

Using Primary and Secondary Sources to Analyze “On Being Brought from Africa to America” (Phillis Wheatley)
Lesson Plan (1-2 days) for 11th Grade ELA

Designed by **K. McGriff**, using materials from **African Americans in the Making of Early New England (an NEH Landmarks of American History and Culture Workshop, presented by the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association)**

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS/MISSISSIPPI COLLEGE- AND CAREER-READY STANDARDS:

ELA-Literacy.L.11-12.4, ELA-Literacy.L.11-12.5, ELA-Literacy.L.11-12.6

ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1, ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.6, ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.9

ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1, ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.3

OBJECTIVE:

Students will read and analyze Phillis Wheatley’s poem “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” first generating their own summary of the claim the poem makes, then analyzing 2-3 conflicting critical interpretations of the poem and finally writing their own.

Note: The point of this lesson is fourfold. It (1) introduces students to the life and work of an important author in the American canon; (2) requires students to use traditional tools of the literary analysis of a poem and to (3) situate a piece of literature in its historical context; (4) exposes students to examples of literary criticism (which they are often asked to perform without having ever seen a model!).

BEFORE CLASS, STUDENTS WILL READ:

excerpts from “Phillis Wheatley,” in The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution & excerpts from Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage

or, for low-level readers: excerpts from A Voice of Her Own: The Story of Phillis Wheatley, Slave Poet

Note: Excerpts assigned for homework will include *only* biographical information about Phillis Wheatley, *not* examples of, or analysis of, her poetry.

RELEVANT VOCABULARY:

from “On Being Brought from Africa to America”

mercy, pagan, **benighted** (students will use context clues during/after reading to determine the meaning of this word), sought, **sable** (students will use context clues during/after reading to determine the meaning of this word), diabolic

from The Black Presence... and Biography of a Genius

reviled, **notoriety** (students will use context clues during/after reading to determine the meaning of this word), contemporaneous, appropriate/appropriation, hypocritical

from “Great African American Authors”

irony

POSSIBLE PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

What surprised you as you did the homework readings about the life of Phillis Wheatley? What about her life story is different from what you have learned in the past about American slavery, in Mississippi or elsewhere? What about Phillis Wheatley’s life story confirms or corroborates what you have learned in the past about American slavery?

A 2007 survey (Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life) found that 83% of black Americans identify as Christian – a significantly higher percentage than in the American population at large. Why? Why are so many black Americans Christians? Consider your own community and what you know about the racial and religious history of the United States.

How do we, living in 2017, know what slavery is like? From what kinds of sources do we get our information about it? What did enslaved people say about it? If you've not read the words of enslaved people about slavery – or even if you have – what do you imagine they would have said?

What would you expect a poem called “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” written by an enslaved woman in 1768, to be about? Before you have read it, what predictions do you have?

DIRECT INSTRUCTION 1:

Distribute copies of “On Being Brought from Africa to America.” Introduce vocabulary that students will encounter in the poem. Direct them to underline or mark the words “benighted” and “sable” on their copy of the poem; these words they'll determine the meaning of using context clues or other strategies from their vocabulary notebooks as they work on interpreting the poem.

Have students read the poem silently, then read it aloud and/or have a strong reader read it aloud to the class.

WORK PERIOD 1:

Direct students to work first independently; then confer with a partner/small group to write a summary, in contemporary language, of the poem/of the argument the speaker makes in the poem, using the following questions as a guide:

The title of the poem is “On Being Brought from Africa to America.” Is the speaker's attitude about being brought from Africa to America positive or negative? How do you know? What words in the poem have positive/negative connotations?

What words, phrases, or lines in the poem are associated with Africa or Africans? What words, phrases, or lines are about America?

Based on the way the word is used in context, what does “benighted” probably mean? How do you know? What other words in the poem are synonyms of “benighted”? What about the word “sable”?

Find the verbs in the poem. What verb tenses does Wheatley use? Which verbs are in past tense, and why? Which are in present tense, and why? Does Wheatley use future tense? If so, where, and why?

Line 6 is punctuated with quotation marks. Why? Who is Wheatley quoting?

Based only on the text on the page, who is the intended audience for the poem? How do you know?

Carefully reread lines 7-8. What does Wheatley want to make sure her audience understands?

DISCUSSION:

Question students about their findings during the work period.

What is the central claim of “On Being Brought from Africa to America”? What reason(s) or evidence does the speaker give in support of this claim? (Discuss questions from the work period as necessary.)

What is surprising to you about the message of this poem? Does it match the predictions we made just before reading it?

This poem has been called “the most reviled poem in African American literature.” Why do you think that is? Do you agree with that assessment? Is there another way to read this poem?

DIRECT INSTRUCTION 2:

Introduce vocabulary that students will encounter in the secondary sources/literary criticism. Distribute the following excerpt from “Phillis Wheatley,” in The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution:

A black voice in the Christian white wilderness cries out in these lines. After all the obvious comments are duly made—she rejects her heritage, she accepts the myth of Cain, she expects her soul to be whitewashed in heaven—there is still much undiminished spirit to be found in this little poem. The charged voice of the outraged girl, defending “our sable race” against a “scornful eye,” is rightfully stored in the mind.

Have students read this excerpt to themselves, then read it aloud. Question them about this interpretation of the poem. Where do these authors, Sidney Kaplan and Emma Nogrady Kaplan, point out the same things we noticed the first time we analyzed the poem? What do they say that’s new? What do they say in Phillis Wheatley’s defense? What evidence from the text of the poem do they use to support this defense of her?

Distribute the following excerpt from Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage, then point out the word “notoriety”, and direct students to underline or mark it; they’ll determine the meaning of it using context clues or other strategies from their vocabulary notebooks.

Modern critics have accused Wheatley, or at least the primary voice in her poem, of rejecting her African heritage and engaging in racial self-hatred. But such critics confuse accommodation with appropriation. Like many authors of African descent who followed her, Wheatley repeatedly appropriates the values of Christianity to judge and find wanting hypocritical self-styled Christians of European descent. Theologically, Wheatley perceives her capture in Africa as leading to a fortunate fall that allows her formerly “benighted soul” to rise to embrace Christianity. [...T]he “mercy” acknowledged in “On Being Brought from Africa to America” is granted not only to the speaker of the latter poem. The “Father of mercy,” through her poetry, also grants it to her readers, who must choose between being among the “Some [who] view our sable race with scornful eye” and those who embrace the truth and “Remember [that], *Christians, Negros*, black as *Cain*, / May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train.”

Wheatley’s position is completely consistent with belief in an omniscient and benevolent deity, but it does not necessarily imply that she either accepts or endorses slavery. Physical slavery paradoxically leads to the spiritual freedom offered to the servants, slaves, of Christ.

WORK PERIOD 2:

Direct students to work independently to read and answer the following questions about the excerpt from Carretta’s biography. Before full-class discussion, allow them 2-3 minutes to discuss these questions with a partner or small group.

According to Vincent Carretta, what do “[m]odern critics” say about “On Being Brought from Africa to America”? Does Carretta agree with them?

According to Carretta, what do “such critics” get wrong about this poem?

What, according to Carretta, is Wheatley’s real purpose in addressing Christians?

How does Wheatley use language that will make her Christian audience more likely to listen to what she has to say?

BONUS: What does Carretta say in this passage about Phillis Wheatley’s religious beliefs? Does this support or conflict with his analysis of the poem?

DISCUSSION/DIRECT INSTRUCTION 3:

Ask students about Carretta’s analysis. What does this add to our understanding of Phillis Wheatley’s poem?

Review the word “irony,” then show students the film clip about Phillis Wheatley from Great African American Authors. Ask students about Dr. Dana Williams’s interpretation of “On Being Brought from Africa to America.” What does Dr. Williams mean when she says that this poem is “ironic”? What does she say is the central claim of the poem? What evidence from the poem – or from Phillis Wheatley’s biography – supports that claim?

WORK PERIOD 3/ASSESSMENT:

Direct students to work independently to write a paragraph in response to the following prompt:

Phillis Wheatley’s poem “On Being Brought from Africa to America” has been called “the most reviled poem in African American literature.” In your opinion, does it deserve its notoriety? Why or why not?

In your paragraph, be sure to address why this poem is so “reviled” – even if you don’t agree with this analysis! Use at least three pieces of evidence from Wheatley’s poem in your paragraph, and cite at least one of the secondary sources you’ve read in class or for homework. You may choose a secondary source that supports your position, or one to refute, or both.

OPTIONAL, for enrichment:

Read excerpts from shmoop.com and newadvent.org (linked on Schmoop) about the “mark of Cain.”