

the collected works of phillis wheatley

The collected works of Phillis Wheatley represent a groundbreaking contribution to American literature and a significant chapter in the history of African American writing. Born around 1753 in West Africa and brought to America as an enslaved child, Wheatley overcame the formidable barriers imposed by her status to become the first published African American poet. Her works not only reflect her personal experiences but also address broader themes of liberty, faith, and the human condition. This article delves into the life, literary contributions, and enduring legacy of Phillis Wheatley, offering insights into her collected works and their impact on American literature.

Early Life and Background

Phillis Wheatley was born in what is now Senegal or Gambia, and at the age of seven, she was sold into slavery in Boston, Massachusetts. The Wheatley family, who purchased her, recognized her intelligence and potential. They provided her with an education, which was highly unusual for enslaved individuals at the time.

- Education:
- Wheatley learned to read and write in English, and she also became familiar with Latin and classical literature.
- She was heavily influenced by the works of poets such as Alexander Pope and John Milton.

Her exposure to the Enlightenment ideals of freedom and individuality would later shape her poetry.

Literary Career

Wheatley's literary career began in earnest when she started writing poetry in her teenage years. Her first poem was published in 1767, and by 1773, she had completed her collection of poems, which would later be published in a book titled "Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral."

Publication of "Poems on Various Subjects"

In 1773, Wheatley became the first African American woman to publish a book when her collection "Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral" was printed in London. The book was met with both acclaim and skepticism, as some questioned whether an enslaved woman could have penned such sophisticated poetry.

- Key Features of the Collection:
- Themes: The poems often explore themes of religion, freedom, and the personal

struggles of the human spirit.

- Form and Style: Wheatley's poetry adheres to the neoclassical style, employing heroic couplets and embracing the conventions of 18th-century poetry.
- Dedication: The book includes a dedication to George Washington, whom Wheatley admired and who later acknowledged her talents.

Major Poems in the Collection

Some of the standout poems in Wheatley's collected works include:

1. "On Being Brought from Africa to America": This poem reflects on her journey to America and her conversion to Christianity, acknowledging both the pain of her enslavement and the spiritual salvation she found.
2. "To His Excellency, General Washington": A tribute to George Washington, this poem expresses her hopes for American independence and freedom.
3. "An Hymn to the Morning": In this piece, Wheatley celebrates the beauty of nature and the divine, showcasing her deep religious faith.

Challenges and Controversies

Despite her success, Wheatley faced numerous challenges as both an African American and a woman in 18th-century America.

- Skepticism of Her Authorship: Many contemporaries doubted that a Black woman could produce poetry of such quality. To prove her authorship, she had to gather testimonials from prominent individuals, including George Washington and other luminaries of her time.
- The Limits of Freedom: While Wheatley's poetry often celebrated the ideals of freedom and liberty, her own life was constrained by the institution of slavery. She remained enslaved until the death of her owner in 1778.

Later Life and Legacy

After her owner's death, Wheatley was freed but continued to face hardships. She struggled financially and faced the challenges of being a free Black woman in a society that still upheld racial inequalities.

- Personal Struggles:
- Wheatley married John Peters, a free Black man, but the couple faced financial difficulties, and many of their children died in infancy.
- She continued to write but was unable to secure a publisher for her later works.

Impact on American Literature

Phillis Wheatley's contributions to American literature are profound and far-reaching. She opened the door for future generations of African American writers and poets. Her works challenged the prevailing notions of race and gender in her time, proving that talent and intellect are not confined by race or social status.

- Influence on Future Writers:
- Wheatley's poetry laid the groundwork for later African American poets, including Paul Laurence Dunbar and Langston Hughes.
- She is often cited as an early voice in the struggle for civil rights and racial equality.

Conclusion

The collected works of Phillis Wheatley stand as a remarkable testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity. Through her poetry, Wheatley not only expressed her personal struggles and triumphs but also voiced the collective aspirations of her people for freedom and dignity. As the first published African American poet, she carved a path for future generations, ensuring that the voices of Black writers would be heard in the tapestry of American literature. Her legacy continues to inspire and challenge readers and writers alike, reminding us of the power of words to transcend the limitations imposed by society.

Wheatley's journey from slavery to literary acclaim exemplifies the potential inherent in all individuals, regardless of their circumstances, and her works remain a vital part of the American literary canon.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the main themes explored in the collected works of Phillis Wheatley?

The collected works of Phillis Wheatley primarily explore themes of faith, freedom, race, and the struggle for identity. Wheatley often addresses the complexities of her status as an enslaved African woman and highlights the importance of education and virtue.

How did Phillis Wheatley's work influence African American literature?

Phillis Wheatley is considered a pioneer of African American literature. Her work paved the way for future generations of Black writers by demonstrating that African Americans could produce sophisticated poetry. Her success challenged prevailing notions about race and intellectual capability.

What significance does the poem 'On Being Brought from Africa to America' hold in Wheatley's collection?

The poem 'On Being Brought from Africa to America' is significant as it reflects Wheatley's personal journey and offers a nuanced perspective on slavery. It addresses themes of conversion and redemption while also critiquing the racism prevalent in society, making it a powerful commentary on her experiences.

In what ways did Phillis Wheatley use classical references in her poetry?

Phillis Wheatley frequently employed classical references in her poetry to enhance her arguments and connect her experiences to broader literary traditions. By invoking figures from Greek and Roman mythology, she established her intellectual credibility and appealed to her predominantly white audience.

What impact did the publication of Wheatley's collected works have on societal views of slavery in the 18th century?

The publication of Phillis Wheatley's collected works challenged the prevailing societal views of slavery in the 18th century by showcasing the literary talent of an enslaved woman. Her success and eloquence prompted discussions about the capabilities of enslaved individuals and contributed to the early abolitionist movement.

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