PHILLIS WHEATLEY was a native of Africa; and was brought to this country in the year 1761, and sold as a slave.

She was purchased by Mr. John Wheatley, a respectable citizen of Boston. This gentleman, at the time of the purchase, was already the owner of several slaves; but the females in his possession were getting something beyond the active periods of life, and Mrs. Wheatley wished to obtain a young negress, with the view of training her up under her own eye, that she might, by gentle usage, secure to herself a faithful domestic in her old age. She visited the slave-market, that she might make a personal selection from the group of unfortunates offered for sale. There she found several robust, healthy females, exhibited at the same time with Phillis, who was of a slender frame, and evidently suffering from change of climate. She was, however, the choice of the lady, who acknowledged herself influenced to this decision by the humble and modest demeanor and the interesting features of the little stranger.

The poor, naked child (for she had no other covering than a quantity of dirty carpet about her like a fil-

libeg) was taken home in the chaise of her mistress, and comfortably attired. She is supposed to have been about seven years old, at this time, from the circumstance of shedding her front teeth. She soon gave indications of uncommon intelligence, and was frequently seen endeavoring to make letters upon the wall with a piece of chalk or charcoal.

A daughter of Mrs. Wheatley, not long after the child’s first introduction to the family, undertook to learn her to read and write; and, while she astonished her instructress by her rapid progress, she won the good will of her kind mistress, by her amiable disposition and the propriety of her behaviour. She was not devoted to menial occupations, as was at first intended; nor was she allowed to associate with the other domestics of the family, who were of her own color and condition, but was kept constantly about the person of her mistress.

She does not seem to have preserved any remembrance of the place of her nativity, or of her parents, excepting the simple circumstance that her mother poured out water before the sun at his rising—in reference, no doubt, to an ancient African custom. The memories of most children reach back to a much earlier period than their seventh year; but there are some circumstances (which will
shortly appear) which would induce us to suppose, that in the case of Phillis, this faculty did not equal the other powers of her mind. Should we be mistaken in this inference, the faithlessness of memory concerning the scenes of her childhood, may be otherwise accounted for.

We cannot know at how early a period she was beguiled from the hut of her mother; or how long a time elapsed between her abduction from her first home and her being transferred to the abode of her benevolent mistress, where she must have felt like one awaking from a fearful dream. This interval was, no doubt, a long one; and filled, as it must have been, with various degrees and kinds of suffering, might naturally enough obliterate the recollection of earlier and happier days. The solitary exception which held its place so tenaciously in her mind, was probably renewed from day to day through this long season of affliction; for, every morning, when the bereaved child saw the sun emerging from the wide waters, she must have thought of her mother, prostrating herself before the first golden beam that glanced across her native plains.

As Phillis increased in years, the development of her mind realized the promise of her childhood; and she soon attracted the attention of the literati of the day, many of whom furnished her with books. These enabled her to make considerable progress in belles-lettres; but such gratification seems only to have increased her thirst after knowledge, as is the case with most gifted minds, not misled by vanity; and we soon find her endeavoring to master the Latin tongue.

She was now frequently visited by clergymen, and other individuals of high standing in society; but notwithstanding the attention she received, and the distinction with which she was treated, she never for a moment lost sight of that modest, unassuming demeanor, which first won the heart of her mistress in the slave-market. Indeed, we consider the strongest proof of her worth to have been the earnest affection of this excellent woman, who admitted her to her own board. Phillis ate of her bread, and drank of her cup, and was to her as a daughter; for she returned her affection with unbounded gratitude, and was so devoted to her interests as to have no will in opposition to that of her benefactress.

We cannot ascertain that she ever received any formal manumission; but the chains which bound her to her master and mistress were the golden links of love, and the silken bands of gratitude. She had a child’s place in their house and in their hearts. Nor did she, notwithstanding their magnanimity in setting aside the prejudices against color and condition, when they found these adventitious circumstances dignified by talents and worth, ever presume on their indulgence either at home or abroad. Whenever she was invited to the houses of individuals of wealth and distinction, (which frequently happened,) she always declined the seat offered her at their board, and, requesting that a side-table might be laid for her, dined modestly apart from the rest of the company.

We consider this conduct both dignified and judicious. A woman of so much mind as Phillis possessed, could not but be aware of the emptiness of many of the artificial distinctions of life. She could not, indeed, have felt so utterly unworthy to sit down among the guests, with those by whom she had been hidden to the banquet. But she must have been painfully conscious of the feelings with which her unfortunate race were regarded; and must have reflected that, in a mixed company, there might be many individuals who would, perhaps, think they honored her too far by dining with her at the same table. Therefore, by respecting even the prejudices of those who courteously waived them in her favor, she very delicately expressed her gratitude; and, following the counsels of those Scriptures to which she was not a stranger, and taking the lowest seat at the feast, she placed herself where she could certainly expect neither to give or receive offence.

It is related that, upon the occasion of one of these visits, the weather changed during the absence of Phillis; and her anxious mistress, fearful of the effects of cold and damp upon her already delicate health, ordered Prince (also an African and a slave) to take the chaise, and bring home her protegee. When the chaise returned, the good lady drew near the window, as it approached the house, and exclaimed—‘Do but look at the saucy varlet—if he has n’t the impudence to sit upon the same seat with my Phillis!’ And poor Prince received a severe reprimand for forgetting the dignity thus kindly, though perhaps to him unaccountably, attached to the sable person of ‘my Phillis.’

In 1770, at the age of sixteen, Phillis was received as a member of the church worshipping in the Old South
Meeting house, then under the pastoral charge of the Rev. Dr. Sewall. She became an ornament to her profession; for she possessed that meekness of spirit, which, in the language of inspiration, is said to be above all price. She was very gentle-tempered, extremely affectionate, and altogether free from that most despicable foible, which might naturally have been her besetting sin—literary vanity.

The little poem commencing,

‘I was mercy brought me from my heathen land,’

will be found to be a beautiful expression of her religious sentiments, and a noble vindication of the claims of her race. We can hardly suppose any one, reflecting by whom it was written—an African and a slave—to read it without emotions both of regret and admiration...

We have before remarked, that Mrs. Wheatley did not require or permit her services as a domestic; but she would sometimes allow her to polish a table or dust an apartment, (occupations which were not thought derogatory to the dignity of a lady in those days of primitive simplicity) or engage in some other trifling occupation that would break in upon her sedentary habits; but not unfrequently, in these cases, the brush and the duster were soon dropped for the pen, that her meditated verse might not escape her...

The poems now republished, are as they came from the hands of the author, without the alteration of a word or letter. Surely they lift an eloquent voice in behalf of her race.

Is it urged that Phillis is but a solitary instance of African genius? Even though this were the case (which we by no means grant) we reply—that had Phillis fallen into less generous and affectionate hands, she would speedily have perished under the privations and exertions of common servitude. Or had she dragged out a few years of suffering, she would have been of much less value to her master, than the sturdy negro of more obscure faculties, but whose stronger limbs could have borne heavier burthens. How then can it be known, among this unfortunate people, how often the light of genius is quenched in suffering and death?

The great difference between the colored man and his oppressors seems to us to be, that the great Ruler of the universe has appointed power unto the white man for a season; and verily they have bowed down their brethren with a rod of iron. From the luxuriant savannahs of America and the barren sands of Africa, the blood of their victims cries unto God from the ground.

Friends of liberty! friends of humanity! when will ye appoint a jubilee for the African, and let the oppressed go free?

We have named, in the course of the preceding Memoir, some of the remarkable privileges which fell to the lot of Phillis. We should allude also more distinctly to the general disadvantages of her condition. It must not be forgotten, that the opportunities of education allowed females, at this early period, were few and meagre. Those who coveted superior advantages for their children sent them home (as the mother country was fondly termed) for their education. Of course, this expensive method could be adopted only by a privileged few, chiefly belonging to old English families of rank and wealth. The great mass of American females could boast of few accomplishments save housewifery. They had few books beside their Bibles. They were not expected to read—far less to write. It was their province to guide the spindle and distaff, and work willingly with their hands. Now, woman is allowed to establish her humble stool somewhat nearer the elbow-chair of her lord and master; to pore over the huge tome of science, hitherto considered as his exclusive property; to con the musty volumes of classic lore, written even in strange tongues; to form her own opinions, and give them forth to the world. But, in the days of Phillis, these things were not so. She was not stimulated to exertion by the successful cultivation of female talent. She had no brilliant exhibition of feminine genius before her, to excite her emulation; and we are at a loss to conjecture, how the first strivings of her mind after knowledge—her delight in literature, her success even in a dead language, the first bursting forth of her thoughts in song—can be accounted for, unless those efforts are allowed to have been the inspirations of that genius which is the gift of God. And who will dare to say, that the benevolent Sovereign of the universe has appointed her unfortunate race to be hewers of wood and drawers of water, and given them no portion with their brethren...
LESSON PLAN: Perspectives on Slavery

Students analyze an excerpt from a book about Phillis Wheatley and a poem by Wheatley to understand different perspectives on slavery in America.

**Learning Objectives**
Formulate historical questions from memoirs and poems from the past; obtain historical data by uncovering the social context in which it was created; identify gaps in a historical record while constructing a sound historical interpretation; support interpretations with historical evidence to construct reasoned arguments.


**Overview Questions**
What perspective does Odell provide about slavery in the memoir of Phillis Wheatley? How is Wheatley’s perspective alike or different? Which perspective is a more accurate account of slavery in America? How might Odell’s book be interpreted in a social context? What argument can you construct about Odell’s interpretation based on Wheatley’s poem?

**Step 1: Comprehension Questions**
What perspective does Odell provide about slavery in the memoir of Phillis Wheatley? How is Wheatley’s perspective alike or different from that of Odell?

- **Activity:** Assign one of the two primary sources to half of the students; have them formulate questions to pose to the other students on the perspective from which each was written. Next, discuss as a group how the perspectives are similar and different.

**Step 2: Comprehension Questions**
What historical data can you obtain from both primary sources about slavery? Is the memoir an accurate account of slavery in America?

- **Activity:** Ask students to compile a list of historical facts about slavery using both primary sources. Have students use additional resources to compare the facts and determine if the facts in the memoir are accurate.

**Step 3: Context Questions**
How might Odell’s motive for compiling the memoir be interpreted? What is the social context in which it was created?

- **Activity:** Instruct students to write a summary explaining Odell’s motive for compiling the memoir of Wheatley. Remind students to use evidence to support their assertions and interpretations.

**Step 4: Exploration Questions**
What argument can you construct about Odell’s bias and credibility? Are there any gaps in her interpretation?

- **Activity:** Ask students to select key passages in the memoir and to cite examples of bias or credibility. Next, have students supply information to fill in any gaps in Odell’s interpretation of Wheatley’s experience and perspective. Invite students to share their analyses with the class.

**Step 5: Response Paper**
Word length and additional requirements set by Instructor. Students answer the research question in the Overview Questions. Students state a thesis and use as evidence passages from the primary source document as well as support from supplemental materials assigned in the lesson.