To His Excellency General Washington Study Guide

To His Excellency General Washington by Phillis Wheatley

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Introduction

Phillis Wheatley's poem "To His Excellency General Washington" is as unique as the poet herself. The poem was sent to George Washington, the newly appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Armies of North America, in October of 1775, well before American Independence was declared in 1776. Washington, as busy as he was with organizing the colonies to take on the British, sent a letter back to Wheatley thanking her for the poem and inviting her to visit him if she ever came to Cambridge, Massachusetts. The two did meet in March of 1776, seven years before the war was finished and true independence was declared. Washington was roundly lauded in poems and prose *after* the successful conclusion of the Revolutionary War in 1783, but Wheatley's poem was written when the war's outcome was very uncertain, the British being the obvious favorites to win. It can be said that Wheatley was the groundbreaker in beginning the Washington legend as the "father of our country," yet she stands as a groundbreaker in even more important ways. In 1773, two years before this poem was written, Phillis Wheatley, a twenty-yearold slave, published her collection of poems entitled *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral,* the first book of poetry published by an African American, and only the second book by a woman in what would become the United States. Considering that Ms. Wheatley was bought at a slave auction in 1761, not able to read or write and incapable of speaking English, her book of poems is truly astounding. She was revered in many countries. Benjamin Franklin offered his services to her, as did many other high- ranking men in America. In April of 1776, the author and political philosopher Thomas Paine published Wheatley's poem to Washington in *The Pennsylvania Magazine.* The central theme of this poem is "freedom's cause," the colonies' struggle for freedom from England, which General Washington was assigned to lead. Like many other residents of Boston, Wheatley's feelings for the British regime turned from obedient admiration to mild admonition, and finally, to support of the revolution. The poem anticipates the future for the new republic, and praises the efforts of its military leader and first president.

Author Biography

Wheatley was born in 1753 or 1754 in West Africa (present-day Senegal), kidnapped, and brought to New England in 1761. John Wheatley, a wealthy Boston merchant, bought her for his wife, Susanna, who wanted a youthful personal maid to serve her in her old age. Wheatley was frail and sickly, but her gentle, demure manner charmed Susanna. The child learned to read and write quickly and became proficient in Latin, so the Wheatleys assigned her only light housekeeping duties and encouraged her to study and write poetry. As a result, she achieved a high level of education rare for upper-class colonial men, let alone women or slaves. In fact, Wheatley was treated less like a servant and more like a member of the Wheatley family. She was given a private, well-heated room and a lamp to use at night. She was free to visit with the Wheatleys' friends but forbidden to associate with other slaves.

It is believed that Wheatley began writing in 1765. Her poem "An Elegiac Poem, on the Death of That Celebrated Divine, and Eminent Servant of Jesus Christ, the Reverend and Learned George Whitefield" gained her national and international attention when it was published locally in 1770 as a broadside pamphlet and then reprinted in newspapers throughout the American colonies and in England. Wheatley continued to write elegies and honorific verses to commemorate the lives of friends and famous contemporaries as well as poems to celebrate important events.

Wheatley was freed from slavery three months before Susanna Wheatley's death in March 1774. She married John Peters on April 1, 1778. Peters was a free black man who worked as a lawyer and grocer, among other occupations, and was a writer and speaker. Peters eventually abandoned Wheatley and their three children, forcing Wheatley to work as a scullery maid in a rooming house. Two of her children died. Untrained for menial labor and physically frail, she died at the age of thirty-one on December 5, 1784. Her third child died within a few hours of Wheatley and was buried with her in an unmarked grave.

Poem Text

Celestial choir! enthron'd in realms of light,
Columbia's scenes of glorious toils I write.
While freedom's cause her anxious breast alarms,
She flashes dreadful in refulgent arms.
See mother earth her offspring's fate bemoan,
And nations gaze at scenes before unknown!
See the bright beams of heaven's revolving light
Involved in sorrows and veil of night!

The goddess comes, she moves divinely fair,
Olive and laurel bind her golden hair:
Wherever shines this native of the skies,
Unnumber'd charms and recent graces rise.

Muse! bow propitious while my pen relates
How pour her armies through a thousand gates,
As when Eolus heaven's fair face deforms,
Enwrapp'd in tempest and a night of storms;
Astonish'd ocean feels the wild uproar,
The refluent surges beat the sounding shore;
Or thick as leaves in Autumn's golden reign,

Such, and so many, moves the warrior's train.
In bright array they seek the work of war,
Where high unfurl'd the ensign waves in air.
Shall I to Washington their praise recite?
Enough thou know'st them in the fields of fight.
Thee, first in peace and honours,□we demand
The grace and glory of thy martial band.
Fam'd for thy valour, for thy virtues more,
Hear every tongue thy guardian aid implore!

One century scarce perform'd its destined
round,
When Gallic powers Columbia's fury found;
And so may you, whoever dares disgrace
The land of freedom's heaven-defended race!
Fix'd are the eyes of the nations on the scales,
For in their hopes Columbia's arm prevails.
Anon Britannia droops the pensive head,
While round increase the rising hills of dead.
Ah! cruel blindness to Columbia's state!
Lament thy thirst of boundless power too late.

Proceed, great chief, with virtue on thy side,40
Thy ev'ry action let the goddess guide.
A crown, a mansion, and a throne that shine,
With gold unfading, WASHINGTON! be thine.

Plot Summary

Line 1

Celestial choir is the poet's muse, a device of neoclassicism. The muse is called on to inspire the poet's writing.

Line 2

"Columbia" was a term Wheatley used for America, later used by other writers.

Line 3

"Freedom's cause" is the central theme of the poem, the struggle of the colonists to be free from England, even if it meant going to war against the more powerful British.

Line 4

In this context, "dreadful" means "inspiring awe or reverence," "in refulgent arms" means "in brilliant defense." In this sense, Columbia (America) is portrayed in righteous terms for standing up against England.

Lines 5-6

The speaker of the poem points out that other countries are watching something unique occurring in the uprising. And as it turns out, the American Revolution directly inspired the French Revolution.

Lines 7-8

Heaven is affected by the struggle in a sorrowful way.

Lines 9-12

The poet describes the goddess of Freedom coming down from the heavens to become involved in the war. The ancient Greeks would use laurel to crown the victors in their games. An olive branch is a symbol of peace.

Lines 13-14

The poet calls on the muse again to be favorably disposed to inspire the poet in the retelling of the battles the American armies are going through.

Lines 15-19

The poet, through a simile, compares the American forces' battles to the power of Eolus, king of the winds.

Line 20

The "train" is the troops in file, as lining up in military formation.

Lines 21-22

The "ensign" is a flag decorated in national colors, or emblems, relating to the army displaying it. In this case, it would have been decorated with an emblem of the colonial armies sewn on it.

Lines 23-25

"Thee" is Washington, and the phrase "first in peace" is the most famous phrase in the poem, used later by Congress at Washington's funeral. There is some argument as to whether Wheatley wrote "first in peace" or "first in place," since, as commander- in-chief of the army, Washington would naturally be "first in place" over all the troops. Both versions have been published.

Lines 26-29

In 1620, a little over one hundred years before the writing of this poem, the Pilgrims first landed at Plymouth Rock.

Line 30

France was considered a strong country, skilled at warfare, with "Gallic" referring to the French.

Lines 31-32

The speaker considers America's efforts sanctioned by heaven, and warns against those, such as England, who war against her.

Lines 33-34

The poet suggests the whole world is watching the outcome of the war, seeing which way the power may shift, hoping it may be toward the new nation.

Lines 35-38

England is described as old and tired, responsible for many deaths, inspired by a thirst for power. The colonists first tried to reason with England but had to settle for war to gain their independence.

Lines 39-42

The poet encourages Washington to continue his objective in gaining freedom for the colonists, and she argues that the goddess of Freedom is guiding his actions. If he follows the goddess and her virtue, the poet suggests that Washington will win the war and become the head of the new state.

Themes

Freedom

The date that Wheatley wrote this poem, 1776, is familiar to Americans with even the weakest sense of history as a date associated with freedom. It is mentioned every year on one of the nation's major holidays, the Fourth of July, as the date of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, which proclaimed that the colonies were no longer subject to the rule of England. In the poem, Wheatley not only asserts that America has a right to be free from British rule but goes so far as to identify America as the land of freedom. Although this poem does not make any reference to it, there is of course a good deal of irony implicit in the very fact of an African-American woman writing in 1776 to urge a white male to fight for freedom. In 1776, women were not allowed any political rights and were not even allowed to vote until the twentieth century, after decades of hard work by members of the suffrage movement. The vast majority of blacks in the colonies had even less freedom: in some Southern states, though there were as many or more blacks as whites, the blacks were slaves and subject to legal abuse for disobeying their owners. Though freedom for blacks and women was eventually won by people who stood up against the status quo and drew attention to unfairness, Phillis Wheatley was not in a position to address these concerns. Still, her poem did address an issue with which most citizens were concerned, and her praise of General Washington did serve to encourage the revolution against England. In a small, subtle way this advanced the cause of freedom for women and blacks by drawing attention to the intelligence and sensitivity of one of their rank.

Hero

In the poem, George Washington is referred to as a hero in the grandest tradition of the word, as the embodiment of all virtues that his society needs to save it from its enemies. The second stanza□ the poem's longest one□lists the accomplishments of the armies under his command and then notes that it is useless to list such accomplishments for Washington, who is famed not only for his valor but for his virtue as well. A narrower sense of heroism, one that is used in everyday discourse, would claim great military might for the hero without mentioning moral righteousness. In this case, though, Wheatley claims for the hero every positive attribute possible, both physical and spiritual.

To some extent, it is unnecessary for the poem to praise Washington's military heroics because they had already been observed and accepted by all of the people of the United States. The praise that Wheatley heaps on Washington's prowess as a general in this poem is necessary for properly enumerating his accomplishments as a hero, but it represents the poem's least original thinking and may have been boring to readers and even to Washington himself, who had long since accepted his mastery of the battlefield. Wheatley goes beyond praising his accomplishments, though, and adds a

dimension of righteousness to her praise of the man so that his accomplishments seem sanctioned by the will of God. The concept of a worldly hero who excels at his work is fine, but it is limited, especially when it is compared to the idea of a hero who has, as line 39 puts it, virtue by his side.

Divine Right

Students of this poem often focus on it as the work of the first woman of African descent to have her writing published in North America, but the only race that the poem itself mentions is "freedom's heaven-defended race." Just how the American people came to claim such an exalted title is not explained: instead, the poem just assumes that America is blessed, and uses that as evidence of George Washington's greatness. In assuming that the colonies' freedom from England is the will of God, Wheatley is able to heap even greater praise upon the subject of her poem, who leads the fight for America's freedom. The most successful warriors are the ones who are not held back by selfdoubt, so the poem's attitude toward the righteousness of America's cause must have been the same one that Washington had to a great degree. Expressing it as the poem does, more eloquently than Washington would have been able to, conferred legitimacy on his feelings by showing the assumption of God's support to be the intelligent, poetic way to look at the war. In part, this poem's purpose was to flatter George Washington, which is clear from the fact that Wheatley sent it directly to him, but another purpose would have to have been, like all poetry, to explain the subject for readers of future generations. By claiming divine right for the colonial cause, Wheatley not only flattered the general but strongly suggested to readers that God must have supported one side of the conflict over the other.

Style

Phillis Wheatley is roundly considered to follow the neoclassical style of Alexander Pope, an early eighteenth-century poet highly regarded in Wheatley's era. She borrowed images from the neoclassical style easily, such as "realms of light," "astonish'd ocean," and "Autumn's golden reign." Wheatley also includes references to Greek mythology in her verse□the goddess of Freedom, muses and celestial choirs, Eolus, the god of wind. Her poem is written in heroic couplet, where rhyming is made within two lines, as in the last words of the second stanza's lines: "fair" and "hair," "skies" and "rise." As well as the rhyming couplets, Wheatley employed a similar number of syllables for every line□most of the lines consist of ten syllables. In the poem, the concept of freedom is abstracted, much in the style of neoclassicism. Yet there are also intimations toward the emotional style of the upcoming Romantic movement. Whereas neoclassicism stood for the established political and social order, Wheatley breaks with neoclassical convention in this poem by supporting the efforts of the revolutionary army. This poem is highly imaginative, also similar to the Romantic movement, as it idealizes a hard struggle that was forming all around her in the New England colonies, proclaiming the success of Washington and his troops long before it became a reality.

Historical Context

George Washington

"To His Excellency George Washington" was written to Washington when he was the commander of the American forces during the Revolutionary War, almost thirteen years before he took the position for which he is best remembered, as the country's first president. Commanding the army was a position for which Washington seemed destined, one that made the most of his strengths and minimized his personal shortcomings. He was born in 1732 to a large and moderately wealthy family in rural Virginia. As a child growing up in a British colony, he dreamed of becoming an officer in the British army but was discouraged from this dream by his mother and by an older brother who pointed out that the family lacked the connections that would be necessary for him to rise in the ranks. At the age of seventeen, he became the surveyor of Culpepper County, which gave him an opportunity to travel across the country and to earn an income allowing him to live independently from his family. A few years later, when his older brother Lawrence contracted tuberculosis, Washington traveled with him to Barbados, the only trip he ever made outside of the American colonies. Lawrence died the following year, and Washington eventually inherited the family estate, Mount Vernon, from him.

In 1753, British and French interests were in dispute over territory in the valley of the Ohio River, and Washington took the opportunity to enlist with the British. Sent to observe the French Fort Duquesne (at a wilderness site that is now Pittsburgh), he killed a party of French soldiers that he mistook to be spies. This event set off the French and Indian War, which blossomed into a global conflict that involved Prussia, Great Britain, and Hanover against Austria, Saxony, France, Russia, Sweden, and Spain. During this war, Washington became famous throughout the colonies for his military skills. He became frustrated with the British army, though, and resigned his commission in 1759 and retired to life as a farmer and a member in the Virginia legislature.

When fighting broke out between the colonies and Britain in April of 1775, the Continental Congress convened to determine a strategy for waging war. George Washington was appointed by unanimous vote to lead the army on June 15. It was his responsibility to organize the militias of the various states into a fighting force with enough power to hold off one of the world's most powerful and sophisticated military organizations. His responsibility was not to defeat the entire British army but to convince them that it was a waste of effort to keep pouring money and troops into North America. Much of the success of the Revolution is credited to the soldiers' devotion to Washington and the near-religious awe that he inspired in them, which is reflected in the poem.

After the British quit the fighting in 1783, the colonies tried to work cooperatively as independent units, but it soon became clear that a central government had to be formed

in order to oversee the situation. The Constitution was drafted in 1787, and General Washington was the clear choice to be the nation's first president. Much of the way that the government operates today is styled after traditions developed during Washington's first and second administrations. Some people feared that he would rule America until his death, and some hoped that he would, but when he willingly stepped down in 1796, it proved that the new nation would be governed by democratic vote and not become a case of a new monarchy replacing an old one.

The American Revolution

Like most armed conflicts, the Revolutionary War was the culmination of years of animosity that had built up until the moment when the two sides broke into outright hostility□with gunfire on April 19, 1775, at Lexington, Massachusetts, with the "shot heard 'round the world." The American Colonies had been settled primarily by British immigrants, but there had been other nations involved, too, primarily the Dutch and the French, who came down from the Canadian territories. From 1689 to 1763, there was a series of four wars between the English and the French regarding who would have primary control of the North American colonies. The last, the French and Indian War, led to a global conflict that left America in British hands. It also, however, left Britain with massive war-related debts, and to pay these debts, King George III of England imposed a series of increasingly harsh taxes on the colonies, seeking to draw from their untapped natural resources. Glass, tea, paint, and paper coming into the colonies were taxed at a high rate. Colonists resisted by refusing to buy goods imported from England. The British became more aggressive with their demands; the resistance of the colonists grew as well. In 1774, the British Parliament passed a resolution that came to be known as the "Intolerable Acts," punishing Massachusetts residents by shutting down their government and closing Boston Harbor. The first Continental Congress convened soon after, forming a crude form of national government. In April of 1775, the British lieutenant general Thomas Gage sent troops out into the Massachusetts countryside to collect the colonists' weapons; several scouts, including Paul Revere, rode ahead into the countryside to warn that the British were coming. The next day, at Lexington, the war began, with eight Americans dead by the end of the day.

The Revolution was fought from 1775 to 1781, when Washington's army defeated the British at Yorktown, Virginia, after a two-month-long siege. After that, open fighting between the two sides ended, although the war was not officially over until the Treaty of Paris was signed by both sides in 1783.

Critical Overview

Jay Parini, writing of Wheatley in *Columbia History of American Poetry,* explains that "from the time of her first published piece to the present day, controversy has surrounded the life and work of America's first black poet, and only its second published woman poet. . . . Few poets of any age have been so scornfully maligned, so passionately defended, so fervently celebrated, and so patronizingly tolerated." In *Critical Survey of Poetry, English Language Series,* John Shields points out that "one of the major subjects of her poetry is the American struggle for independence . . . Wheatley so energetically proclaims America's success in the political arena certainly attests her sympathies . . . that a people who find themselves unable to accept a present, unsatisfactory government, have the right to change that government, even if such a change can be accomplished through armed revolt." This poem is a description of that feeling. There has been much dissension in the criticism of Phillis Wheatley's poetry. One camp derides her for not being more vocal in her dissent against slavery. The other camp proclaims her as a true revolutionary, an African-American female slave in eighteenthcentury New England, writing poetry that excels what was typically being written during her time. In *Bid the Vassal Soar,* M. A. Richmond recounts that in 1810, responding to a harsh criticism of Wheatley's poetry by none other than Thomas Jefferson, Samuel Stanhope Smith, president of the College of New Jersey, wrote: "The poems of Phillis Wheatley, a poor African slave, taught to read by the indulgent piety of her master are spoken of with infinite contempt. But I will demand of Mr. Jefferson, or of any other man who is acquainted with American planters, how many of those masters have written poems equal to those of Phillis Wheatley?" The answer was not one.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and literature at Oakton Community College in Des Plaines, Illinois. In this essay, he recognizes the common tendency to interpret Wheatley's poem in terms of her race and her significance to blacks in America, but he urges readers to not make too much of what is not there.

To contemporary students, the story of Phillis Wheatley is often more interesting than her poems. This is especially true in the case of the historical poem "To His Excellency General Washington," which comes with a full background story, complete with a guest appearance by one of America's most famous personages. The poem's root story is fascinating and is itself an important part of the nation's heritage. It does indeed deserve to be studied today because the details about race, education, and heroism have much to tell about how the country developed to the point at which it is today. The poem is as carefully flattering as any poet laureate's work would be for any inauguration, and Washington's effort to drape modesty over his delight when corresponding with Wheatley is no different from any politician's reaction to public praise. The lack of any sign of racial identity in this particular poem□and in Wheatley's poetry in general□ reflects a stance toward the country's muddled race relations that is as relevant today as it was before the country was formed; and Wheatley's quick descent after her great fame (she was dead within ten years at age thirty-one) is still a relevant warning about how quickly fame can fade away.

The circumstances around this poem have almost endless historical significance, but without the poem itself, Wheatley's story is just the interesting tale of an unusual African-American woman living in a colony that is fighting for its freedom but is about to stamp its approval on human slavery. Often, it is easier to examine any poem without taking into account the circumstances of the poet who wrote it, and many critics recommend this approach. With a poem like "To His Excellency General Washington," readers and critics have to remind themselves to look at the poem itself.

The poem's most striking feature is its use of language. The words themselves are complex, elevated, the sort of elitist words that authors have tried to avoid more and more, especially since modernism began early in the twentieth century. The audience that modern poets imagine for themselves is one of ordinary people, and they don't want to put these readers off by using words that only the most educated readers would understand. Many of the words Wheatley uses in "To His Excellency General Washington" would have been no more familiar to the average soldiers in Washington's army than they are to students today. Though most of them make themselves clear when read in context, they are not words that are readily recognizable. For example, the distinction between "refulgent" (line 4) and "refluent" (line 18) is one that could be understood by perhaps one person in a hundred.

What's more, Wheatley shows a fondness for going out of her way to shorten words by making contractions of them. In theory, she needs to do this to make them fit into her rhythm scheme, but more likely she does it to draw attention to her own nimble control

of the language. Words like "enthron'd," "unnumber'd," "enwrapp'd," "fam'd," and the rest, may have fit the poem just fine if they had been put into the poem intact, but the contracted form, with its little curlicue of an apostrophe, may have made them look classy to Wheatley's audience.

To modern audiences, such verbal embellishments may be annoying, but Wheatley wrote during the Age of Enlightenment: she and her peers felt optimistic about knowledge in general and education in particular, and that optimism led to their eagerness to use any verbal trick available, almost daring readers to keep up with them. Poetry certainly was not new during the Enlightenment, but poets treated it as if human intelligence were in its infancy and waiting to be taken to new heights. The verbal excesses of writers of the eighteenth century lack the modesty that appeals to modern audiences. Eighteenth-century writers ran amok with excitement about what could be done with words and therefore showed little restraint. Critics make too little of this enthusiasm, leaving readers annoyed and baffled. Too often, they tend to mention that Phillis Wheatley was an Enlightenment poet and, having mentioned it, go on to pigeonhole her as a black writer and then to focus on the absence of black themes in her work.

Granting her the freedom to use gaudy words, modern readers can appreciate Wheatley's skill in stringing her words together. Her rhythm in this poem was flawlessly iambic, which, more than just a technical definition, is the rolling "unstressed" pattern of syllables that makes the poem so easy to read out loud, and to hear. The words might not be entirely familiar, but the rhythm is undeniable. As twenty-first-century readers know from the development of pop music over the last twenty years, rhythm is the thing that audiences connect with most. Rather than focusing on the words, readers might well appreciate "To His Excellency General Washington" for its musicality.

One other technique that Wheatley used that should be recognized as a reflection of her time is her way of calling out to the gods of antiquity. The poem is sprinkled with frequent references to the "celestial choir," the "muse," and the "goddess," in addition to such classical allusions as the one to "Autumn's golden reign." Identifying the Enlightenment's influences on her is relevant to understanding and accepting the poem because Wheatley, like all other Enlightenment writers, is clearly straining to show off all that she knows: if readers think she took these measures as a member of the social underclass, they might consider it a way of overcompensating for low self-esteem, but, in fact, it was just the way writers operated. It hardly helps modern readers appreciate the poem to tell them that Wheatley was following a fad of her time, but it is better to let them think of her as a poet of her age than to leave them to frame her as a black poet, only to find the frame empty. Readers who accept the poem's style but still feel uncomfortable with it may find themselves having trouble with Wheatley's excessive praise of George Washington, then the leader of the Continental Army. This is one of the clearest examples of how the passage of time has changed a poem's significance. Poetry today is more inclined to look at prominent social figures as fallen heroes. Horror became war's defining aspect in the twentieth century. After all that was written about the First and Second World Wars and the Vietnam conflict, American society has little patience for poets who try to glorify war. Students see Wheatley's images as quaint,

naive relics and are as likely to believe in the nobility of "the unfurl'd ensign" and the "heaven-defined races" as they are to believe in the myth of Atlas holding the world in space on his giant shoulders.

And yet, readers still have a faint taste of the heroism that Wheatley tapped into with this poem. As ugly as political competition gets, most opponents are willing to keep quiet and support the military during times of conflict. America's most recent significant military action, the Persian Gulf War in 1991, made household names out of Generals Powell and Schwartzkopf, and there is every reason to believe that Americans, no matter how cynical, will make heroes out of the next war's generals.

The fact that George Washington went on to become president only serves to confuse the poem's message for modern readers. Presidents have never been above criticism the way that military leaders have. Opposition is the basis of the democratic political process. Today, high praise for a politician is just as likely as not to come from the politician's supporters, who then try to make it look like the work of an innocent, ardent supporter like Wheatley. In a world of public-relations hype, Wheatley's praise of Washington sets off the modern reader's defense mechanism.

"To His Excellency General Washington" evokes greatness the old-fashioned way, with an admirer using her poetic gift and vast classical training to heap praise on a man that the world generally agreed was great. It uses figures of speech and classical symbols with which modern audiences are not comfortable, and it is direct in its praise to such a degree that readers of today's modern, ironic age hardly know what to do with it. There is a fascinating social story attached to this poem. It has to do with the fact that Wheatley was black in a world that seldom recorded the existence of black citizens, that Washington's plantation in Virginia owned two hundred slaves, that Wheatley received an exceptional education and was encouraged to develop her natural talent while most talented African Americans were taught that they were incapable of complex thought. One March afternoon in 1776, this exceptional woman and this exceptional man met and conversed for thirty minutes. The details of their meeting and its symbolic ramifications for all American history makes for a fascinating story. But it is not the story of this poem.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on "To His Excellency General Washington," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Richmond examines the interaction between George Washington and Phillis Wheatley in the aftermath of her writing "To His Excellency General Washington."

So many visitors came flocking to General Washington's headquarters at Cambridge early in 1776 that one chronicler of the proceedings there chose apologetically not to set down the long list.

"I cannot refrain, however," he interjected, "from noticing the visit of one, who, though a dark child from Africa and a bondwoman, received the most polite attention of the Commander-in-Chief. This was Phillis, a slave of Mr. Wheatley, of Boston . . . She passed half an hour with the Commanderin- Chief, from whom and his officers, she received marked attention."

Having then just attained the age of twentythree, Phillis Wheatley was no child, but she was definitely dark, an African, and a slave, attributes sufficiently unique among Washington's visitors to prompt the chronicler's departure from his resolve not to clutter the record with an account of those who came to Cambridge. The uniqueness of the visit is underscored by the circumstances.

Washington was an uncommonly busy man at the time, having been designated by the Continental Congress only a few months earlier as Commander- in-Chief of the Armies of North America, and being occupied with the effort to fashion a reality that approximated the grandiloquence of his title. The armies were still to be created out of scattered bands of armed irregulars, and were still to face the major tests of battle against the imperial might of the British Crown.

With this burden of military duties, Washington could hardly have welcomed civilian visitors, making an exception perhaps for those who came on relevant business; that is, influential politicians, financiers, or potential suppliers and provisioners of his troops. Surely, one least likely to be welcomed at general headquarters might well have been a "dark child from Africa," who was a slave, a poet, and a woman. As a Virginia plantation owner with two hundred slaves, Washington was hardly predisposed to the polite entertainment of a slave. Nor were his intellectual interests such as to impel him to seek out the company of poets. And the male prejudices implicit in Southern chivalry would not have deemed a wartime military camp the proper haunt for a young woman, although in this instance Southern chivalry might be irrelevant because Miss Wheatley was black.

Just the same, against all the odds, the Father of His Country did grant a civil audience to the slave poet who just as fittingly may be christened the Mother of Black Literature in North America. Events leading up to the curious encounter are shrouded with choice ambiguities. The opening shot, however, clearly was fired by Miss Wheatley with a letter and poem addressed to Washington at his Cambridge headquarters. The letter follows:

Providence,

October 26, 1775

SIR.
I have taken the freedom to address your Excellency
in the enclosed poem, and entreat your acceptance,
though I am not insensible of its inaccuracies. Your
being appointed by the Grand Continental Congress
to be Generalissimo of the Armies of North America,
together with the fame of your virtues, excite sensations
not easy to suppress. Your generosity, therefore,
I presume, will pardon the attempt. Wishing
your Excellency all possible success in the great
cause you are so generously engaged in, I am, Your
Excellency's mostly obedient and humble servant,
Phillis Wheatley

For the next four months then there was silence, with no record that the General had received or noted the poet's offering. Finally, on February 10, 1776, writing at some length about other matters to his military secretary, Colonel Joseph Reed, Washington added almost as an afterthought:

I recollect nothing else worth giving you the trouble
of unless you can be amused by reading a letter and
poem addressed to me by Mrs. or Miss Phillis Wheatley.
In searching over a parcel of papers the other
day, in order to destroy such as were useless, I
brought it to light again. At first, with a view to doing
justice to her great poetical genius, I had a great
mind to publish the poem; but not knowing whether
it might not be considered rather as a mark of my
own vanity, than as a compliment to her, I laid it
aside, till I came across it again in the manner just
mentioned.

Several questions are provoked by this brief passage, chiefly: Did Washington know who his correspondent was? Were the Wheatley letter and poem saved from destruction as useless by the chance thought that they might amuse Reed?

Historians are divided in their answer to the first question. True, Phillis Wheatley had by then achieved fame as a slave poet□but it is also true that Washington's interest in poetry was so slight that she might have escaped his notice, and the reference to her "poetical genius" could rest on the one poem rather than on a knowledge of her prior work. More intriguing is his use of "Mrs. or Miss," for it was not the custom then among whites, most especially slaveowners, to dignify slaves with such titles. The chronicler who recorded the meeting between the general and the poet employed the common

usage, "Phillis (no Miss or Mrs.), a slave of *Mr.* Wheatley," and he *was* aware of her reputation as a poet. It would seem that the "Mrs. or Miss" is evidence not only of Washington's uncertainty about his correspondent's marital status but of a more fundamental ignorance of her identity□except for the suggestion that the secretary might be amused by the letter and poem, flavoring the entire passage with condescension and irony, which was common white sport at the expense of slaves (and, indeed, this sort of entertainment survived emancipation in white American lore). If this was the vein of the memo, there could be more mockery than courtesy in the usage of "Mrs. or Miss." However, Washington's suggestion of amusement may be attributed more charitably to modesty or the affectation of it. A general is no more likely to be a hero to his secretary than to his valet, and the Wheatley poem was so fulsome that Washington might well have been constrained to inject a deprecating note when transmitting it to Reed, especially since he was concerned with the appearance of vanity.

The controversy cannot be resolved conclusively, but its very existence says something about the black-white relationship, involving in this instance the most renowned slave and the most highly esteemed slaveowner of 1776.

However the communication to the secretary is interpreted, its tone certainly did not foreshadow what Washington was to write little, more than a fortnight later, this time directly to the poet. Dated from Cambridge, February 28, 1776, the letter reads:

Miss Phillis, Your favor of the 26th of October did
not reach my hands till the middle of December. Time
enough□you will say, to have given answer ere this.
Granted. But a variety of important occurrences, continually
interposing to distract the mind and withdraw
the attention, I hope will apologize for the delay, and
plead my excuse for the seeming, but not real neglect.
I thank you most sincerely for your polite notice
of me in the elegant lines you enclosed; and however
undeserving I may be of such encomium and
panegyric, the style and manner exhibit a striking
proof of your poetical talents; in honor of which, and
as a tribute justly due you, I would have published
the poem, had I not been apprehensive that, while I
only meant to give the world this new instance of
your genius, I might have incurred the imputation of
vanity. This, and nothing else, determined me not to
give it a place in the public prints.

If you should ever come to Cambridge, or near headquarters,
I shall be happy to see a person so favored
by the Muses, and to whom nature has been so beneficent
in her dispensations. I am with great respect,
your obedient and humble servant.

The internal evidence is overwhelming that the General knew the identity of the poet. The reference to "this new instance of your genius" presupposes awareness of prior instances of it, and the open invitation to visit his headquarters also suggests acquaintance with whom his correspondent was. This time there is no ambiguity about her unmarried state, and the use of "Miss Phillis" seems like a knowing compromise: the overall tone of the letter dictating the common courtesy of "Miss" in the salutation and the first name only drawing the line of caste differentiation. One historian, whose focus is on Washington's relationship with the Negro, observed, "This . . . is probably the first time in his life that he ever accorded the civility of 'Mrs.' or 'Miss' to one of her race, or gave a Negro the unusual distinction of an invitation to pay him a social visit."

As plausible a speculation as any is that between February 10, when he wrote to Reed, and February 28, when he wrote to Phillis Wheatley, Washington was briefed by someone, possibly Reed, about his correspondent's identity, thus accounting for the striking change in attitude.

In any event, acceptance of the invitation was much more prompt than its issuance. In March, four months before independence was declared, the General and the poet met in Cambridge, neither knowing what the still infant war had in store for them. They should have been guided by the prescience that wars make generals and destroy poets.

Although the General was then forty-four and the poet only twenty-three, his former service as a secondary officer in a minor war had hardly tested his mettle as a commander of armies and a leader of men, and all the accomplishments that were to establish his place in history and legend were still before him; she, on the other hand, had completed the main body of her published literary work. The tall, physically robust soldier still had twenty-four years of life left; the slender, frail poet had less than nine.

In a sense, the poet anticipated the Washington legend, the effulgent tones of her poem seeming more in harmony with the successful conclusion of the war than with its uncertain beginning. Aside from this, an interesting claim is made for the poem: that she originated the phrase "first in peace." This seems doubtful, since in the poem's context "first in place and honours" fits better than does "first in peace and honours," although both renditions have been published.

Despite Washington's protestation that publication of the poem could be misunderstood as a token of his vanity, the poetic tribute from the black slave to the white general appeared in the April, 1776, issue of the *Pennsylvania Magazine,* then edited by Thomas Paine. Presumably Reed, residing in Philadelphia at the time, arranged for its publication. The poem follows in full, for its historical interest and as a fair example of Miss Wheatley's poetic output, both in literary form and intellectual content, at the peak of her fame.

Surely Washington may be forgiven if from a reading of this poem he could not divine that its author was either an African or a slave. The ornate style was clearly an imitation of Alexander Pope's, which was then the fashion and had, therefore, many imitators. The thought was mercantile Whig, preferred by the fashionable New England society in

which the poet's owners, the Wheatleys, moved, and the suggestion of a golden throne and crown for Washington at the poem's end might easily have been no mere poetic image but an expression of political belief.

The poem poses a mystery more profound than Washington's awareness or nonawareness of the poet's identity. How did the poet comprehend her own identity? Relevant to this question is the larger background of the Wheatley-Washington exchange, a background that concerned the relationship of the Continental Army to all blacks.

On October 18, 1775, just eight days before Miss Wheatley wrote her letter to Washington, the Continental Congress adopted a resolution that barred all blacks from the Revolutionary armies. As happens so often, the Congressmen did not make policy; they merely approved a policy that the generals had already put into effect. With Washington's sanction, his council of general officers had already determined that no blacks, free or slave, were to be soldiers.

Eleven days after the Wheatley letter, on November 7, the royal governor of Virginia, Lord Dunmore, issued a proclamation that said:

> I do hereby further declare that all indented servants, Negroes, or others (appertaining to rebels) free, that are able and willing to bear arms, they joining his Majesty's troops as soon as may be.

Note that the proclamation did not refer to all slaves, only to those owned by rebels. Slaveowners loyal to the king were safe in the possession of their chattels (at least as far as Lord Dunmore was concerned, although slave rebellions and escapes, which were numerous in those unsettled times, did not await his royal dispensation). Later, the British Army did not always keep its promise of liberty, and many of its black volunteers were afterward sold into bondage elsewhere in the British colonies. But all this was later and did not affect the potential impact of Lord Dunmore's proclamation at the time of its issuance. A half-million blacks, a few free and the rest slaves, inhabited the Colonies. Their disposition could be decisive in determining the outcome of the still gathering contest. Apparently the king's governor in Virginia thought so, and his prime adversary from Virginia, General Washington, was impelled to counter this bold stroke.

Without consulting either his general officers' council or the Continental Congress, and ignoring his prior concurrence with their decisions, on December 30, 1775, Washington issued the following order from his Cambridge headquarters:

> As the General is informed, that Numbers of Free Negroes are desirous of enlisting, he gives leave to the recruiting officers to entertain them, and promises to lay the matter before the Congress, who he doubts not will approve it.

The next day Washington sent a letter to the Continental Congress with the explanation that "free Negroes who have served in this Army, are very much dissatisfied at being discarded," and that therefore he had run counter to his previous instructions from the Congress and permitted blacks to enlist. Note the date of these communications the end of December and then recall that in his letter to Phillis Wheatley, Washington said that hers, dated October 26, somehow did not reach his hands "till the middle of December." Was this purely coincidental, or did subordinates in his entourage consider the poet's message of insufficient importance for his attention until a change in policy on black enlistments was under consideration?

Once again, Congress voted after the fact of military action. Early in January, 1776, the Congress approved Washington's unilateral reversal of its policy, stating in its resolution:

the free Negroes who have served faithfully in the
army at Cambridge, may be re-enlisted, but no others.

More mincing than the royal governor, who promised freedom to slaves who fought for the king, the Colonial Congress promised them nothing, and even for freed blacks Congressional generosity was limited to conferring the right to bear arms only upon those who had already exercised it. Congressional apprehension at Lord Dunmore's thrust was overshadowed by solicitude for the slaveowner's property rights. After all, Washington was not the only large slaveholder among the leaders of the independence forces. Several Colonies, however, went beyond the Congress and passed laws providing freedom for slaves who fought with their armies. So it was that at least five thousand blacks fought in the armies of the American Revolution. The pressures of military necessity played a part similar, if not comparable in scope, to the part they were to play four score and seven years later, when Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation.

Congressional approval of Washington's policy change came, as has been noted, in January. What effect, if any, did this have on creating the climate for Washington's gracious note to Miss Wheatley in the subsequent month? Granted, this is a question of conjecture, but it is not far-fetched. Presumably, in his position Washington was guided by considerations of state in small matters as well as large, and a modification of policy toward blacks in general would have influenced the relationship with one particular black poet.

If Phillis Wheatley was aware of the political maneuvers of Lord Dunmore and General Washington in relation to blacks and the rival armies, there is no trace of it in her communications, rhymed or prose, to the General. And if her feeling toward the Revolutionary War was in any way shaped by her condition as a black and as slave, there is no hint of it in her writing.

Who was she then? There are bone-bare facts to answer this question. Who did she think she was? Here the answer is more obscure, more complex, reflecting self-awareness, a sense of self-identity, all the influences, crude or subtle, that fashion a

human mind and spirit. Traces of such influences must be sought along the path she traversed from Africa to Cambridge.

Source:M.A. Richmond, "The Poet and the General," in *Bid the Vassal Soar,* Howard University Press, 1974, pp.3-10.

Adaptations

Phillis Wheatley, Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells Barnett, Sojourner Truth, and others are represented on Smithsonian Folkways' compact disc *The Negro Woman,* performed by Dorothy Washington.

Wheatley's poem "On Liberty and Slavery" is included on an audiocassette collection from Audio Bookshelf entitled *I, Too, Sing America,* released in 2000.

"To His Excellency George Washington" is included on an 1955 recording entitled *Anthology of Negro Poets in the USA,* edited by Arna Bontemps. It was re-released on cassette in 1992 by Smithsonian Folkways Records.

In 1992, Smithsonian Folkways also released a cassette called *Blacks in the American Revolutionary War,* which covers individuals such as Wheatley and Crispus Atticus as well as blacks who served in the armed forces.

Topics for Further Study

Write a report on the use of the word "Columbia" to refer to the United States, and how "America" came to be chosen as the country's official name.

Throughout history, war heroes have gone from the military to political careers. Do you think that they are generally successful as politicians? Explain why or why not.

Washington's army was at a terrible disadvantage, with fewer soldiers and resources than the British. Report on the difficulties that the army of the American Revolution faced off the battlefield and how Washington addressed these problems.

Find another song or poem praising a great person and report on the author who wrote the piece.

Compare and Contrast

1776: The Declaration of Independence is signed by fifty-six leaders of the American Revolution.

Today: The Declaration of Independence is still used as an inspiration for oppressed people all over the world.

1776: Wheatley lives her life in relative obscurity, unable to find a publisher for her second volume of poetry.

Today: Wheatley is revered for breaking some of the barriers of racism. In 1998, a hand-written copy of her poem "Ocean" is bought at auction for $68,000.

1776: On Christmas night, Washington leads his troops in boats across the Delaware River in a surprise attack against British troops at Trenton, New Jersey.

Today: Washington is remembered as a superb military tactician.

1776: To finance the Revolution, the Continental Congress establishes a nationwide lottery.

Today: State lotteries become a hot trend in the 1980s and 1990s, growing into multi-state games that can reach over a hundred million dollars for a single winner.

1776: This poem is the first to refer to the United States as "Columbia," after Christopher Columbus.

Today: The word is forever linked to General Washington's name in the title of the nation's capitol: Washington, District of Columbia.

What Do I Read Next?

"To His Excellency General Washington" is included in *The Collected Poems of Phillis Wheatley* (1989), available from Oxford University Press.

Another influential poem about a Revolutionary War hero is Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Paul Revere's Ride," which can be found in many poetry anthologies, as well as in *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: Poems and Other Writings* (2000) from the Library of America.

African-American poet Robert Hayden expresses his mixed emotions about Wheatley in his poem entitled "Letter for Phillis Wheatley," which can be found in his *Collected Poems* (1997).

To find out more about what Washington was like, students can go to the words of the man himself. The Library of America has an authoritative collection of his letters and speeches in *Washington: Writings,* first published in 1997.

Lerone Bennett Jr.'s book *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America* (1993) barely mentions Wheatley, but, unlike other histories of Africans in America, it has a long section nearly a hundred pages on blacks in colonial America.

Famed scholar Benjamin Quarles wrote a bestselling book in 1964 called *The Negro in the Making of America.* As the title suggests, the book has much about the role of African Americans in pre-Revolutionary times.The book was most recently updated in 1996.

Patricia Bradley's book *Slavery, Propaganda, and the American Revolution* looks at how the founding fathers avoided addressing the issue of race while rallying colonists to stand against the British. It was published by the University of Mississippi Press in 1998.

George Washington: The Making of an American Symbol by Barry Schwartz is a book devoted to examining the way the Washington legend grew.

Further Study

Foster, Frances Smith, *Written By Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892,* Indiana University Press, 1993.

This book contains literature written by African-American women before the twentieth century. Many students are unaware of the amount of this type of literature.

Knollenberg, Bernhard, *Growth of the American Revolution,* The Free Press, 1975.

This thick book covers a relatively short period of time in detail.

Neimeyer, Charles Patrick, *America Goes to War: A Social History of the Continental Army,* New York University Press, 1996.

Neimeyer examines the soldiers who made up the Continental Army. This source has much about the role of African Americans in the Revolutionary War.

Nott, Walt, "From 'Uncultivated Barbarian' to 'Poetical Genius': The Public Presence of Phillis Wheatley," in *Melus,* Vol. 18, No. 3, Fall 1993, p. 21.

Nott chronicles the development of Wheatley's reputation in the years after her death.

Robinson, William H., *Phillis Wheatley: A Bio-Bibliography,* G. K. Hall, 1981.

In addition to the story of her life, this source contains a list of all of Wheatley's writings in publication.

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Parini, Jay, *Columbia History of American Poetry,* Columbia University Press, 1993, pp. 20-1.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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