



Phillis Wheatley
c. 1753–1784

NOTABLE QUOTE

*“Some view our sable
race with scornful eye . . .
Remember, Christians,
Negroes, black as
Cain,
May be refin’d, and join
th’ angelic train.”*

Letter to the Reverend Samson Occom

by Phillis Wheatley

Phillis Wheatley became the first African-American poet to be published. Moreover, her unusual life is the stuff that movies are made of. Kidnapped at age seven in West Africa, she was sold to the prosperous Wheatley family at a Boston slave auction. Within 16 months, the precocious child had mastered English and could read the Bible. She then went on to learn Latin and Greek well enough to read the classics.

Startling Success Story With the encouragement of the Wheatley family, she started writing poetry as a teenager. She gained considerable fame both in the colonies and in England when newspapers began publishing her poems, most of

them on moral and religious subjects. While in London in 1773 to publish her book of poetry, Wheatley was the toast of society, which included many nobles and dignitaries and the visiting American patriot Ben Franklin.

Life as a Free Black Woman By 1778, Wheatley had gained her freedom and married a free black man. Their life together was a losing struggle against poverty, however, for in many respects living as a free black in a colonial city was as bad as being a slave. In late 1779, Wheatley tried to get a second book of her poems published, but war-torn, financially strapped Boston had lost interest in her.



Abigail Adams
1744–1818

NOTABLE QUOTE

*“Remember all Men would be
tyrants if they could.”*

Letter to John Adams

by Abigail Adams

Abigail Adams was the wife of the second U.S. president, John Adams, and mother of the sixth, John Quincy Adams. But she is equally well-known for her outspoken opinions as expressed in thousands of personal letters.

Intelligent and Competent The daughter of a wealthy minister, young Abigail read extensively in her father’s well-stocked library. After marrying John Adams, she moved with him to a farm in Braintree, Massachusetts. As John became increasingly involved in colonial politics and the struggle for independence, Abigail took over management of the household and farm as well as John’s business affairs.

An Early Feminist? Because of her support for women’s education and her acute awareness of men’s “absolute power,” many have championed Abigail Adams as an early advocate of women’s rights. However, although her thinking was clearly advanced for her time—she also favored the abolition of slavery—she held quite conventional views about a woman’s subordinate role in society.

Author Online

For more on Wheatley and Adams, visit the **Literature Center** at **ClassZone.com**.



LITERARY ANALYSIS: DICTION

Diction is a writer's choice of words. Diction includes both vocabulary (words) and syntax (arrangement of words). Diction can be formal or informal, common or technical, abstract or concrete. Note the formal diction in this excerpt from the letter written by Abigail Adams:

How many are the solitary hours I spend, ruminating upon the past, and anticipating the future, whilst you, overwhelmed with the cares of state, have but a few moments you can devote to any individual.

Writers often communicate **tone**, or attitude toward a subject, through their diction. As you read the letters, notice words and phrases that reveal each writer's attitude toward the issues of liberty and freedom.

READING STRATEGY: READING PRIMARY SOURCES

Primary sources are materials written or made by people who took part in or witnessed the events portrayed. These sources can provide unique insights on a subject. To get the most out of a primary source, consider the following:

- Who was the writer? The age, nationality, and social class of the writer can influence the point of view.
- What is the form of the document: letter, diary, speech? How might the form have affected the content?
- When and where was it written? The time and place of a primary source's writing can provide clues to the culture and history of the period.
- Who is the intended audience? In a private letter to a loved one, a writer might voice thoughts and feelings more freely than in an open letter to a public audience.

For help analyzing the letters of Wheatley and Adams, complete a chart such as the one shown here as you read each letter.

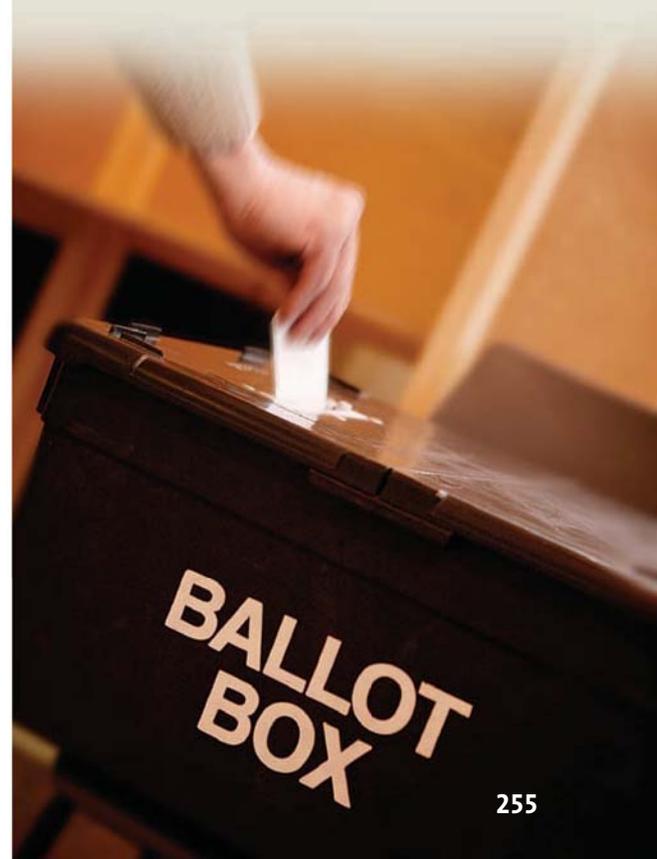
<i>Writer:</i>
<i>Form:</i>
<i>When and Where Written:</i>
<i>Intended Purpose/Audience:</i>

Explore the Key Idea

Who gets to make the RULES?

KEY IDEA Those in **authority** make the rules for others—whether it's in the halls of Congress or the classroom. The authors of these two letters, while agreeing wholeheartedly with the patriot cause, still felt left out of the process and the benefits of the American Revolution.

DISCUSS People today have not only more freedom than people did in colonial times but also more ways to change the laws. Think of at least three situations in which rules directly impact your life. Then for each situation, discuss ways that are available to change or modify those rules.



Letter to the REVEREND SAMSON OCCOM

Phillis Wheatley

BACKGROUND The Reverend Samson Occom was a Mohegan Indian who became a minister after converting to Christianity. In a letter to Phillis Wheatley, he had criticized some of his fellow ministers for owning slaves. Wheatley's response to her friend, dated February 11, 1774, was later published in colonial newspapers.

Reverend and honored sir,

I have this day received your obliging kind epistle, and am greatly satisfied with your reasons respecting the negroes, and think highly reasonable what you offer in vindication of their natural rights: Those that invade them cannot be insensible that the divine light is chasing away the thick darkness which broods over the land of Africa;¹ and the chaos which has reigned so long, is converting into beautiful order, and reveals more and more clearly the glorious dispensation of civil and religious liberty, which are so inseparably united, that there is little or no enjoyment of one without the other: Otherwise, perhaps, the Israelites had been less solicitous for their freedom from Egyptian slavery;² I do not say they would
10 have been contented without it, by no means; for in every human breast God has implanted a principle, which we call love of freedom; it is impatient **A** of oppression, and pants for deliverance; and by the leave of our modern Egyptians³ I will assert, that the same principle lives in us. God grant deliverance in his own way and time, and get him honor upon all those whose avarice impels them to countenance and help forward the calamities of their fellow creatures. This I desire not for their hurt, but to convince them of the strange absurdity of their conduct, whose words and actions are so diametrically opposite. How well the cry for liberty, and the reverse disposition for the exercise of oppressive power over others agree—I humbly think it does not require the penetration⁴ of a
20 philosopher to determine.— **B**



1. **insensible . . . the land of Africa:** unaware that Christianity is spreading throughout Africa.
2. **Israelites . . . Egyptian slavery:** a biblical allusion to the Israelites who were led out of Egypt by Moses.
3. **modern Egyptians:** the owners of African slaves.
4. **penetration:** understanding; insight.

ANALYZE VISUALS

This image shows a slave auction in New Amsterdam (New York). What does this tell you about slavery in colonial America?

A DICTION

Describe Wheatley's **diction** in lines 1–11. How do you think her way of writing might have struck white readers at the time?

B PRIMARY SOURCES

Does Wheatley's letter deal with private or public issues? What are they?

First Slave Auction in New Amsterdam, 1655.
The Granger Collection, New York.

Letter to JOHN ADAMS

Abigail Adams

BACKGROUND In March of 1776, while John Adams was in Philadelphia with other delegates drafting a code of laws for the new independent country, Abigail wrote a letter asking him to “remember the ladies” in the new laws: “Be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of husbands.” John’s response was to laugh and remark, “You are so saucy.” The following is the next letter she sent to him.

Braintree, 7, May, 1776

How many are the solitary hours I spend, ruminating upon the past, and anticipating the future, whilst you, overwhelmed with the cares of state, have but a few moments you can devote to any individual. All domestic pleasures and enjoyments are absorbed in the great and important duty you owe your country, “for our country is, as it were, a secondary god, and the first and greatest parent. It is to be preferred to parents, wives, children, friends, and all things, the gods only excepted; for, if our country perishes, it is as impossible to save an individual, as to preserve one of the fingers of a mortified hand.” Thus do I suppress every wish, and silence every murmur, acquiescing in a painful separation from the

10 companion of my youth, and the friend of my heart. **C**

I believe ’t is near ten days since I wrote you a line. I have not felt in a humor to entertain you if I had taken up my pen. Perhaps some unbecoming invective¹ might have fallen from it. The eyes of our rulers have been closed, and a lethargy has seized almost every member. I fear a fatal security has taken possession of them. Whilst the building is in flames, they tremble at the expense of water to quench it. In short, two months have elapsed since the evacuation of Boston,² and very little has been done in that time to secure it, or the harbor, from future

ANALYZE VISUALS

These pastel portraits of Abigail and John Adams were done in 1766, about two years after their marriage. How do these portraits compare with those that might be done today of a young couple?

C PRIMARY SOURCES

Does Adams’s letter concern itself with private or public issues in lines 1–10? What does she say about the relationship between the private and the public?

1. **unbecoming invective:** inappropriate abusive language.

2. **two months . . . Boston:** British troops under General William Howe and more than a thousand Loyalists evacuated Boston on March 17, 1776.

invasion. The people are all in a flame, and no one among us, that I have heard of, even mentions expense. They think, universally, that there has been an amazing neglect somewhere. Many have turned out as volunteers to work upon Noddle's Island, and many more would go upon Nantasket,³ if the business was once set on foot. "T is a maxim of state, that power and liberty are like heat and moisture. Where they are well mixed, every thing prospers; where they are single, they are destructive."

A government of more stability is much wanted in this colony, and they are ready to receive it from the hands of the Congress. And since I have begun with maxims of state,⁴ I will add another, namely, that a people may let a king fall, yet still remain a people; but, if a king let his people slip from him, he is no longer a king.⁵ And as this is most certainly our case, why not proclaim to the world, in decisive terms, your own importance? **D**

Shall we not be despised by foreign powers, for hesitating so long at a word?

I cannot say that I think you are very generous to the ladies; for, whilst you are proclaiming peace and good-will to men, emancipating all nations, you insist upon retaining an absolute power over wives. But you must remember, that arbitrary power is like most other things which are very hard, very liable to be broken; and, notwithstanding all your wise laws and maxims, we have it in our power, not only to free ourselves, but to subdue our masters, and, without violence, throw both your natural and legal authority at our feet;—

"Charm by accepting, by submitting sway,

40 Yet have our humor most when we obey."⁶ **E**

I thank you for several letters which I have received since I wrote last; they alleviate a tedious absence, and I long earnestly for a Saturday evening, and experience a similar pleasure to that which I used to find in the return of my friend upon that day after a week's absence. The idea of a year dissolves all my philosophy.

Our little ones, whom you so often recommend to my care and instruction, shall not be deficient in virtue or probity,⁷ if the precepts of a mother have their desired effect; but they would be doubly enforced, could they be indulged with the example of a father alternately before them. I often point them to their sire,

50 "engaged in a corrupted state,

Wrestling with vice and faction."⁸ **F**

A Adams

D **DICTION**

Reread lines 25–30.

What words suggest a concern with political issues? What does this diction tell you about the writer's comfort with discussing the subject of government?

E **PRIMARY SOURCES**

What inconsistency in the attitudes of the times does Abigail Adams point out in lines 32–40?

F **DICTION**

Reread lines 46–51. What does the formal language used to discuss both public and private matters tell you about family relations at the time?

3. **Noddle's Island . . . Nantasket**: sites near the city of Boston. Noddle's Island is now called East Boston.

4. **maxims of state**: rules or short sayings related to government.

5. **king**: a reference to King George III, who ignored colonists' protests and put Massachusetts under military rule.

6. **"Charm . . . obey"**: a couplet taken from Alexander Pope's poem *Moral Essays*.

7. **deficient . . . probity**: lacking in goodness or integrity.

8. **"engaged . . . faction"**: lines taken from Joseph Addison's play *Cato*. Cato (234–149 B.C.) was a Roman politician who fought for high moral standards in the Roman Senate.