



The Black Intellectual Tradition and the Great Conversation with Dr. Angel Parham

Lesson 1: Phillis Wheatley, Part I

Outline:

The Life and Work of Phillis Wheatley

- Phillis Wheatley came from Senegal.
- Phillis was named for the vessel that brought her from Africa.
- Only 75 of the 96 Africans on the voyage made it. A number of young girls and women were brought, counter to the instructions given.
- We are not certain where she was originally from, we only know where she was picked up. Some Africans were marched from the interior of Africa to the coast.
- She arrives in July of 1761 in Boston. Phillis was probably about 7 years old.
- The Wheatley family, John and Susanna, buys Phillis. They had experienced the loss of three children.
- John Wheatley was principally a tailor. John Hancock was one of his clients.
- Phillis was frail and sickly when she arrived.
- Why did the Wheatley's buy Phillis?
 - Sometimes people would buy an enslaved person as a luxury good or an ornament.
 - Phillis was about the same age as Sarah Wheatley was when she had died.
 - The Wheatley's treated Phillis more like a member of the family, which does not minimize the degradation of being enslaved. Phillis was very opposed to slavery.
 - Phillis was given access to a dictionary and to a place to write. She was taught to read. She mixed socially with the friends of the Wheatley's.
 - Phillis was sent to school with Mary and she learned Latin as well as English.
- Throughout the 18th century and well into the 19th century, Phillis Wheatley and her work were very much celebrated.
 - Her poetry was shot through with classical allusions.
 - She was an inspiration to black people and a vindication to white people who stood up for the rights of Africans.
- Her reputation suffered in the 20th century.



- Her perspective as a deep believer was construed as giving in to her own oppression.
- She had a desire to see other Africans converted to Christianity.
- There is sense that she bought into the idea of the “fortunate fall”, where you were introduced to Christianity because of your enslavement.
 - Nobody wanted to hear about this idea in the 60s and 70s.

On Being Brought from Africa to America by Phillis Wheatley

- It sounds like she is saying that it is a mercy that she is brought from Africa to America.
- What is important to understand is that Phillis Wheatley was for the salvation of all people.
- Her other poems and letters give a more full portrait of who Phillis was and her faith.
- She was critical of how faith was carried out toward black people.
- She discusses her passion to see people in Africa saved, but she also chides Europeans for taking the gospel for granted and for not living it out properly.
- It is important to understand that while she talks about the saving of her people (the African people), but she remarks critically that the Europeans faith does not seem to be transformative in the same way. She does not buy into the idea that African people are especially in need of the gospel.
- Phillis Wheatley thinks there is something profoundly disordered about a group of people who claim to have the gospel, but who are systematically oppressing their fellow human creatures. God has implanted a principle, which we call love of freedom.
- It is unfortunate that this poem, *On Being Brought from Africa to America*, was taught so often out of context of this larger understanding of her life and what she really cared about.