Phillis Wheatley

1. Life.
2. Poems.
3. “On Being Brought from Africa to America”.

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1. Life:

She was born somewhere near what nowadays is Gambia or Senegal. She was kidnapped into slavery at the age of seven/eight. She was purchased by John Wheatley at Boston Harbour on July 11thh, 1761. She did not have very good health so, for this reason she was assigned to perform just housekeeping tasks for the Wheatley family; constituted by: John, Susana (his wife) and Nathaniel and Mary (children).

She had a good education: English, Greek, Latin, theology, philosophy, geography, history, good knowledge of the Bible… She started writing poetry under the influence of the English masters: John Milton, Alexander Pope… and she was encourage by her masters to write poetry, in fact, she could published her poems in the press and then, the family of her master tried to help her publishing a collection of 30 poems in Boston, but they could not find financial support in Boston. One of the reasons why they could not find financial support was that American publishers did not believed that Phillis Wheatley could not have written these poems since she was a black slave woman. She had to prove a face to face examination that she was able to write poems but even so, they could not have this economic support in Boston.

That’s why in 1773 she travelled with Nathaniel Wheatley to London for the publication of the book of poems (it was published that year). Back in Boston she got her manumission but she kept working to the Wheatley’s until John’s death.

After John Wheatley’s death in 1778 she married John Peters, who was a free black man, and they had 3 children but all died in infancy. While she was married, she tried to publish some poems but it was no possible, so she started working as a schoolteacher and as a servant. She passed her last years in poor health and in precarious economic conditions. She died at the age of 31 in poverty.

2. Poems:

“Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral” (London, 1773): collection of poems composed by 39 poems. There are some poems that did not were in the original collection. She left some Patriotical poems, in defence of independence. And she added others.

Basic features:

* Neoclassical conventions: hyperbole, personification, ornamentation, combination of Pagan and Christian traditions.
* Moral and religious themes: nature, imagination and memory.
* Celebration of public events.
* Freedom: political freedom; artistic freedom (it was a way of escaping from a material world to a more satisfactory world, which was the world of imagination); spiritual freedom (religious and death: for her “death” is a relieve of suffering. Art and poetry as a source of liberation.

1. “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.

HEROIC COUPLETS: iambic pentameters (\_`//\_`//\_`//\_´//\_`) rhyming in pairs (AABBCCDD). 5 feets, and iambic foot: the first syllable is not stressed but the next one yes.

This poem just has 8 lines, but we can divide it in two parts:

1. First one (1-4):

African past: Pagan land, benighted soul, negation of redemption.

American experience: mercy, God, Saviour, redemption.

She sees the slavery as a merciful experience: slavery = mercy. It was thanks to the slavery that she converted to the Christianity.

1. Second one (5-8):

Rejection of racism: rejection of the association of blackness with damnation (5-6).

Christians = Negroes = Cain 🡪 Sinners but with the capacity to be purified: “Behold, I have refined thee, but not with silver, I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction” (Isaiah 48:10). Refin’d = purify, as a way to get the salvation. Spiritual freedom and spiritual redemption.

We can find some references to the achievement of freedom for the African people in America. There are references that suggest how Phillis Wheatley I giving her support to the fight against slavery through this poem.

There are three words “die”, “Cain” and “refin’d” that were not chosen with innocence. Just before this poem was written and published, there was an attempt on the part of the abolitionists to move people from the New England to boycott on indigo dye and refined cane sugar refin’d: DIE/DYE, CAIN/CANE, REFIN’D.

We can find a parallelism between Jewish slavery and black slavery.

“Saviour” and “redemption” (negrita): have a particular meaning. They have primarily a spiritual meaning, but after reading the second part of the poem, these terms seems to adopt certain political connotations. God is presented as a saviour called to redeem African people not only spiritually from the corruption of their paganism, but also politically, from the bandage of slavery.