

Phillis Wheatley: A Woman for Our Times

Kidnapped from her African homeland at the tender age of seven, Phillis Wheatley became an influential character of the latter 18th century and provides a beautiful example of a life ruled by God's love. Phillis Wheatley fell into the hands of unusually kind masters who accepted her as a family member. Well versed in Greek and Latin, she was better educated than many free people of her day. Of all the great men and women who lived in colonial America, I would like to meet Phillis Wheatley because she was not resentful concerning her earthly bondage yet proved the injustices of slavery.

I am somewhat awed by Phillis Wheatley's ability to see the providence of God in such an abominable institution as slavery. She said: *'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.* If given the opportunity to meet this humble woman, I would like to know if she was ever inclined towards resentment. Although she felt no hatred toward her masters, Phillis surely remembered her fearful kidnapping, the loving family she never saw again, and the horrific conditions aboard the slave ship. To possess the ability to see God's mercy beneath all the black clouds of slavery demonstrates a soul not marred by ignorant hate. No doubt she realized the depravity hate inflicts upon the human soul whether white or black, slave or free. I wonder what Phillis Wheatley would think of blacks today, dwelling in a nation almost purged of racism, who believe Caucasians still wish to keep them in a subservient position. How would she combat racism as it exists in the 21st century? Would it be through violence, compliance, or simply rising above the



stereotypes? It would be interesting to hear Wheatley encourage the many blacks bound by victimization. Her avoidance of hatred and bitterness is an inspiration to me and should be for our entire race.

Phillis Wheatley's life is a testimony that all decent people are capable of admiring a fellow human being regardless of race, gender, or background. As the first black woman to become nationally respected, Wheatley must have recognized this principle. I wonder if she ever considered using her talent as a means of speaking against slavery. Given my justice-centered mindset, I would have found it difficult not to write very forcefully against the practice of slavery. I would be interested in her opinion regarding those, later in history, who became influential for this reason. I know Wheatley did not condone slavery as can be discerned from the following excerpt of poetry. *Some view our sable race with scornful eye,/"Their colour is a diabolic dye."/Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,/May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.* She explained God's acceptance of all peoples and reminded racists that everyone would be rewarded with due equality in heaven. While Phillis Wheatley did not use her poetry as a method of outright resistance, she proved that trivialities, such as color, were unimportant if the internal person was respectable.

A small, dark woman donned with snowy white cap and stiff, clean apron. Her voice would float melodiously across the stately room as she greeted me. She would look at me with discerning eyes, at the same time full of tender love. Naturally I would feel nervous in her presence, but as a person who had risen from America's lowliest station to



sit before great men she undoubtedly would understand. This is how I imagine Phillis Wheatley, a black female slave in colonial America, whose life, surrendered to Jesus Christ, became an example for all of the African race in America, then and now. If I could presently meet just one outstanding individual in early America, it would be the poetess Phillis Wheatley. It is not that I admire her poetry, but her humble spirit is one many modern blacks could learn from, if not totally accept. In paraphrased words of Booker T. Washington, another distinguished African American, Phillis Wheatley realized that weak men submit to a spirit of hate, but only great men are able to nurture a spirit of love.

