

# Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



## *On Being Brought from Africa to America*

'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,  
Taught my benighted soul to understand  
That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:  
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.  
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,  
"Their colour is a diabolic die."  
Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain,  
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

Phillis Wheatley<sup>1</sup>

### **Reflections**

Phillis Wheatley was the first ever African-American to be published, the mother of literature by people of African descent. Many of her poems offer nuanced and Christian-themed commentary on the treatment of slaves; other work confronts head on issues of racism, sexism, and colonialism. She was sold into slavery when she was seven or eight years of age and transported to North America from West Africa (most likely present-day Gambia). She endured the Middle Passage and was sold as a domestic slave to the Wheatley family in Boston, Massachusetts. She was taught to read and write and her owners encouraged her early poetry, offering Phillis an unprecedented education for an enslaved woman.

In her short life, she became famous around the world and was paraded in the United States and abroad as an "African genius." After her death at the age of 31, critics—most notoriously Thomas Jefferson—began to reassess and question her literary significance. Of course, now, her esteemed place in literary history is more secure than ever and there is no overstating her extraordinary life and her remarkable impact.

Written around 1767, this poem is one of her more well-known and one of her more curious. The use of the word "mercy" is especially noteworthy. Considering that she was separated from her family and sold into slavery as a child, how is it that the narrative of her life is merciful? How can cruelty and violence be interpreted as an act of mercy? Some have argued that it was the Wheatleys' compassion and their commitment to her education—specifically, her Christian education—that was proof of salvation and mercy (though that her

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<sup>1</sup> "On Being Brought from Africa to America" by Phillis Wheatley. Public domain.

owners would also be her saviors is of course a complicated relationship to unpack. That slavery was somehow a *benefit* because it led her to Christianity is a difficult idea.) In other poems, Wheatley is much less conflicted, much clearer about the cruel fate of black people, and much more explicit in her disdain for the institution of slavery.

I appreciate the tension between darkness and light, especially in a poem about the color of skin. To be “benighted” is to be overtaken by darkness or to be in a state of moral or intellectual ignorance. Here, she connects a soul that is unenlightened (and a life that is disenfranchised) to other negative connotations about literal and figurative darkness; in other words, dark skin is associated with a dark soul and, consequently, a hopeless life.

Considering that her audience would have been almost entirely white (and Christian), the contrast of light and dark (read good and evil) is obvious. Indeed, a “sable” race is a black race and the word choice here (which reminds us, too, of the weasel-like mammal, the sable, hunted for its dark fur) underscores the “diabolic die” many of her readers would have assumed Phillis Wheatley possessed. “Die” instead of “dye” is, of course, an ingenious sleight-of-hand. It’s a devilish question: did she intend *die* as in death? or *die* as in engraving? or *die* as an alternate spelling of *dye*?

With that imperative “Remember, Christians” in the final couplet, Wheatley assumes an authoritative stance, daring to tell—if not to scold—Christians about what they should already know. She reminds them of Cain, son of Adam and Eve, killer of his younger brother Abel, and whom the Lord condemns to wander the earth as a fugitive. Wheatley scholars surmise that she might have presumed that the curse and mark of Cain was his “blackness.” She also reminds us that Cain, though the first murderer, is also protected by God. And just as we will all “join th’ angelic train” so too may we be “refin’d”—cultivated, redeemed, freed from moral impurities.

It’s a deceptive poem in some ways; its exact rhyme scheme and its brevity may mislead some to think it is simple or straightforward. But Wheatley’s work is subtle, nuanced, and incredibly deliberate in word choice and diction—in other words, excellent.

### ✂ About the poet

Phillis Wheatley is commemorated nationwide—from the Boston Women’s Heritage Trail to the Phillis Wheatley YMCA in Washington, D.C. She was considered the abolitionists’ illustrative example of artistic and intellectual possibility. Though her name was a household word and her famed achievements a catalyst for the antislavery movement, her life was chronically difficult. She suffered from health problems and died young, uncared for and alone, while her husband was incarcerated in a debtor’s prison. All three of their children died in infancy, the third one in time to be buried with his mother.



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