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### The Meaning Behind Phillis Wheatley Peters' "Letter to Reverend Samson Occom"

The 1770s was a time in American history for change, growth, and the beginning of a long road to acceptance. The foundation of American Independence was just starting, while people who were not white men had to jump over hurdles just to have the opportunity to be heard. Two great individuals who fall under this category of fighting for a place to use their voice are Phillis Wheatley Peters and Samson Occom. Wheatley Peters' letter to Occom conveys the idea that the mistreatment of Black people in the early United States goes against the ideals instilled in them by both the Enlightenment and Christianity, as well as the letter being a call to action for change.

Wheatley Peters decides to write Occom a letter thanking him for his support of African Americans during the 1770s. The very beginning of the letter starts with her saying she is "greatly satisfied with [his] reasons respecting the Negroes, and think[s] highly reasonable what [he] offer[s] in Vindication of their natural Rights," (Wheatley Peters). In other words, Wheatley Peters is offering gratitude to Occom for stating that Black people also deserved the rights being given to everyone else during the founding of this country. By using terms like "natural rights" that are used by other Enlightenment writers, such as Benjamin Franklin, at the time, it puts the narrative in the perspective that someone privileged with a lighter skin color might be forced to

understand. Everyone understood the basic idea of natural rights: rights that are given to those simply for being alive, yet when it came to having those rights granted to people of color it suddenly became a confusing term. Wheatley Peteres' use of this term is very effective in calling out the hypocrisy seen at the time surrounding basic rights when it came to one's skin color. The sentence she writes continues by saying "those that invade them cannot be insensible that the divine Light is chasing away the thick Darkness which broods over the Land of Africa," (Wheatley Peters). She decides to tie in religion, as a devout Christian herself, which is a great tool when continuing to call out the hypocrisy of the early United States. She claims that the "divine light" also known as God, is getting rid of the "darkness" over Africa. In other words, she acknowledges the horrors that have occurred in Africa due to the slave trade and expresses how God wants to revert these actions and bring light to the land. This plea that God is asking for change is meant to invoke white Christians to understand the brevity of the situation and force them to want to enact said changes, all through a letter simply thanking another man for understanding the things that African Americans were going through.

The letter continues by honing in on the religious aspect of the atrocities occurring with people of color at the time. Wheatley Peters expresses how "for in every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance," (Wheatley Peters). The syntax of this is so beautifully crafted, deliberately digging into how God himself put the idea of freedom into each of his creations, and how said creations are "impatient" to being treated unfairly. It's a core value that is instilled by God, and Wheatley Peter's use of word choice paints a clear and agonizing picture of how no one under God wants to be treated the way that black people are being treated. Towards the end of the letter she says how she "desire[s] not for their Hurt, but to convince them of the strange Absurdity of

their Conduct whose Words and Actions are so diametrically, opposite,” (Wheatley Peters). This in itself prompts a call to action for the white Christians around her. She is blatantly expressing her need not for revenge, but rather for people's understanding that these actions go against everything they claim to stand for in their religion. Using word choices such as “absurd” puts into perspective just how bizarre it is to decide who deserves natural rights based on one's skin color, especially through the lens of a religion that is meant to support love and freedom.

All in all, Philis Wheatley Peters' letter to Samson Occom was one that made her opinions about the mistreatment of black people under Christianity abundantly clear. Her choice of including words such as “natural rights” and vivid adjectives truly paints the idea that people of color in the 1770s were begging for a chance to voice their opinions on their mistreatments but were hardly given the opportunity to. This exchange between two individuals showcases just how much they yearned for change, even using terminology and beliefs that aligned with those refusing to treat them properly.