

LESSON PLAN TITLE: *Phillis Wheatley's Words: Connecting with the Past*

Grades: 3–8

TIME REQUIRED: 1–3 class periods

CONCEPT STATEMENT: Students will practice decoding vocabulary by exploring a poem by the first African American woman to publish a book. Inspired by a discussion of a painting from the VMFA collection and the life story of author Phillis Wheatley, they will practice close reading techniques to discover the meaning of a written primary source from an earlier time—and experiment with a method of conveying that meaning to others by emphasizing significant words within the poetry.

OBJECTIVES:

Students will:

1. Learn how to identify difficult vocabulary words used in older primary source writings;
2. Practice uncovering the meanings of some of these words; and
3. Identify and use operative words as they read aloud a poem by Phillis Wheatley.

VIRGINIA STANDARDS OF LEARNING CORRELATIONS:

English: 3.3, 3.4.d-g, 3.5.e-j, 3.7, 3.8, 4.4; 5.1.a, 5.4, 5.5, 6.5, 7.5, 8.5

Visual Arts: 3.11, 3.13, 3.18, 4.19, 5.12, 6.14, 7.10, 8.12

History: USI.1.a&b&e, USI.5.d

(Additional SOL connections may be made if you choose to have the class read *My Name is Phillis Wheatley: A Story of Slavery and Freedom* by Afua Cooper.)

MATERIALS:

Per Student

Word Detective and Decoder Sheet (included in this document)

pencils and colored pencils

a dictionary and/or access to online resources

Prerequisite Skills and Knowledge:

Students should have a basic understanding of how to use a dictionary and other reference works. If possible, their resources for this activity should include internet offerings.

VOCABULARY:

definition – A statement of the exact meaning of a word, especially as found in a dictionary.

interpret – To explain the meaning of something, such as information, words, or actions.

operative words – The most important words in written or oral passages that best explain or represent the thought, or intention, of each line or phrase.

paraphrase – To express the meaning of something written or spoken using different words, especially to make the meaning more clear.

primary source – Something written, created, or recorded at the time of a period being studied or considered. Primary sources can include documents, poems, essays, works of art, and artifacts.

rebus – Any document that uses pictures to replace words, parts of words, or phrases.

OVERVIEW FOR MAIN ACTIVITY

Introduce this exploration of Phillis Wheatley's writing by showing the class this painting, which is in the collection of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.



Alexander Spotswood Payne and His Brother, John Robert Dandridge Payne, with Their Nurse
ca. 1790-91
Unknown artist, who is known as the Payne Limner
American
Oil on canvas
Gift of Miss Dorothy Payne, 53.24

Begin the discussion by asking your students to describe the scene in the painting using prompts such as:

Who do you think these three young people might be?

Who seems to be the most important? Why?

Next, give them some background about the painting while encouraging them to notice its details.

This painting features two sons of the Virginia planter Archer Payne and his wife, Martha Dandridge Payne. Archer Payne was the master of New Market, a large plantation located in Goochland County, just west of Richmond, Virginia. At the time the painting was made, Payne was a successful man of property who owned a two-story manor house, over a thousand acres of productive farm land, and about two dozen enslaved laborers.

The young man holding the bow and arrows in his right hand and a woodpecker in his left is eleven-year-old Alexander Spotswood Payne, who eventually inherited his father's plantation. He is greeted by his younger brother, John Robert Dandridge Payne and the family dog.

On the far right of the painting, a young African American girl leans forward, ready to support the toddler, who still wears his linen infant shirt. She is dressed in a jacket and petticoat, the typical outfit of an enslaved plantation house servant. Although the painter was likely representing a particular person, the girl's presence in the painting symbolized the family's prosperity. She appears to be about the same height as Alexander, so she is probably also around eleven—but she is already serving as the family nursemaid. At the age of twelve, she would have become taxable property in Goochland County, listed along with the family's horses, carriages, and other enslaved workers.

This painting was created around 1790 or 1791, just a few years after the American Revolution, which took place from 1765 to 1783. Even though this revolution was inspired by ideas such as liberty and freedom, the new United States ratified a constitution that extended the slave trade for another twenty years. In fact, when the U.S. Constitution was put into force in 1789, the number of each state's congressmen in the House of Representatives was based on population and the constitution allowed each enslaved man, woman, and child to be counted as 3/5 of a human being.

We don't even know the name of this enslaved nursemaid—although scholars continue to examine surviving records and artifacts looking for clues to her identity and her life story.

Phillis Wheatley's Story

Next, tell the students the story of another little girl of African descent who had become a famous published writer by the time the Payne family painting was made. Explain that this young girl arrived in Boston in 1761, fifteen years before the American Revolution began, and became the first African American poet to publish a book. In fact, she is credited as the founder of African American literature! Share the brief overview of her life that appears below with your students—or have them read the chapter book *My Name is Phillis Wheatley: A Story of Slavery and Freedom* by Afua Cooper.

The part of this story that scholars have confirmed begins when the little girl was bought as a slave by Mr. John Wheatley, a Boston gentleman. She was probably born in Gambia or Senegal, and was brought to America aboard the slave ship *Phillis*. Mrs. Suzanna Wheatley, who was in need of a house servant, chose her out of the individuals offered for sale in the Boston slave market because of her "humble and modest demeanor" and "the interesting features of the little stranger."

Since the slender, frail little girl did not seem to remember much about her life before her enslavement in West Africa, the Wheatley's gave her the name of the ship that brought her to America and, as was common at the time, she took her new owner's last name—and so became Phillis Wheatley.

Because she was losing her baby teeth in 1761, Phillis Wheatley was probably about seven or eight when the Wheatley's took her back to their home. They were soon astonished by her intelligence. She rapidly became fluent in English and could read and write in her new language by the age of nine. Taught by the Wheatley's daughter Mary, Phillis soon began to learn Greek, Latin, history, geography, and religion, paying special attention to the Bible. She also read many of the poets and writers who were admired at the time, including John Milton and Alexander Pope.

Phillis Wheatley Becomes a Poet!

It was not long before she tried her hand at writing poetry herself. Her first published poem, which she wrote when she was about twelve or thirteen, was "On Messrs. Hussey and Coffin." This account of a fortunate survival at sea appeared in 1767 in the *Mercury*, a newspaper published in Newport, Rhode Island. Three years later, in 1770, she wrote a poem to mark the death of George Whitefield, a famous Methodist minister who had preached widely in the American colonies. Her poem, *An Elegiac Poem, on the Death of that Celebrated Divine, and Eminent Servant of Jesus Christ, the Reverend and Learned George Whitefield*, was published not only in Boston, Newport, and Philadelphia, but also in London, which soon brought her international fame.

In May 1773, Phillis, who often suffered from respiratory ailments, sailed to England with the Wheatley's son Nathaniel, both to improve her health and to promote her poetry. In the course of his life, Reverend Whitefield had served as chaplain to Selina Hastings, the Countess of Huntington, a notable English religious leader who was known to support writers of African descent. Phillis's poem about Whitefield earned her the assistance of the countess, and a collection of thirty-nine of her verses called *Poems on Various Subjects* was published in England later in the same year. After learning that Mrs. Wheatley was seriously ill, Phillis returned to Boston, probably before she could meet the Countess of Huntington in person—but she did meet a number of other important people, including Benjamin Franklin. Her book sold well both in England and in America, with eleven editions printed between 1773 and 1838. In the decades that followed, Phillis Wheatley's literary accomplishments were often used as evidence against one of the main justifications used by slaveholders to defend the practice of slavery in America—the claim that Africans were intellectually inferior to Europeans.

Although Phillis was at the height of her literary career upon her return to Boston, the years that followed proved challenging. Suzanna Wheatley died in 1774, followed by her daughter Mary and her husband John in 1778. Their son Nathaniel, who had previously moved to England, died in 1783. Although scholars differ on the exact timing of her emancipation, she was certainly a free woman by 1778, the year of John Wheatley's death. The loss of the Wheatley family left Phillis without a secure home, and she struggled to survive by working as a seamstress while she continued to write poetry.

In 1778, eight months after John Wheatley's death, she married a free black man named John Peters. The economic upheaval of the years that followed the Revolutionary War created hardships for many Americans, but free African Americans faced particularly difficult times. The couple struggled with poverty for the rest of their married life. Sources say that they had three children, two of whom died in early childhood. When Phillis died in 1784, scholars believe that she had recently been working as a scullery maid and living in abject poverty. Her third child died shortly after Phillis and was buried with his mother in an unmarked grave.

Phillis Wheatley's extraordinary life and work have been celebrated by many historians and writers, including Afua Cooper, author of the chapter book *My Name is Phillis Wheatley: A Story of Slavery and Freedom*, published in 2009. In an on-line interview, Cooper offers the following tribute to this remarkable talent:

"She is one of the foundation writers of the American literary canon. . . . She started black literature in the Western Hemisphere. . . . All of us black writers today, we owe her a debt of gratitude."

—Afua Cooper

Primary Sources:

Finish your discussion of the life of Phillis Wheatley by explaining that our understanding of her work and her life has changed many times since her work was first published. In fact, scholars continue to uncover new information about Phillis Wheatley by studying primary sources.

A primary source is something written, created, or recorded at the time of the period being studied. Primary sources can be documents, poems, essays, works of art, and artifacts. They provide each generation with the opportunity to reconsider what earlier generations have written about the past.

Ask the students to offer ideas about why it is important to consider primary sources as we form our ideas about the past.

ACTIVITY DIRECTIONS:

After showing the students the painting that includes the young enslaved nursemaid and learning about the life of Phillis Wheatley, invite the students to read, investigate, and discuss a passage of poetry written by Wheatley. [For younger students, these activities may be done as a class.]

Pass out copies of the *Word Detective Decoder Sheet* and lead your students through the following activities using your own version of the prompts below.

In Phillis Wheatley's lifetime, many of the words people used were different from the words we might use to say the same things today. That means that if we want to read and understand Phillis Wheatley's poem, we'll need to become word detectives and decoders. Are you ready?

1. The first thing we're going to do is to circle all the words and phrases in this stanza from Phillis Wheatley's poem *On Imagination* that seem difficult or strange to our 21st century ears.

Imagination! who can **sing** thy force?
Or who describe the swiftness of thy course?
Soaring through air to find the bright **abode**,
Th' empyreal palace of the **thund'ring** God,
We on **thy pinions** can surpass the wind,
And leave the rolling universe behind:
From star to star the **mental optics rove**,
Measure the skies, and **range the realms above**.
There in one view we grasp **the mighty whole**,
Or with new worlds amaze th' **unbounded** soul.

2. Next, make a list of those words and phrases, leaving spaces for writing in the definitions.

3. Our next step as word detectives is to look up the difficult words in dictionaries or on-line resources and to talk about some of the phrases in the poem.

The words in boldface are probably the ones that your students will choose. They should be able to find the individual words in dictionaries or by using on-line search engines. Give them assistance appropriate to their reading level and experience to help them figure out the meaning of the phrases.

Here are a few examples:

Imagination! who can **sing** thy force?

Explain that many poets of early times actually did sing their poems to audiences. The word “sing” in this line makes us think about those poets, but it actually means “express” or “describe.” Phillis is asking “who can describe the power that imagination can have?”

Soaring through air to find the bright **abode**,

An abode is a home or place to live.

Th' empyreal palace of the **thund'ring** God,

It was a common practice in Wheatley’s time to elide (or drop syllables) from words to help the rhythm or meter of a poem. That means that “Th” really means “The.”

“Empyreal” means “belonging to heaven” or “heavenly.”

The word “thun’dring” has been shortened from “thundering.”

We on **thy pinions** can surpass the wind,

“Pinions” are the flight feathers on the wings of birds. Here, the word could be replaced with the word “wings.” So, “We on thy pinions can surpass the wind” could be rephrased as “We, on the wings of our imagination, can go faster or farther than the wind.”

From star to star the **mental optics rove**,

The word “mental” means related to the mind. “Optics” here means “visual” or “related to sight.” Putting those words together, “mental optics” means “the visions or images we see in our minds.” Rove is a verb that means “to travel without a specific destination” or “to wander.”

When we put all of these words together, the line could be re-written as “the images in our minds take us on journeys from one star to another.”

Measure the skies, and range the realms above.

This line might be rephrased as “We might travel across the entire sky—and visit all the places in heaven.”

There in one view we grasp **the mighty whole**,

Or with new worlds amaze th' **unbounded** soul.

These lines might be paraphrased as “From heaven, we might see the entire world—the mighty whole—or we might see new worlds that would fill our souls, which imagination has set free, with amazement, or wonder.”

4. Now ask the students to try to interpret the difficult words and phrases by drawing pictures to represent the words. A written passage in which words are replaced with pictures is called a “rebus.”

This part of the exercise is to help students understand and remember the words by associating them with images. For example, “abode” could be represented by a picture of a house; “empyrean palace” by a house in the clouds; and “the mighty whole” by a picture of the Earth.

5. The next step is to rephrase the entire poem.
[This is also a good assessment of how well students understand the passage.]

Imagination, can anyone describe how strong or fast you are? Through our imaginations, we can fly through the sky to find the shining palace of mighty God. On the wings of thought, we can go faster than the wind and leave the spinning Earth behind, traveling everywhere and enjoying the universe’s wonders. From the heavens above, we would be able to see the entire globe or maybe even see new worlds when freed from our physical bodies by imagination.

There are, of course, many other ways to interpret and rephrase this selection. Discuss the various versions with the class.

6. The final challenge is to practice reading the passage out loud. When an actor prepares to deliver lines in a play, he or she thinks about the most important word—the one that explains or represents the thought of the line. Actors call these the “operative words.”

This part of the activity can be done in small groups in the classroom or given as a homework assignment. If the students are assigned to practice reading the passage at home, give them the opportunity to share their interpretations during the next class period.

Ask students to try emphasizing the operative word in each line as they read the passage. It’s ok for different people to choose different words. Discuss how placing the emphasis on different words can make changes in how the passage is understood.

Using the suggestions below or other ideas suggested by the class, conclude your investigation of Phillis Wheatley by discussing her thoughts about the power of imagination and her word choices.

Why might imaginary journeys be important to an enslaved person?

What kind of “new world” do you think she imagined?

Why did she choose to describe the soul as “unbounded”?

Also, remind them of the enslaved nursemaid who began your discussion. Ask if they think she would have enjoyed Phillis Wheatley’s poem—and prompt them to explain why or why not.

Word Detective Decoder Sheet

1. Circle the words and phrases that you don't understand or that seem strange to you.

A Stanza from Phillis Wheatley's poem *On Imagination*

Imagination! who can sing thy force?
Or who describe the swiftness of thy course?
Soaring through air to find the bright abode,
Th' empyreal palace of the thund'ring God,
We on thy pinions can surpass the wind,
And leave the rolling universe behind:
From star to star the mental optics rove,
Measure the skies, and range the realms above.
There in one view we grasp the mighty whole,
Or with new worlds amaze th' unbounded soul.

- Look up the words and write in the meanings of the difficult words and phrases in the spaces you've allowed for the definitions.
- Using pencils and/or colored pencils, draw in pictures in the spaces below to represent the missing words, which are in parentheses following each line.

Imagination! who can _____ thy force? (**sing**)

Or who describe the swiftness of thy course?

Soaring through air to find the bright _____, (**abode**)

_____ palace of the thund'ring God, (**Th'empyrean palace**)

We on thy _____ can surpass the wind, (**pinions**)

And leave the rolling universe behind:

From star to star the _____ rove, (**mental optics**)

Measure the skies, and range the realms above.

There in one view we grasp the mighty whole,

Or with new worlds amaze th' _____ soul. (**unbounded**)

6. The last challenge is to practice reading the passage out loud. When an actor prepares to deliver lines in a play, he or she thinks about the most important word in each line—the word that best explains or represents the thought of the line. Actors call these the “operative words.”

Can you pick out the words that you think are the most important?

Try emphasizing the operative word you’ve chosen in each line as you read the passage.

It’s ok for different people to choose different words. Think about how placing the emphasis on different words can change how the passage is understood.

A Stanza from Phillis Wheatley’s poem *On Imagination*

Imagination! who can sing thy force?
Or who describe the swiftness of thy course?
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There in one view we grasp the mighty whole,
Or with new worlds amaze th' unbounded soul.

SOURCES AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

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http://face2face.si.edu/my_weblog/2014/03/phillis-wheatley-her-life-poetry-and-legacy.html

Find this and other resources online at <http://vmfa.museum/learn/>
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