor and Thomas Hubbard, a slave dealer. Then, sitting there was also Reverend Charles Chauncy, who fought against the Great Awakening, i.e. an evangelical movement because it was supporting "women and girls; yeah Negroes...to do the business of Preachers"<sup>54</sup>.

As it can be noticed, Wheatley certainly did not find herself in front of scholars who were so impressed by her skills that they did not believe in her authorship. She was there because they did not want to believe in it. The majority of them were slaveholders and chauvinists who

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<sup>52</sup> Gates, H. L. Jr. (2003, January 13). *Phillis Wheatley on trial*. The New Yorker. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/01/20/phillis-wheatley-on-trial>

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

shared the racist ideas of the European and American world and what they did inside that room was simply giving voice to the narrow-minded part of the public opinion.

At this point it becomes obvious that if the challenge of being exposed to this sort of trial was already punishing, by being put in front of these specific figures, the difficulty was exacerbated. What opened in front of her was a new era and most importantly, a new debate: what was race? Did it even exist and did it really influence one person's capacities?

As mentioned, a few times before, Wheatley's words were even more meaningful considering the impact she would have. By being black, her actions always led to the political debates of slavery. As Henry Louis Gates stated in his essay "Writing Race and the Difference It Makes", black people tried to use the pen in order to write themselves out of slavery, their task had more serious consequences. The essayist then continues by asserting:

"Black writers wrote as if their life depended on it and, in a curious sense, their lives did"<sup>55</sup>.

This is more than noticeable with Phillis Wheatley; the trial she went through simply confirmed that the figures in power knew very well what was about to happen. This is why the most respected thinkers of the time were called to analyze her writings and question her in person. Recognizing a black voice as an authentic meaningful author meant that the African would become the European and the slave would be a freedman<sup>56</sup>. It was a step towards true transformation and the white population did not seem ready.

On the other hand, how could they be ready when they lived for centuries in a white-centered society? Apart from politicians, even the main thinkers who represented the pillars of philosophy such as Hegel or Kant, had founded their discourses on a classist basis.

The former in fact, had stated that Africa had no history since its inhabitants were not able to read or write<sup>57</sup>. These were strong affirmations coming from one of the most admired thinkers in history, which means that the readership assimilated every concept he wrote. Because of his fame and authority, even if certain statements as the one mentioned above, appeared questionable, very few people would argue about it and start disagreeing.

So, changing mentality was improbable also because Hegel was not the only one who expressed racist beliefs, he was just one star in a constellation of privileged discriminatory authors.

Analyzing these names means looking at the education that people were offered throughout those years. Sometimes it was not even a matter of specific hatred towards women or black people, but the root was simply ignorance.

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<sup>55</sup> Henry Louis Gates, 1985, "Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes." *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1): 12-13.

<sup>56</sup> id. p. 11.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

Just as Phillis Wheatley had not read any other black author who could inspire her, nor did her readership. As a consequence, everyone's common reaction was of shock, but the difference lies in how they expressed it. Some simply decided not to believe in it, some others even considered it an act against nature and tried to hinder her career.

The main point is that she was one against the world and only her authentic and elaborate style helped her reach the podium.

## **2.4 Her style as a connection with the Black community**

The young woman also resorted to peculiar artistic expressions intertwined with a Christian language to show her desire for a connection with Black people. The young poet suffered identity issues because even at home she was separated from the other servants by being considered "the person of her mistress"<sup>58</sup>. Phillis Wheatley then not only felt alone and excluded among the whites, but also with her own people.

In fact, after being freed, she wrote in a letter that American slaveholders could be compared to Egyptian captors just as Israel equated an African slave<sup>59</sup>.

Moreover, Wheatley used to stylize herself as an "Ethiop" to underline her belonging to the African community but also to affirm herself as an artist from another world. She wanted to succeed not despite her roots but thanks to them.

In fact, her Western influences were just the foundations of her works; what she learned from Alexander Pope, Horace and Virgil was the basis from which she started to experiment, but her style incorporated more aspects of her biography than people might think.

As a matter of fact, in her writing she focused often on the elegy, i.e., a form of poetry where the lyrical subject manifests grief and loss<sup>60</sup>. This concept was inherited from her African roots since in this culture, girls had the responsibility to perform funeral dirges<sup>61</sup>.

She wrote numerous elegies and according to the literary critics, they can be divided into two macro categories: one dedicated to dignitaries and another one for people of her small and

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<sup>58</sup> Rusert, Britt. "'The World Is a Severe Schoolmaster': Phillis Wheatley's Poetry of Domination and Submission." *Early American Literature* 57, no. 3 (2022): 787.

<sup>59</sup> O'Neale, Sondra A. "Challenge to Wheatley's Critics: 'There Was No Other 'Game' in Town.'" *The Journal of Negro Education* 54, no. 4 (1985): 508-509

<sup>60</sup> Poets, Academy of American. n.d. "Elegy | Academy of American Poets." Poets.org. <https://poets.org/glossary/elegy>.

<sup>61</sup> Michals, Debra. 2015. "Phillis Wheatley." National Women's History Museum. 2015. <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/phillis-wheatley>.

private circle. In the former she adopts a rigid structure with the three main key points of lament, praise and consolation, whereas in the latter she avoids the second element<sup>62</sup>.

It is quite understandable that this literary genre was also a way to explore her past and subjectivity, especially while writing verses for individuals whom she knew from a closer outlook. In this case, it was even easier to express her grief with a deeper and more personal approach but most importantly, she had the possibility to give life also to her own feelings of sorrow. What she accumulated throughout the years could now come alive in other people's stories, similar to the one she experienced first-hand.

A clear example of this is the elegy *On the Death of a young Lady of Five Years of Age*. Here the author presents the concept of death as a voyage and it becomes easier to compare it to the transatlantic one that she had to face as a little girl.

From dark abodes to fair ethereal light  
Th' enraptur'd innocent has wing'd her flight;  
On the kind bosom of eternal love  
She finds unknown beatitude above.  
This know, ye parents, nor her loss deplore,  
She feels the iron hand of pain no more<sup>63</sup>;

The last verse referring to the "iron hand of pain" may be a hint at the poet's enslavement and the cruelty she suffered by being technically imprisoned<sup>64</sup>.

The theme of death is often symbolized as a crossing, especially in her elegies. As a consequence, it is debated that this was a strategy to explore and relive her own past.

From this viewpoint, her elegies gain a cathartic power and become a tool in the journey of self-discovery.

To demonstrate that there is a common thread that unites her poems of this genre, another useful example is *A Funeral Poem on the Death of C. E., an Infant of Twelve Months*.

Through airy roads he wings his instant flight  
To purer regions of celestial light;

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<sup>62</sup> Bennett, Paula. "Phillis Wheatley's Vocation and the Paradox of the 'African Muse.'" *PMLA* 113, no. 1 (1998): 69.

<sup>63</sup> Phillis Wheatley, *On the Death of a Young Lady of Five Years of Age*, 1773.

<sup>64</sup> Bennett, Paula. "Phillis Wheatley's Vocation and the Paradox of the 'African Muse.'" *PMLA* 113, no. 1 (1998): 69.

Enlarg'd he sees unnumber'd systems roll,  
Beneath him sees the universal whole,  
Planets on planets run their destin'd round <sup>65</sup>,

The subject is Charles Eliot, who was only 1 year old when he passed away, and the aim of the elegy is to express condolences and consolation to his parents, who lost their son too soon.

What Wheatley suggests is that at least the newborn reached heaven in a short time and was spared from the sorrows of worldly life<sup>66</sup>.

The writer's identification with the subject here reaches the apogee. Firstly, what is striking is once again the imagery of death as a voyage. However, the destination in this case is not a land in which the infant is going to be exploited but paradise. In fact, from the author's perspective, being taken away from this world meant being saved<sup>67</sup>.

His innocence remained intact and the real danger for him would have been the cruelty of humanity.

In both of the elegies which are mentioned, the literate views death as being "enraptured" by the sky. What is interesting is that the same imageries of the Middle Passage keep coming sometimes almost subconsciously. The words "snatched", "enraptured" remind the reader of a forced dislocation, as she experienced herself at a young age. In this way she can get closer to the subject of her poems considering that they faced a similar reality and the writer, by being older, overcame it. Consequently, she can present a broader outlook on the situation.

What the poet implies is firstly a closeness to the victim for the instant abduction and then a well-thought solace.

The poet had a strong belief that the afterlife would offer her and to all those who suffered a compensation for the challenges and the trials which they endured. So, death was only the end of pain and the most awaited of reliefs<sup>68</sup>.

Even Wheatley was forced to "die" after being kidnapped and brought by force to Africa, but she did not land on a heavenly sky. Quite the opposite, after the trauma, she arrived in what looked like hell and instead of being reunited with the Holy Father, she was alone, in a stranger's house and in a stranger land.

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<sup>65</sup> Phillis Wheatley, *A Funeral Poem on the Death of C.E., an Infant of Twelve Months*, 1773.

<sup>66</sup> "MHS Collections Online: Poem by Phillis Wheatley, 'a Poem on the Death of Charles Eliot ...,' 1 September 1772." 2024. Masshist.org. 2024. <https://www.masshist.org/database/795>.

<sup>67</sup> Bennett, Paula. "Phillis Wheatley's Vocation and the Paradox of the 'African Muse.'" *PMLA* 113, no. 1 (1998): 70.

<sup>68</sup> id. 71.

Her striking talent emerges in the strength to re-explore painful memories and still use them for a tone of consolation offering an optimistic and relieving perspective.

This is exactly her strong suit: re-emerging from the ashes of her past with grace and presenting them as a lesson. Wheatley is not a poet of rebellion and harsh or angry tone, she is strong by not letting the circumstances turn her bitter. Consequently, she becomes one of the most suitable voices for elegies. She is able to sing the most tragic situations and be a light of hope and comfort.

In *To S.M. a Young African Painter on Seeing His Works*, a poem dedicated to Scipio Moorhead, who was an African artist enslaved in America, Wheatley reassures her colleague about life after death expressing the same ideas. In fact, she writes:

But when these shades of time are chas'd away,  
And darkness ends in everlasting day,  
On what seraphic pinions shall we move,  
And view the landscapes in the realms above?  
There shall thy tongue in heav'nly murmurs flow,  
And there my muse with heav'nly transport glow<sup>69</sup>

Even here, death is mentioned and presented as a transition towards a spiritual dimension where not only they will not be excluded from colonial society, but they will also have the possibility to express their art and souls directly<sup>70</sup>. This will be the result of having higher subjects; in fact, while on Earth she is forced to sing the cruelties and deal with the never-ending human burdens, in Heaven she will be inspired by the Divine Entity<sup>71</sup>. Only then she will have the purest of languages but up until she is alive, she will only be destined to strive for it but never to reach it fully.

In this same poem, the writer also offers a reflection on art. She points out clearly that to her, an artist needs to be influenced by the spiritual dimension and therefore religious themes and tones play a crucial role.

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<sup>69</sup> Phillis Wheatley, *To S.M. a Young African Painter on Seeing His Works*, 1773.

<sup>70</sup> Bennett, Paula. "Phillis Wheatley's Vocation and the Paradox of the 'African Muse.'" *PMLA* 113, no. 1 (1998): 71.

<sup>71</sup> "A Summary and Analysis of Phillis Wheatley's 'to S. M., a Young African Painter, on Seeing His Works.'" 2023. Interesting Literature. February 28, 2023. <https://interestingliterature.com/2023/02/phillis-wheatley-to-s-m-young-african-painter-summary-analysis/>.

It seems that in this composition by dealing with her profession and relating it to someone who has so many similarities with her the writer is comfortable to express herself fully.

In fact, not only she clarifies her view on her favorite topics, but she gives the poem an evident classical structure with rhyming couplets of iambic pentameter<sup>72</sup>.

Her style thus reveals the influences she absorbed throughout her career that somehow have also become part of her identity as a poet.

In conclusion, the three main pillars of Phillis Wheatley's style are: religious symbolism, classical influence and the inclination towards elegiac poetry considering that more than a third of her literary production belonged to this field<sup>73</sup>.

Her African identity and her condemnation of slavery emerge subtly since she always preferred a delicate approach for such complex matters.

From this perspective, it becomes more understandable why she was such a criticized artist; not only did she demonstrate great skills but also a big variety of them.

Therefore, she encompassed different literary personas. On one hand this helped her explore herself and her artistic potential while on the other it showed to the world how versatile and multifaceted she was. It might be said that she walked multiple paths and probably it was this what helped her achieve all the results nobody expected she could have.

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<sup>72</sup>Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Foundation, Poetry. 2020. "Phillis Wheatley." Poetry Foundation. June 15, 2020. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/phillis-wheatley#:~:text=Poems%20on%20Various%20Subjects%20revealed>.



## Chapter 3

### 3.1 *On Virtue: the poem*

To understand her writing and artistic persona more clearly, it would be useful to choose a significant poem out of her production and examine it. *On Virtue* could be a perfect composition that could explicate her style and modus operandi.

O thou bright jewel in my aim I strive  
To comprehend thee. Thine own words declare  
Wisdom is higher than a fool can reach.  
I cease to wonder, and no more attempt  
Thine height t'explore, or fathom thy profound.  
But, O my soul, sink not into despair,  
*Virtue* is near thee, and with gentle hand  
Would now embrace thee, hovers o'er thine head.  
Fain would the heaven-born soul with her converse,  
Then seek, then court her for her promised bliss.

Auspicious queen, thine heavenly pinions spread,  
And lead celestial *Chastity* along;  
Lo! now her sacred retinue descends,  
Arrayed in glory from the orbs above.  
Attend me, *Virtue*, thro' my youthful years!  
O leave me not to the false joys of time!  
But guide my steps to endless life and bliss.  
*Greatness*, or *Goodness*, say what I shall call thee,  
To give a higher appellation still,  
Teach me a better strain, a nobler lay,  
O Thou, enthroned with Cherubs in the realms of day!<sup>74</sup>

This is one of the first poems Wheatley wrote so it is even easier to capture her essence as a writer. It is also the second poem which appears in *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773). The composition is short, containing 21 lines divided into two stanzas.

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<sup>74</sup> Phillis Wheatley, *On Virtue*, 1766.

There is no rhyme scheme nor a coherent organization of the syllables since there is an alternation of the iambic pentameter with the trisemic one.<sup>75</sup> Nevertheless, the presence of couplets makes the composition have its own rhythm and flow.<sup>76</sup>

In terms of the style, it can also be added that the echo of the Augustan poetry can be noticed quite clearly. This type of art in fact focused deeply on notions of balance and order, trying to look at the past and recreate an ancient atmosphere which rooted back to the Roman Empire's era. Therefore, the main concerns were a sense of stability and nobility<sup>77</sup>.

However, as for the thematic nucleus, the influences are quite different since here a central role is always played by the Christian world.

The main topic is the evangelical conversion and as the title suggests, virtue is at the center of this process. According to the writer, virtuousness is a concept that the human mind cannot even conceive utterly, almost as if it was a God's feature.<sup>78</sup> This is why at the beginning she writes "Oh Though bright jewel in my aim I strive to comprehend Thee". This type of righteousness is put on a pedestal, as an example for the human population. It is too enlightened to be part of the human characteristics but at the same time it is a goal that we should keep in mind while building ourselves cognitively.

The lyrical "I" then focuses on the soul; trying to point out that desperation should not be an option in the attempt to grasp at wisdom. In fact, she writes "Oh my soul, sink not into despair". This path towards virtue is expressed with a climax as this quality starts to be presented as a gentle woman who wants to get close to the poet's soul.<sup>79</sup>

The metaphor of Virtue as a woman continues in the second stanza when Wheatley compares this trait to a monarch of good omen, when she describes it as "Auspicious queen" and asks her to accompany her throughout her whole youth.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> "On Virtue," Teaching American History, n.d., <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/on-virtue/>.

<sup>76</sup> "On Virtue by Phillis Wheatly," www.eliteskills.com, accessed July 8, 2024, <https://www.eliteskills.com/c/3032>.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Michael Monescalchi, "On Virtue: Phillis Wheatley with Jonathan Edwards," Commonplace, accessed June 30, 2024, <https://commonplace.online/article/vol-17-no-3-monescalchi/#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20%E2%80%9CProposals%E2%80%9D%20for>.

<sup>79</sup> "A Summary and Analysis of Phillis Wheatley's 'on Virtue,'" Interesting Literature, September 24, 2023, <https://interestingliterature.com/2023/09/phillis-wheatley-on-virtue-summary-analysis/>.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

What is interesting to note is that she also offers some synonyms of the presented quality in the poem, i.e., “Greatness” and “Goodness” and concludes the composition by asking Virtue to teach her how to write considering her noble and heavenly position.

This last part makes it even clearer that Wheatley had very strong ideals. In the process of idealizing Virtue and asking her to be a teacher, it reveals that her whole literary persona follows these values and almost depends on them when creating art.

Wheatley also plays a lot with imageries, colors and contrasts to express her ideas; in this case the most evident example is the dichotomy between virtue, called “bright jewel” or “the fair sun’s most attractive ray” and vice, described as “poisoned dart” leading to desperation.<sup>81</sup>

The use of images is really powerful since it emphasizes the message the poet wants to convey and at the same time it helps her create a beautiful and aesthetic atmosphere, in which to present her piece of advice regarding the pursuit of virtuousness.

### **3.2 Wheatley’s idea of Virtue**

As we analyzed even previously in this thesis, Wheatley always won by replying nobly, by being kind in her fights and revolutions, by simply being graceful.

She was really young when she wrote *On Virtue* and yet it is as if she kept the promise to her young self and to her set of ideals when building her career. The superiority of goodness is her distinctive trait which made her famous and remarkable.

Not only that, being virtuous and great in the context she was in was also extremely rare, almost impossible. However, once again she demonstrated that it was the right path by not letting the circumstances turn off her potential.

The connection with God and the heavenly world is omnipresent and the basis of her whole mentality. This is also what helped her gain respect by who read her works.

By pointing out that these are not just mere ethical codes that a person should follow but behaviors that the Creator would want people to adopt makes it easier for the readership to accept Wheatley’s narrative.

Also, as she underlines multiple times, it is hard for individuals to adhere to these principles because they normally do not belong to the common conduct. Consequently, what results from this poem is that being virtuous means standing out and therefore having the spotlight for oneself to then present a significant change.

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<sup>81</sup> “On Virtue by Phillis Wheatly,” [www.eliteskills.com](http://www.eliteskills.com), accessed July 2, 2024, <https://www.eliteskills.com/c/3032>.

The sentence “Wisdom is higher than a fool can reach” entered history and became one of the most famous Phillis Wheatley’s quotes since they really englobe best the poet’s quintessence. Through her writings the literate became an activist and a spiritual guide because she was proposing codes of behaviors, and this poem is the one that best shows how her writing was not merely aesthetical, but it combined didactical purposes with an elegant style.

It is important to point out that even if the themes discussed in the poem seem rational and logical, at that time they were not so easily acceptable, especially considering the author who wrote it. As a matter of fact, the popular belief according to which the black community belonged to an inferior category of races made it difficult to understand that they could strive for virtuousness too. Therefore, the poem presents itself also as the umpteenth challenge for the readership, in particular for one specific sector of it.<sup>82</sup>

Moreover, many people considered even women incapable of reaching the desirable level of virtue. To many men’s eyes, girls were pure objects of lust and by being excluded for centuries from the literary and cultural circles, reading from a Black woman that wisdom could have been reached through the means of virtue by everyone was a big provocation.

This is exactly where Phillis Wheatley’s genius lies; she always resorted to subtle and refined chain of thoughts to make readers reflect upon their ideas and values.

She captivated male readers’ attention with her delicate and feminine energy since this was the main quality with which they could picture a woman.

We could say in this case, that her elegant tone sometimes is also a way of preparing the ground to express her ideas which in most cases were too revolutionary.

Furthermore, even if this “strategy” which we cannot know whether she was aware of or it was simply her way of being or maybe even a combination of both, helped millions of people change their minds. In fact, when we speak about ground-breaking ideas regarding equality, we do not refer only to the eliterian white males who read her compositions but also to black people and especially women.

### **3.3 Wheatley’s voice for equality**

It must be said that unfortunately in many situations the aforementioned categories were so brainwashed by the propaganda of that moment that they believed or started to assimilate what was being said even if it was against them.

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<sup>82</sup> Sarah A. Morgan Smith, ““On Virtue,”” Teaching American History, n.d., <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/on-virtue/>.

Consequently, Wheatley's voice was useful not only in building new mentalities but in destroying toxic ones that were just starting to be built.

Protecting and defending minorities did not just mean attacking what other people claimed about them but also what the victims believed.

Even if on one hand it might seem illogical, there were women thinking that it was not in their nature to be virtuous and to access knowledge or gain wisdom. As it was underlined before, this structural negation led them to not fight for their opportunities.

Moreover, it would also be useful to ask ourselves what it meant on a human level to believe these accusations against them.

Black people and young girls were growing by thinking that they could not have a pure soul nor have the right to have a contact with God or hope in general.

Not only is this humiliating for the subject, but it is also part of an annihilation of the person denying them the opportunity to bloom and be a good component of a society. What I mean by that is that a vicious circle was being created. The victims accepted what was being said about them and they or at least, some of them, started to assimilate their potential lack of qualities.

By doing so, they did not strive to become virtuous because they thought it was simply not in their DNA. Therefore, they would act according to their dangerous beliefs and fall into immorality. At this point the white racist sector of the population had the confirmation for their claims when actually they did not understand a simple concept: all of this was created by them. It is pretty obvious that after repeating aggressively to a person that they are immoral and inferior, a seed was being planted and there should have been no surprise about what flowers would have bloomed from that.

This dynamic could be compared to parenting. Gentle parents who establish a supportive dialogue towards their kids usually have the best results or the same happens with families who have collaborative brothers and sisters.

Of course, in this case white people were not the parents of the blacks but what is sure is that they failed in their role as brothers. Instead of helping, the pattern was: addressing the differences and attacking minorities for this.

A big strength was needed to come out of this toxic cycle and offer kindness instead. This is what Phillis Wheatley did and the success she gained was her reward.

Righteousness and inner strength are the two columns which the artist always suggested to keep in mind, and she ended up being the perfect embodiment of both.

Moreover, it must be said that virtue represented also a beacon of hope for the poet. In fact, considering the surroundings she grew up in, a society condemned to division and hatred, she relied on the pursuit of biblical values.<sup>83</sup>

The Christian imprint of her works offers specific lenses with which one should perceive and understand life.<sup>84</sup> In fact, even the last detail in which the writer addresses directly the Virtue and asks her to be her guide and offer inspiration, it could be interpreted as a request to be safeguarded from the temptations of the mundane life, especially in her late teenage years.

By being so influenced by the Protestant dimension, she often also explores the themes linked to sin and guilt but again, always very subtly.

With her innocence and desire for righteousness, she acted with fear and this can be perceived in some of her statements, but more than anything she knew that the Christian readership was sharing the same ideas in this context.

So, following this line of reasoning, Virtue becomes a universal guide. The role that is played is crucial since it improves the ethical behaviors and spiritual life of a person. This is also why, this poem has become one of the most famous ones of her whole literary production and appears as the one which best encapsulates her persona both as a writer and as a human being.

In conclusion, Wheatley's path has been one of morality, of wisdom and of virtue.

Her career as an activist is coherent with her ways of understanding the world which can be seen clearly in her poems. Her delicate tone fought for the good with good words.

She never accepted violent riots or loud voices to establish a rebellion, instead she demonstrated the opposite. She proved to the whole world that the most powerful act of revolution is to stand out and act with morality and grace if these are the results the person is seeking for.

Her formula seems so simple and yet it was so innovative to make it concrete but she succeeded, and this is exactly how she won, back then and also today, many centuries later.

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<sup>83</sup> "On Virtue by Phillis Wheatly," [www.eliteskills.com](http://www.eliteskills.com), accessed July 2, 2024, <https://www.eliteskills.com/c/3032>.

<sup>84</sup> Dr. Oliver Tearle, "A Summary and Analysis of Phillis Wheatley's 'on Virtue,'" *Interesting Literature*, September 24, 2023, <https://interestingliterature.com/2023/09/phillis-wheatley-on-virtue-summary-analysis/>.

### 3.4 Wheatley's legacy

As regards Wheatley's legacy in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, as many authors suggested, it would be better to speak about legacies, for the plural underlines the different roles Phillis Wheatley embodied throughout her life.<sup>85</sup>

As a matter of fact, it is quite obvious at this point of this academic work that perhaps one of her most significant contributions is linked to the anti-slavery movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century which then gave life to different forms of activism.

During the post-Civil-Wars, for instance people started to fight against Jim Crow laws and the Black clubwomen movement arose. In this context, Wheatley's name emerged in the chants and the speeches of the most renowned leaders and this is how the "Phillis Wheatley Club and Home" was founded. It was a center harboring young women from the Great Migration and offering them a safe space dedicated to education<sup>86</sup>.

Not only that but schools across North America started to be named after her in order to forever preserve her story and help her keep being an example for black pupils.

In terms of her legacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the domino effect makes it clear that it would be difficult today to understand and interpret certain important current events such as the "Black Lives Matter" movement without acknowledging the roots of these protests.

Behind the fury of people screaming for their rights, there are writers such as Wheatley who taught them this perseverance and reminded them of their potential while they were still alive. So, today's militants can be considered the great-grandchildren of all these extraordinary personalities who started a rebellion when slavery was still a legalized cage.

The fact that for years and centuries, certain names never die, means that the people are the greatest sector of an activist's legacy. Being able to influence future generations who did not even know you personally but keep advocating and defending your words and history is a guarantee that history has been made.

This paper tried to point out in different occasions that Wheatley's voice was crucial in not only defending black people's rights but also in making them raise awareness about their own strength and potential.

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<sup>85</sup> Robyn Reid, "LibGuides: Phillis Wheatley Peters: Legacies," libguides.tcu.edu, August 23, 2023, [https://libguides.tcu.edu/phillis\\_wheatley\\_peters/legacies](https://libguides.tcu.edu/phillis_wheatley_peters/legacies).

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

If we were to consider her career as a poet for example, by being one of the first important names of Black Literature, she represented the beacon of hope and inspiration for countless artists who had the courage to experiment, reveal their work and pave a path for their people.

It is important to remember that black authors that we read today owe a lot to their ancestors. As mentioned beforehand, many of them confirmed it publicly that they had to read the writings of Frederick Douglass or Sojourner Truth or Phillis Wheatley in this case to understand better the views they were defending.

As for the future, she keeps being an inspiration also because there are still new children stories emerging based on her biography.<sup>87</sup>

Some examples are *A Voice Of Her Own: The Story Of Phillis Wheatley, Slave Poet* (2003) by Katheryn Lasky and illustrated by Paul Lee or also *Phillis's Big Test* (2008) by Catherine Clinton and illustrated by Sean Qualls or even *Poet Laureate of the American Revolution* (2017) by Richard Kigel.

This is probably the clearest demonstration that her voice and legacy keep being unperishable and promise a bright future because her fame has an unstoppable pace.

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<sup>87</sup> Eva Siegelova, "The Legacy of Phillis Wheatley" (2020), Masaryk University, [https://is.muni.cz/th/atlsp/The\\_Legacy\\_of\\_Phillis\\_Wheatley\\_Final\\_Thesis\\_2020\\_.pdf](https://is.muni.cz/th/atlsp/The_Legacy_of_Phillis_Wheatley_Final_Thesis_2020_.pdf).



## Conclusion

To sum up, this thesis focused on a different and innovative approach to claim the right to freedom. Phillis Wheatley is the figure who displayed a marvelous example of how the communication can be a golden *Passepartout*, no matter the circumstances.

With a nefarious past characterized by abandonment and enslavement, she followed the path of education and decided to stick to it, mastering her language and behaviors. These were the foundations for her character and for her success which continues to echo even today, numerous years later.

What is noteworthy of her story has always been her grace and attentive dedication to her career. The poet was a prodigy and cultivated her talent despite the misogynist and racist environment she was placed in. It was what motivated her even more and gave her the strength to keep going and realize that she was meant for much more and was able to achieve it.

The most significant trial for her was the Middle Passage that she had to endure because it was the first transition which catapulted her into a new life, the one of a slave for the Wheatley's. Secondly, the trial in which she was forced to present her works propelled her out of her small circle and offered her a worldwide recognition.

It is interesting to see how the two hardest events of her life represented two big opportunities to build foundations for who she was. The writer grew as an example of resilience and flexibility.

The first quality can be seen also in her personality as an activist because she never lost hope for freedom, despite the atrocities she witnessed from a very young age in the voyage towards America. In her poems, she mentions her status but never with bitter nor hostile words. Wheatley always resorted to peace, delicacy and elegance. Her style with Augustan influences and religious fervor made her be loved and respected by the readership and this is how she also made them change their minds over some of the toxic and deeply rooted narratives.

It could be said that she was an all-round artist and a countercurrent, soft and value-oriented soul. For this exact reason, she is labelled as one of the most significant campaigners of her time and of Black history but despite her contributions with her poems and the infinite possibilities to focus on that career, she decided to stick to writing.

However, even this was a big act of activism and when she had offers to travel instead, she preferred to use her own means and stay true to herself as a writer more than a militant. All

these were proofs of her loyalty to her destiny as a poet and her burning desire to grow as a literate.

Lastly, a big example of her profile as a literate is the poem which this thesis analyzed, i.e. *On Virtue*, which explores the theme of values, it explains what they meant for the writer.

The composition is a confirmation of what was aforementioned about the writer since it displays an extremely elegant and refined style with classical details and reminiscences.

Secondly, the thematic nucleus reveals how dear also the Christian values were for Wheatley and the role they played in inspiring her during her creative moments.

The young woman puts Virtue on a pedestal and she shows it as what has always been her guide to arrive where she was in that moment.

Phillis Wheatley wrote about freedom and kindness but more than that she also impersonated these qualities; not only wrote but she lived her own poetical writings and formulated authentic poetry.

To conclude, in order to fulfill their didactical aim, history and literature should try to dig deeper into who the central figures of a specific time period were as human beings.

As it can be noticed even with Wheatley, the young literate was much more than a poet and to utterly comprehend her writings and especially her success, her past and personality must be explored.

The risk to make history repeat itself is always exceedingly high and therefore a different approach is needed, a more sensible one with different focuses and also with different protagonists to focus on. The battle for freedom and the right to liberty are certainly complex themes but the writer presented in this thesis was crucial in understanding them better. The real and difficult path to emancipation and education is now more visible through stories like this one than by knowing the dates in which slavery ended or blacks could access schools. Behind those numbers, there is always a long journey of battles, determination, hope and example given to the future generations and behind the freedom gained by the Afro Americans and their possibility to enter the literary world, there is Phillis Wheatley's story.



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## ITALIAN SUMMARY

L'abolizione della schiavitù e il cambio di prospettiva nei confronti del popolo Afroamericano è da sempre uno dei temi più studiati a scuola. Sarebbe però utile chiedersi come viene insegnato e se questo sia il metodo giusto. Ciò che si reitera maggiormente sono date, leggi e nomi di politici bianchi e benestanti. Tuttavia, poca o quasi nulla è l'attenzione dedicata ai veri protagonisti posti dietro le quinte, ovvero coloro che, nonostante le loro condizioni di sottomissione, si sono battuti per anni con la loro voce, modellandola invece che alzarla.

Phillis Wheatley Peters è un nome centrale in questo contesto in quanto fu la prima donna Afroamericana a pubblicare un proprio libro di poesie. Durante tutta la sua vita ha incarnato un esempio di grazia ed eleganza, tanto che ha suscitato una considerevole incredulità tra gli esperti letterari dell'epoca, che l'ha poi obbligata a presentarsi davanti ad un processo per dimostrare la titolarità delle sue opere.

Di conseguenza, la sua lotta era duplice: da un lato combatteva per essere riconosciuta come artista e dall'altro per essere accettata come essere umano. Il suo caso è di estrema importanza in quanto non si trattava di mera perplessità bensì di puro razzismo.

La mentalità vigente non concepiva la popolazione di origine africana come umani di pari livello e quindi le facoltà cognitive non erano associate a questo popolo. Si trattava della base epistemica che permetteva l'intero e nefasto sistema di schiavitù. Proprio attraverso questa giustificazione, infatti, i bianchi si sentiva autorizzati a trattare le persone di colore come animali e ricorrere ad uno sfruttamento ed una violenza senza precedenti. Riconoscere che Phillis Wheatley era una poetessa a tutti gli effetti e dal grande talento, dunque, significava ammettere che la popolazione afroamericana fosse uguale a tutti gli altri.

### **LA BIOGRAFIA**

Phillis Wheatley nacque attorno al 1753 nell'Africa occidentale. Nel 1761 però, fu rapita da dei trafficanti di schiavi per essere venduta nell'America del Nord.

Fu esposta quindi alle atrocità del "Middle Passage", ovvero la tratta atlantica degli schiavi africani. Questa era una componente chiave della rotta commerciale triangolare. Il vertice da cui aveva inizio tutto erano i beni provenienti dall'Europa come le armi, l'alcol e i tessuti che venivano portati nel continente africano in cambio di schiavi. Le coste occidentali erano infatti spesso denominate "Coste della Schiavitù".

Si stima che dal 1517 al 1867 circa 12.5 milioni di individui furono presi in ostaggio e obbligati a salire sulle imbarcazioni che li avrebbero condotti in un viaggio costellato di insidie, pericoli e maltrattamenti. Questo percorso aveva delle serie conseguenze psicologiche oltre che materiali.



In primo luogo, infatti, è necessario ribadire che i livelli di ansia e stress erano vertiginosamente alti dall'inizio poiché nessuno veniva informato su ciò che sarebbe avvenuto. Gli ostaggi si ritrovavano in pochissimo tempo su una barca, legati, picchiati e derisi verso una destinazione sconosciuta. Nessuno sapeva quanto sarebbe durato il viaggio, né cosa li attendeva una volta ipoteticamente arrivati lì.

Moltissimi nutrivano la convinzione che sarebbero stati vittime di cannibalismo e dalla paura e molto spesso anche dalla stanchezza di una prigionia così disumana, optavano per il suicidio. Quest'ultimo era la prima causa di morte che riduceva il numero di prigionieri a bordo. Altre cause di decesso erano il dolore fisico causato dalle posizioni in cui venivano legati e il pochissimo spazio a disposizione che non permetteva nessun accenno di movimento oltre che le malattie. Queste ultime erano inevitabili considerate le scarse condizioni di igiene, la mancanza di tutela, il fisico indebolito e la condizione psicologica allarmante.

Così gli ostaggi si ritrovavano a dover far fronte ad uno scenario da incubo tra tempeste, infermità e attacchi da parte di pirati.

Il viaggio era interminabile per cui era ricorrenza comune che fossero obbligati anche a intrattenere il capitano e gli schiavisti. La famigerata danza del "Limbo", infatti, nasce proprio in questo contesto.

I sequestrati venivano frustati per ballare e in caso di ricompensa per un'attività o danza svolta bene si offriva dell'alcol. È tuttavia, chiaro che si trattava di uno stratagemma duplice; da un lato si cercava di distrarli dagli istinti suicidi mantenendoli occupati e dall'altro li si abituava all'obbedienza.

La tratta atlantica, infatti, altro non era che una palestra per ciò che li avrebbe attesi dopo. La paura, la violenza, l'umiliazione e la manipolazione erano tutti aspetti che avrebbero fatto parte del loro quotidiano. Perciò è più corretto spiegare che gli schiavi vivevano la condizione di schiavitù molto prima di toccare l'America.

Phillis Wheatley è l'esempio più lampante di questo concetto poiché la sua stessa identità si basa su questo capitolo della sua vita. Infatti, il suo vero nome non era "Phillis" ma le era stato dato questo appellativo poiché l'imbarcazione su cui lei era stata fatta salire si chiamava così.

Questo denota anche come un individuo veniva "cancellato" come essere umano con una storia di vita precedente per essere marchiato con un nuovo nome e prezzo per essere venduto.

Era solo l'inizio perché poi il processo di alienazione continuava una volta assegnati a dei proprietari, i quali non offrivano mai informazioni sullo schiavo. Quest'ultimo era solito farsi domande sulla propria provenienza e famiglia ma non era destinato a trovare risposte.

Phillis fu acquistata dalla famiglia Wheatley che le diede il cognome e il consenso di studiare.

Tuttavia, si trattava di una pura eccezione, oltre che fortuna. La maggior parte, se non la totalità degli schiavi veniva violentemente punita al farsi anche solo trovare vicino a libri e giornali.

Un classico esempio è sicuramente Frederick Douglass, uno degli abolizionisti più famosi della storia che dovette imparare a leggere e scrivere di nascosto poiché la famiglia presso cui lavorava aveva stabilito dei limiti ben chiari. Il suo padrone, infatti, pronunciò una frase che poi Douglass trascrisse molti anni dopo nella sua bibliografia, ovvero "Se insegni ad uno schiavo a leggere, diventerà per

sempre incapace di svolgere il suo lavoro”. In queste parole si trova la chiave: l’educazione portava alla libertà.

Erano i padroni stessi ad essere i primi preoccupati a non offrire una via verso l’istruzione dal momento che li avrebbe resi liberi per sempre.

Ad ogni modo, Phillis Wheatley riuscì a imparare a leggere e a scrivere e si rivelò ben presto un prodigio che scriveva poesie dall’età di 14 anni.

La sua condizione fisica fragile che le impediva di lavorare come gli altri servi e la sua abilità da scrittrice disegnò presto una linea di confine tra lei e gli altri impiegati presso la famiglia Wheatley che non passò inosservata e la portò ad essere emarginata dagli altri lavoratori.

Tuttavia, un’opportunità sotto le vesti di un colpo di sfortuna le si presentò ben presto. Nel 1773, venne portata per la sua salute cagionevole in Inghilterra dal figlio dei Wheatley, Nathanael.

Qui ebbe la possibilità di entrare a contatto con i circoli letterari dell’epoca nonché incontrare importantissime personalità di spicco, tra cui il monarca che manifestò il desiderio di conoscerla.

L’incontro purtroppo non avvenne poiché la giovane scrittrice doveva far ritorno in America, dove chiese a Nathanael di essere liberata una volta per tutte, poiché nonostante il privilegio, non aveva dimenticato o, meglio, non aveva mai accettato il suo status da schiava.

Indipendentemente dalle concessioni, nel 1773, quando riuscì a pubblicare il suo primo libro: una raccolta di tutte le sue opere, nel frontespizio c’era ancora il suo nome (ovvero quello dell’imbarcazione), il cognome (datole dai suoi proprietari) e l’appellativo “slave”, cioè “schiava”.

Nessuna manipolazione sarebbe mai stata abbastanza da farla confondere o dimenticare che non era una donna libera perché non importa la strada che aveva percorso, si trovava ancora all’interno di una gabbia e lo sapeva benissimo.

Gli stessi Wheatley ne erano consapevoli e per questo furono costretti a concederle la libertà: la giovane ragazza ormai era matura, determinata e con un potenziale evidente.

Era ovvio a tutti che l’artista era pronta per la sua battaglia a luci accese: si liberò dalle catene e il suo libro ormai era nelle mani di circoli elitari, privilegiati e lontani dalla posizione da cui proveniva lei.

La pubblicazione però portò ad una serie di dubbi tra i letterati che non credevano alle testimonianze della poetessa. Sembrava assurdo che una ragazza appena maggiorenne e cresciuta in schiavitù potesse aver scritto certi testi. Ed è qui che iniziò la vera lotta per il titolo di scrittrice, nonché la sua carriera da artista.

## **LO STILE**

Phillis Wheatley fu da sempre esposta ad un’influenza neoclassica. Crescendo lesse Omero, Virgilio e Alexander Pope e non sembrava esserci traccia di autori afroamericani. Di conseguenza, la giustificazione di molti che non credevano alla paternità delle sue opere era che non avesse mai espresso

nei suoi testi una nota personale, che richiamasse uno stile africano. Ma come poteva aver sviluppato influenze africane se per anni a questa popolazione fu negato leggere e scrivere?

La verità era che la scrittrice non poteva manifestare influssi della sua terra d'origine proprio perché non esistevano tracce o erano rare oppure ancora nascoste.

Se alla stessa Wheatley era stato chiesto di presentarsi ad un processo per dimostrare la titolarità dei suoi scritti perché pareva impossibile che provenissero da una ragazza di colore, come le si poteva chiedere di altri autori della sua cultura?

A questo punto inoltre è importante anche sottolineare un altro aspetto: il privilegio modellato che le era stato concesso. È vero che all'autrice fu permesso leggere e le venne offerto un insegnamento attraverso i figli dei suoi padroni., ma che educazione era? Di stampa euro-americana.

La giovane scrittrice non aveva mai potuto esplorare le sue radici, conoscerle e riscoprirsi.

L'unico ricordo offuscato che dichiarò di avere di sua madre riguardava la preghiera. Wheatley affermò infatti di ricordarsi la figura del genitore piegarsi e inginocchiarsi diverse volte la mattina per rivolgersi al Creatore. Questo indizio rivela che molto probabilmente la poetessa appartenesse originariamente ad una famiglia musulmana; eppure, anni dopo si è ritrovata a leggere la Bibbia sotto suggerimento dei suoi proprietari e mostrare un'influenza decisamente Protestante nelle sue opere.

Tale concetto deve far riflettere ulteriormente sull'identità e la vita che la scrittrice si era costruita e su quello che ne poteva derivare a livello poetico.

Vi è una contraddizione di base se si impedisce all'essere umano di mantenere le proprie radici e poi lo si colpevolizza per non esibirle apertamente. Ancora una volta, la popolazione bianca e privilegiata dimostra come è artefice di problematiche e circoli viziosi che successivamente affida come colpe di popoli che in realtà ne sono le vittime.

Proprio per questo motivo la storia di Phillis Wheatley venne riscoperta negli anni e continua a destare scalpore ancora oggi: è una biografia che illustra molto chiaramente tutti i tasselli della schiavitù e della mentalità razzista che ha permesso a questo schema di perpetuarsi per secoli.

Il giorno in cui la giovane letterata venne sottoposta al celebre processo riguardo la paternità delle sue opere, 18 giudici erano presenti. Erano tutti uomini, decisamente più anziani e privilegiati rispetto a lei. La ragazza fu automaticamente posta in una posizione di subordinazione e disagio; era sotto l'occhio di un semicerchio di menti letterate ma anche razziste. Molti di loro, infatti, quali Charles Chauncy o Thomas Hubbard, uno degli schiavisti più famosi nutrivano idee che andavano contro i passi avanti che Phillis Wheatley tentava di compiere.

Non si sa molto altro su quanto accadde quel giorno, poiché non fu trascritto nulla riguardante il test a cui la giovane fu sottoposta. Tutto quel che si sa è che riuscì a superarlo e conquistare la gloria.

## **ON VIRTUE: la poesia**

Per comprendere meglio i suoi lavori e l'artista che era diventata, risulta necessario esaminare uno dei suoi testi. In questo caso, il componimento che meglio rappresenta la sua personalità è "On Virtue" (trad. "Sulla Virtù").

Il soggetto della poesia è dunque quella caratteristica per la quale Wheatley divenne famosa. Nel testo stesso, l'autrice si presenta come un io lirico che conversa con la virtù, la paragona ad un gioiello, ponendola su un piedistallo e affermando che la mente umana non sarà mai in grado di concepire questa qualità del tutto.

Perciò successivamente si rivolge alla propria anima e le chiede di non disperare poiché la ricerca della virtù è un percorso che porta verso Dio.

Questa connessione divina fu anche quel che le fece guadagnare il rispetto dai lettori. Nell'indicare che un atteggiamento virtuoso era molto più che una regola del codice etico, era infatti un comportamento indicato dal Signore, il pubblico si sentiva vicino alla scrittrice poiché si andava a toccare un denominatore comune.

In secondo luogo, diveniva più difficile contraddirla perché mettere in discussione le sue idee quando avevano uno sfondo religioso significava porre in dubbio la parola Divina.

Phillis Wheatley ovviamente era consapevole di ciò. Infatti, se è vero da un lato che il suo carattere pacato, cortese e bonario era parte della sua persona, dall'altro faceva anche parte del suo profilo come artista esperta.

La giovane scrittrice sapeva bene che operava su un campo minato. Il suo non era il momento più favorevole per esibire il talento di una ragazza di sangue africano. Di conseguenza serviva procedere con cautela e moderazione. Il tono calmo e l'influenza cristiana erano due punti forti che l'avrebbero aiutata nel suo percorso. Lei si batté sempre per la libertà, l'uguaglianza e i pari diritti ma non scendendo in piazza a protestare o ricorrendo alla violenza: sapeva benissimo che non era quella la chiave. Wheatley voleva dimostrare il perché il popolo Afroamericano combatteva così duramente per essere posti sullo stesso piano. La questione non era solo chiedere un diritto ma mostrare di meritarselo.

Per anni impiegò tutta la sua energia nel mostrare come nonostante la giovane età, nonostante fosse una donna e soprattutto nonostante fosse una schiava, aveva le stesse capacità di un uomo che sedeva nei circoli letterari da anni, grazie al vento alle spalle che lei non aveva avuto.

Inoltre, la poetessa per saper parlare era eccezionale innanzitutto nell'ascoltare e prestare attenzione. Di fatto, era ben cosciente del fatto che, se già l'astio nei confronti degli afroamericani raggiungeva livelli pericolosamente alti, usare toni adirati per chiedere un

qualcosa che già i privilegiati non erano disposti a concedere, significava firmare per un fallimento.

La potenza di Wheatley fu da eccezionale scrittrice, mostrare il potere della parola e come modellando il tono si riesce a entrare in qualsiasi stanza nonostante le porte chiuse da millenni. Di conseguenza, ad oggi non si parla di un'eredità lasciataci da lei ma di molteplici. Considerando che durante la sua vita, si batté su diversi fronti, incarnando diversi ruoli, ad oggi è più corretto parlare di innumerevoli eredità che ci sono state concesse da questa personalità e che vanno mantenute con cura.

Fortunatamente, il suo spirito continua ad essere centrale al giorno d'oggi così come lo è stato per anni.

Se nel dopoguerra, fu riscoperta ed esibita come fonte di orgoglio dagli afroamericani, oggi rivive con il Black Lives Matter o in libri addirittura per bambini che raccontano la sua storia e rimangono una ispirazione per le future generazioni.

Per concludere, le materie scolastiche ed accademiche dovrebbero certamente scavare più a fondo quando si tratta di affrontare la tematica della schiavitù e delle disparità di diritti.

È difficile estirpare una lezione profonda ed insegnamenti significativi quando i fattori esposti sono solo numeri freddi, date e politici anonimi. Serve entrare nella storia delle vittime, conoscere il significato delle tragedie, vivere un centesimo di quelle emozioni che hanno vissuto loro e lasciarsi trasportare dal loro esempio di coraggio e resilienza.

È solo così che si può dire di studiare storia affinché questa non si ripeta ed è solo così che si studia la letteratura per rimanerne ispirati e arricchirsi dai propri avi.

## RINGRAZIAMENTI

Alla mia relatrice, che mi ha seguito e supportato, nonostante fossi a distanza e nonostante gli impegni.

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