

Phillis Wheatley, Young Revolutionary Poet **Teacher's Guide**

Introduction

This Teacher's Guide provides a framework for using *Phillis Wheatley, Young Revolutionary Poet* in the classroom as a vehicle to engage students and weave literature into multiple content areas.

The Guide offers many suggestions for interdisciplinary activities that students can do before, during, and after they read the book. These learner-centered activities help students move from solely a comprehension, or knowledge-based way of thinking about historical fiction, to higher levels of critical thought that include analysis and evaluation.

Before Reading

1. Before starting any unit of study, it's a good idea to assess what students already know, or think they know, about the subject. If students have at least some knowledge of Wheatley or her accomplishments, draw a three-column chart on the blackboard with the headings: *What We Know About Phillis Wheatley*, *What We Want to Know*, and *What We Learned*.

Ask students to respond only to the first two columns. After reading the book and doing some or all of the After Reading activities, revisit the chart with the class to complete the third column (*What We Learned*) and to correct any erroneous information in the first column.

2. If students have no knowledge of Wheatley or her accomplishments, you can have them begin reading the book without any prior discussion, or you can review the historical timeframe that the book covers (approximately 1761-1776), including the early slave trade, colonial period, Stamp Act, Boston Tea Party, and the formation of the Continental Congress. You might want to create a timeline of these important events in American history or have students create their own as they read through the book.

During Reading

While many teachers prefer that students read a book without interruption, others opt to conduct mini-assessments along the way.

1. Have students keep an ongoing literature journal in which they can write about what they're reading and keep an ongoing vocabulary list of unfamiliar words or phrases. You might also wish to provide writing prompts to help students think about what they're reading and to make connections to their own lives.
Example writing prompts:

- What are some of Phillis’s qualities, or personality traits that you think helped to shape who she became as an adult? What personality traits did she have that you didn’t like? Why? What are some of YOUR best qualities, or traits of which you are most proud?
 - As you read the book, what kinds of conclusions can you make about whether or not the story of Phillis’s life is true? Do you think some events were made up just to tell an entertaining story? What specific examples in the book can you find to support your ideas?
 - (For older students) The story begins with Phillis being bought as a slave for the Wheatley family. Although the story doesn’t describe the treatment of slaves, how do you think Phillis’s childhood experiences as a slave effected her life as an adult? How did the experiences shape her views about life? What kinds of experiences have you had in your life that have shaped your views about things?
2. As students read the book, be sure to keep a world map posted so that they can identify each colony and country mentioned.
 3. As they read, have students identify figures of speech (e.g., metaphors and similes), phrases of alliteration, analogies, and language of the time period (e.g., *thou, set-to, by thunder*).
 4. Read Wheatley’s poems aloud and discuss their meanings. (Portions of three poems can be found at the end of Chapters 7, 8, and 10.)

After Reading

Historical fiction provides wonderful opportunities to weave and blend literature into many different content areas in meaningful ways. Following are a handful of ways for you to integrate a study of Phillis Wheatley in your classroom. Although they are organized by content areas, we encourage you to move across content lines to blend them in natural ways AND to encourage your students to conduct further research on any specific topics of interest.

Assessment: All of the activities can be assessed in traditional ways (i.e., with quizzes and letter grading systems) to determine how well students can memorize and can recount facts. However, since these activities are rooted in discovery, discussion, communication, and collaboration, they lend themselves to more holistic types of assessment that measure achievement of academic skills, behaviors, and even social/emotional growth. We encourage you to use one or more of the following alternative assessments as students complete the activities.

- **Portfolios**—Keep one portfolio of work for each student to measure progress over a specific period of time. Portfolios are a great aid for both student/teacher and parent/teacher conferences. Encourage students to participate in selecting

samples of writing, artwork, research notes, etc. to be included in their portfolios.

- **Rubrics**— Create a rubric, or chart (with or without grades or a numerical grading scale) to assess whether or not students have met specific standards and learning goals that you have previously identified.
- **Self-Assessment**—Hold regular teacher/student interviews to listen to students evaluate their own progress and skills.
- **Peer-Assessment**—Have students give and receive constructive feedback to assess such things as collaborative group work and to critique writing.
- **Anecdotal Notes**—As students work individually or in teams, make informal observations of how they solve problems, think critically, conduct research, work with others, and synthesize newly learned information. Add your notes to students' portfolios and share them during parent/teacher conferences.

Language Arts Connections

1. Discuss ways in which the author sets the time period and includes historical events and people in the text. Have students try their own hands at writing short historical fiction.
2. Latin and Greek were required subjects for children living in the early colonies—from childhood all the way through college. (It was not common for enslaved children to be educated as Phillis was; she was taught to read English and the basics of Latin.) Have students learn common Latin and Greek root words. Create a class chart showing the root word, its meaning, and examples of modern English words. Example: the Latin root word *fac* means *to do or make*, as in *factory* and *manufacture*.
3. In Chapter 5, Phillis reads stories of “heathen gods and goddesses,” a reference to Greek mythology. Read aloud abridged versions of the Greek myths or have students read them online at Bullfinch’s Mythology, the Age of Fable: <http://www.bulfinch.org/fables/welcome.html>. Ask students why they think Phillis enjoyed reading them.
4. Students can see a photograph of Phillis’s published book at the online American Treasures exhibit on the Library of Congress website: A Voice of Her Own (Imagination) <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/tri013.html>. Call attention to Phillis’s credit on the title page and circling the portrait facing the title page of her book *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*: “Phillis Wheatley, Negro Servant to Mr. John Wheatley, of Boston, in New England.”
5. Older students who wish to read some or all of Wheatley’s published poems can go to the University of North Carolina’s site: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/wheatley/menu.html>. Click “Html File,” then scroll

down to read her poems. The language of the time period makes her poems quite challenging, so students will mostly likely need much teacher guidance when attempting to discern their meanings.

6. Silhouette drawing was a traditional colonial craft. Have students draw a silhouette of Phillis or any other character and write adjectives inside the silhouette which describe that character. Around the outside of the silhouette, provide documentation from the book to support each adjective.
7. In Chapter 6, mention is made of an almanac. Have students research colonial almanacs and then create one of their own in the style of *Poor Richard's Almanac*, first published in the 1750s.

Social Studies Connections

1. Have students work individually or in pairs to complete the **WebQuest**. They will follow Web site links to gather information about historical events during Wheatley's life, and then write a poem about a selected event. Then, they will gather information on the Web about current events and write another poem about a topical issue of interest. If desired, have students compile their poems into a class poetry book.
2. The issues of slavery are not discussed in detail in the book. Readers get only a brief glimpse, in Chapter 3, when Sophie, another slave owned by the Wheatley family, alludes to the beatings that slaves endured and also threatens Phillis with being returned to a former owner if she doesn't please the Wheatleys. It is important to help students understand that although Phillis's experience might have been somewhat different from most slaves—because she was provided education by the Wheatley family—she was, in fact, kidnapped from her home in West Africa and sold into slavery until the Wheatleys freed her in the late 1770s.

Older students can conduct their own research to learn more about the African slave trade. A good place to start is the *African-American Odyssey* collection of primary sources at the Library of Congress, National Digital Library site: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aahtml>. There they can also listen to amazing audio recordings of former slaves recounting their lives in their own words. Another excellent site, *Africans in America*, has resources for both students and teachers: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/title.html>

3. The story is packed with historical references to several major events in American history (i.e., the battle of Bunker Hill, Stamp Act, Navigation Act, Sugar Act, Boston Tea Party, Continental Congress) and notable people in history (e.g., Sons of Liberty, Redcoats, Samuel Adams, George Washington).

Divide students into teams to conduct research and write about these important events and people. Compile all writing into a class American History Guide, complete with a timeline.

4. Although not mentioned by name in the story, the Intolerable Acts (strict laws imposed on the colonists, by Britain, as punishment for the Boston Tea Party) were the reason colonial leaders formed the first Continental Congress. Have students investigate the Intolerable Acts in more depth and determine why all the colonies, except for Georgia, send delegates.
5. Help students to understand the dependence on and relationship between England and the colonists. Discuss the conflicts between the colonists and the British in the years leading up to the Declaration of Independence. Encourage students to think about such things as the concept of “taxation without representation” and Britain’s trade restrictions. Ask students why they think the colonists didn’t trust the British, and vice-versa. Students may want to hold a class debate, with one side representing the views of the British and the other side, the views of the colonists.
6. The Wheatley family lived in Massachusetts, one of the Northern, or New England colonies. Divide students into teams to research and compare the Middle Atlantic and Southern colonies with the Northern colonies. (They might wish to create tables or Venn diagrams to compare similarities and differences among these three regions). Be sure students understand that the seaport towns of the Northern colonies, like Boston, were the hubs of fish and fur trading and shipbuilding, while the economies of Southern colonies (e.g., Georgia, South Carolina) were centered around growing such crops as cotton, rice, and tobacco on huge plantations. Students can create a chart or map showing when each of the thirteen original colonies was founded and by whom. They can add illustrations to depict each colony’s main trade or crop.
7. Dramatize any of the historic events mentioned in the book.

Science Connections

1. In Chapter 5, Mrs. Wheatley announces that she will no longer prepare baked beans because it requires molasses which she refuses to buy as long as England taxes it. (See Math Connections, #1.) Molasses, made of pure sugar cane juice, was the major sweetener used for cooking and baking in colonial America because it was less expensive than sugar. Colonists often made taffy candy with molasses, gathering in the evenings for taffy pulling parties! Have students make their own taffy to learn some of the science behind candy-making. Ask them to predict what they think will happen during each stage of the candy-making process and why. What chemical/molecular structure

changes do they think will happen when the sugar and molasses are heated?
What does stretching or pulling do to the candy?

Ingredients

- 1 cup granulated sugar
- 1 cup brown sugar
- 2 cups molasses
- 3/4 cup water
- 1/4 cup butter
- 1/8 tsp soda
- 1/4 tsp salt
- (optional) 3 drops vanilla or peppermint extract

Directions

Add sugars, molasses, and water to a saucepan and stir over heat until melted. Boil sugar solution until a candy thermometer reaches 265 degrees Fahrenheit. Stir frequently to prevent burning. Remove from the stove and add the remaining ingredients. Stir, making sure to mix well.

Pour out candy onto greased pans and let it cool until the candy begins to stiffen at the edges. Roll the candy into a large ball, using a spatula. Rub clean hands with a little butter and begin to pull and stretch the taffy. Continue pulling until the candy is easy to stretch. Make a long rope of the taffy, twist it, and cut into small pieces with a scissors. Wrap individual pieces in waxed paper.

2. In Chapter 4, Mr. Wheatley is concerned that Phillis's chills and shivering are "ague," a common symptom of diseases like malaria. Colonial-era medicine is a fascinating study for older students. Some of the methods used, like blood-letting—cutting a patient to make him or her "bleed out" the disease—are considered quite barbaric by today's standards. But other forms of colonial medicine are still used today, including medicinal herbs and teas, massage, and aromatherapy. Students can read about some Colonial-era medicine on the American Revolution site which contains the text of a medical book published in 1785.: <http://www.americanrevolution.org/medicine.html>. Students can create a table or other graphic organizer to compare how diseases and illnesses were treated in the 1700s with treatments today.
3. Create natural dyes from berries and plants and use them to dye cloth, as the colonists did using indigo plants.
4. The story mentions the cold winters in Boston. Create a Venn diagram to compare the ways in which the Wheatley family warmed their home and themselves with the ways in which we do so today.

5. In Chapter 10, Phillis traveled by boat from Boston to England. Students can research and make models of historic sailing ships and then investigate the science behind ships. Example: How do ships float? What is the role of a rudder and propeller? How do ships navigate (yesterday and today)?
6. In Chapter 10, Phillis reported watching petrels and seeing porpoises whales, dolphins, sharks, and flying fish. Have students conduct research to determine what other marine mammals and fish live in the Atlantic Ocean.
7. Review simple machines (lever, pulley, wheel and axle, screw, inclined plane) and then challenge students to research, in texts and/or on the Internet, early American tools that used these simple machines and that would have been found in the Wheatley household. (Examples include the spinning wheel and bellows.)

Mathematics Connections

1. As students learn in the story, by about 1775, the British colonists were extremely unhappy with the laws being handed down by the British government, an ocean away from them. The British Parliament, in London, demanded that the colonists pay many taxes to them. (Colonists called this “taxation without representation” because colonists had to pay the Parliament, but couldn’t be elected into the Parliament). Have students investigate The Stamp Act (mentioned in Chapter 6) which forced colonists to pay a tax on almost everything they bought. What kinds of things were taxed and how much were those taxes? How do those historic taxes compare with the taxes we pay today? Why are we taxed? Where does the money go? Compare your city’s taxes with other cities and states. Who is taxed the least/most and why? What would happen if there was no tax in the United States? Would it be a good or bad thing? Why?
2. In Chapter 6, students learn what some things cost in colonial Boston. Invite them to try their hands at some colonial math by making up word problems for each other using the following equivalencies: 12 pence = 1 shilling; 20 shillings = 1 pound; 4 farthings = 1 penny. Students can also learn about (and weave into word problems) other early British currency including half pennies, crown, half crown, and guinea.
3. Investigate the cost of 18th century foods, tools, books, newspapers, and other household items.
4. Develop math skills through cooking by having students make popular recipes of the time period. Students can make such Wheatley family favorites as baked bean with molasses, cornbread, or apple pan dowdy, prepared by Phillis in

Chapter 13. This cobbler was very popular in colonial times and is still often made today, with a few updates on ingredients.

Apple Pan Dowdy

- 1 1/4 cup butter
- 2/3 cup sugar
- 1 egg
- 1 cup milk
- 2 1/2 c flour
- 3 tsp baking powder
- 1/2 tsp salt
- 4 cups peeled, sliced apples
- 1/3 cup brown sugar
- 2 tsp cinnamon
- 1/2 tsp nutmeg

Directions

Preheat an oven to 350 degrees. Combine the flour, baking powder, and salt and set aside.

Butter a 9" square baking dish. Place sliced apples in buttered dish and sprinkle with a mixture of brown sugar, cinnamon, and nutmeg.

In a separate bowl, cream butter and sugar until fluffy. Mix in egg. Add flour mixture, alternating with milk, beginning and ending with flour mixture. It should make a stiff batter. Spread batter evenly over the apples and bake for approximately 50 minutes, or until golden brown. Cool for at least ten minutes before cutting and serving. Cake can be and served right from the pan or, if desired, invert onto a serving plate as one would an upside-down cake, so the baked apple layer is on top.

5. Challenge students to determine the distance and probable length of time it took for Phillis to travel from Boston to England, and then back again. How long might a trip like that have taken in the 1700s? Days? Weeks? Months? How long would it take today?

Arts Connections

1. Create a mural on a large sheet of butcher paper to illustrate each chapter of the book. There are many detailed descriptions of scenes that students can envision and put on paper. Divide students into pairs or groups of three to create different segments of the class mural.

2. Phillis had her portrait painted in Chapter 11. Pair up students and have them pose for/paint one another's portraits over a period of a few days or weeks. Display the portraits around the classroom for all to enjoy.
3. In Chapter 13, we learn that the old elm tree, known as the Liberty Tree, was cut down by the British. Students can learn more about this famous tree where the Sons of Liberty gathered to protest the Stamp Act. The Sons of Liberty believed that these taxes were a means of censorship since they applied to newspapers, advertisements, and other publications. When the British seized Boston in 1775, they cut down the tree for firewood. This enraged the colonists who flew flags, with pictures of the Liberty Tree, during the battles of the American Revolution. The tree was a symbol of support for individual freedom. Have students paint a mural-sized Liberty Tree to hang in the classroom or create one out of papier-mâché.
4. The colonists brought many traditions from home, including having daily, late afternoon tea which consisted of tea, served with biscuits (plain cookies, like shortbread or scones), plain cakes or mince pies, and/or crust-less breads spread with butters or jams. Have students research and then prepare a typical English tea. They may wish to invite parents or other classes to join them.
5. In Chapter 8, students learn that the Wheatleys spun their own thread to make clothes, the result of continued taxes placed on the colonists. Students can try their own hand at spinning pieces of wool into yarn using a small drop spindle. Consider inviting into class a local spinner and weaver to share tools of the trade, teach techniques, and give demonstrations. (Contact a local weaving shop in your area.)
6. Learn about and then make such traditional colonial crafts as patchwork quilts, apple dolls, cornhusk dolls, pomander balls, knitted items, and embroidery samplers. Then barter the crafts at school; bartering for goods and services was common in the colonies.
7. The colonists often had to use just what nature provided them for their clothing, bedding, etc. Ask students to create one useful item made solely from what nature provides.