

# Enjoy the Poems of Phillis Wheatley



*by Kristin Keller*

Excerpts from Charlotte Mason's Original Home Schooling Series are surrounded by quotation marks and accompanied by a reference to which book in the series they came from.

Vol. 1: Home Education

Vol. 2: Parents and Children

Vol. 3: School Education

Vol. 4: Ourselves

Vol. 5: Formation of Character

Vol. 6: A Philosophy of Education

Enjoy the Poems of Phillis Wheatley

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Where applicable, selected words in the original poetry have been updated to reflect modern spelling and some punctuation has been added for ease of reading.

# Enjoy the Poems of Phillis Wheatley

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# Suggested Schedule

To linger with this poet for a year, you might follow a schedule something like this. Also try to memorize and recite one poem each 12-week term.

Week 1: Read a new poem.  
Week 2: Read a new poem.  
Week 3: Read the poet's biography and narrate it.  
Week 4: Read a new poem.  
Week 5: Read a new poem.  
Week 6: Enter the poet into your Book of Centuries.  
Week 7: Read a new poem.  
Week 8: Read a new poem.  
Week 9: Choose one of the previous poems and illustrate it.  
Week 10: Read a new poem.  
Week 11: Read a new poem.  
Week 12: Tell what you know about this poet.

Week 13: Read a new poem.  
Week 14: Read a new poem.  
Week 15: Read a new poem.  
Week 16: Read a new poem.  
Week 17: Children read aloud favorite poems so far.  
Week 18: Read a new poem.  
Week 19: Read a new poem.  
Week 20: Read a new poem.  
Week 21: Choose one of the previous poems and illustrate it.  
Week 22: Read a new poem.  
Week 23: Read a new poem.  
Week 24: Revisit favorite poems.

Week 25: Read a new poem.  
Week 26: Read a new poem.  
Week 27: Read a new poem.  
Week 28: Read a new poem.  
Week 29: Children read aloud favorite poems so far.  
Week 30: Read a new poem.  
Week 31: Read a new poem.  
Week 32: Read a new poem.  
Week 33: Choose one of the previous poems and illustrate it.  
Week 34: Read a new poem.  
Week 35: Read a new poem.  
Week 36: Revisit favorite poems.

# How to Enjoy the Poems

1. Gather the children and read a poem aloud at least once a week. Focus on one poet's work for many months. Linger and get to know his or her ideas.

“Collections’ of poems are to be eschewed; but some one poet should have at least a year to himself, that he may have time to do what is in him towards cultivating the seeing eye, the hearing ear, the generous heart.” (*Formation of Character*, p. 224)

2. Read complete poems, not just portions or snippets. We have included only complete poems in this book.

“Selections should be avoided; children should read the whole book or the whole poem to which they are introduced.” (*A Philosophy of Education*, p. 340)

3. Share poems that are suitable for your children during each season of life. All of the poems in this book are appropriate for children of various ages.

“What can we do to ensure that the poetry our children learn shall open their eyes to beauty, shall increase their joy? In all humility I would offer one suggestion on this point to-day, this: The poetry must be such as to delight them, (1) by being in itself delightful; and (2) by being suitable to their years.” (“An Address on the Teaching of Poetry” by Rev. H. C. Beeching, *The Parents’ Review*, Vol. 3 (1892–93), edited by Charlotte Mason, pp. 893–898)

4. Understand that the purpose of poetry is to cultivate the imagination, right emotions, and the power of vivid expression.

“The purpose of poetry is to communicate or extend the joy of life by quickening our emotions. . . . It teaches us how to feel, by expressing for us, in the most perfect way, right human emotions, which we recognise as right, and come ourselves to share. It is good for all of us to be taught how to feel; to be taught how to feel in the presence of Nature; how to feel to one’s country, to one’s lover, or wife, or child; to be taught to feel the mystery of life, the glory of it, the pathos of it; good for us to be shaken out of our lethargic absorption in ourselves, and to have our eyes anointed with salve, that we may look round us and rejoice, and lift up our hearts. . . .

“. . . It will be readily seen that if the poems become real and vivid to them, the children gain, besides the immediate joy in the life represented, and the right training of the emotions by their right exercise thus administered (which I maintain is the true function of poetry), they gain, I say, besides this, exercise to their own powers of imagination; the wings of their own fancy become fledged, and they can fly at will. And, secondly, they gain skill in the use of language.” (Rev. Beeching, *The Parents’ Review*)

5. Don't turn the poetry readings into lessons. Give only enough explanation necessary to help your children realize the situation of the poem. We have included occasional Setting the Imaginary Stage and Learning the Language notes to help you do this.

“Poetry must not on any pretence be made into a poetry lesson; all that is at enmity with joy must be banished from this ideal province. What one wants, of course, is that the poem shall become to the reader what it was to the writer; a few words may need explaining, but the explanation must not be elaborate . . . ; the chief thing will be to make sure that the child realises the facts, the situation.” (Rev. Beeching, *The Parents' Review*)

6. Allow your children time and space to feel the force and beauty of words.

“The thing is, to keep your eye upon words and wait to feel their force and beauty; and, when words are so fit that no other words can be put in their places, so few that none can be left out without spoiling the sense, and so fresh and musical that they delight you, then you may be sure that you are reading Literature, whether in prose or poetry.” (*Ourselves*, Book 1, p. 41)

7. Encourage your children to make the poetry their own. Let them

- Read it aloud, being careful to say beautiful words in a beautiful way.
- Act it, presenting the dramatic poems in their own style.
- Draw it, portraying a favorite scene in art.
- Copy it, transcribing a favorite stanza in their best handwriting.
- Memorize and recite it, conveying their own interpretation of the ideas.
- Treasure it, entering favorite passages or phrases in a personal journal for years to come.

# Getting to Know Phillis Wheatley

by Kristin Keller

Many people are named after a relative or given a name with special meaning to their parents. In the case of the first published Black American woman, the name her parents gave her is unknown. However, the name by which she is known to history was taken off the hull of the slave ship that carried her to Boston, Phillis, and the surname of the man who purchased her in the market, Wheatley. John Wheatley, a prominent and wealthy tailor and merchant, paid very little for the skinny, sickly, scared girl of about 7 years old. She was to be a domestic servant for his wife, Susannah.

Have you ever heard the word *precocious*? We use it in nature to describe plants that flower or fruit earlier than expected, but we also use it to describe people who display talents or skills unexpected at a young age. It did not take long for the Wheatleys to notice Phillis's precociousness and intellect. At the time, these traits were thought impossible of a girl or any person of color. Susannah, recognizing Phillis's potential, released her from most of her domestic duties and had her educated. Phillis quickly learned to read. Then she learned Latin and Greek, mathematics, geography, and the Bible. Before long, she began to show a special interest in poetry, so the Wheatleys supplied her with quill, ink, and paper and encouraged her writing.

One evening, while serving at the table, Phillis overheard some visitors tell of a narrow escape from a winter storm on the sea. She later sat down and composed a poem about the adventure, titled, "On Messrs Hussey and Coffin." She wrote to the *Newport Mercury*, a Rhode Island newspaper, "To The Printer: Please to insert the following Lines, composed by a Negro Girl (belonging to one Mr. Wheatley of Boston) . . . [who] 'tending Table, heard the Relation, from which she composed the following Verses." It was her first published poem. Phillis was just 14 years old.

Susannah began to take Phillis out visiting at the homes of other wealthy Bostonians. However, the young poet found herself in a unique and ill-defined situation: she sat in parlors of prominent families, but she could not sit with them at their tea tables. Though she was segregated in Blacks-only pews at church, Susannah would not allow her to sit next to their Black carriage driver, Prince, on his seat when he was driving around town. To the Wheatleys, she was not a slave or servant, but she was not family, either.

To say that the American Revolution sprang up around Phillis is no exaggeration. Throughout Boston, Phillis witnessed increasing violence, fiery effigies of British officials, and rioting mobs protesting The Stamp Act. She started writing poetry about the political struggle happening all around her, including, "On the Death of Mr. Snider Murder'd by Richardson," about an 11-year-old boy whom she called "the first martyr" of the American Revolution. Only several weeks after Snider's tragic death, a rowdy snowball fight between Colonists and Redcoats turned into the bloody Boston Massacre on the very street where the Wheatleys lived, King Street. Phillis again turned to poetry, writing "On the Affray in King Street, on the Evening

Wheatley lived  
1753–1784.

## 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 Savior too:  
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.  
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,  
"Their color is a diabolic dye."  
Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain,  
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

*Poetry Note:*

*Make your reading  
sympathetic,  
faithfully expressing  
the poet's heart in  
your delivery of her  
words.*

# Pages for Poem Illustrations

An Illustration of \_\_\_\_\_

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