



Phillis Wheatley Activity Bundle

Integrated Reading, Literacy and

CRITICAL THOUGHT

Activities

For Grades 5 – 8

Reading Comprehension Passage with ten multiple choice questions

Fact or Fiction: Which statements are fact and which are fiction?

Text Elements: Main Idea and Supporting Details

Primary Source Analysis – The Phillis Wheatley Letter to George Washington

Poetry Analysis: Wheatley's Poem About King George III: *To the King's Most Excellent Majesty 1768*

FIVE INTEGRATED ACTIVITIES

Perfect for Interactive Notebooks

Perfect for Morning Work or Assessments

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ANSWERS

| Name | Answers |
|--|---------------------------------|
| Phillis Wheatley Reading Comprehension | C, C, A, A, A, A, D, D, C, D, C |

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PHILLIS WHEATLEY Reading Comprehension

Phillis Wheatley was born in Gambia (in Africa) on May 8, 1753, and died in Boston on December 5, 1784.

When she was 7 or 8, she was sold as a slave to John and Susanna Wheatley of Boston. She was named after the ship that brought her to America, *The Phillis*.

The Poetry Foundation describes her sale:

In August 1761, "in want of a domestic," Susanna Wheatley, ...purchased "a slender, frail female child ... for a trifle" ... The captain of the slave ship believed that the waif was terminally ill, and he wanted ... at least a small profit before she died. ... The family surmised the girl—who was "of slender frame and evidently suffering from a change of climate," nearly naked, with "no other covering than a quantity of dirty carpet about her"—to be "about seven years old ... from the circumstances of shedding her front teeth."

(<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/phillis-wheatley>)

Phillis was very intelligent. The Wheatley family taught her to read and write, and encouraged her to write poetry. Her first poem "On Messrs. Hussey and Coffin" was published when she was only twelve. In 1770, "An Elegiac Poem, on the Death of that Celebrated Divine, and Eminent Servant of Jesus Christ, the Reverend and Learned George Whitefield" made her famous. It was published in Boston, Newport, and Philadelphia.

When she was eighteen, Phillis and Mrs. Wheatley tried to sell a collection containing twenty-eight of her poems. Colonists did not want to buy poetry written by an African. Mrs. Wheatley wrote to England to ask Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon, for help. The countess was a wealthy supporter of evangelical and abolitionist (anti-slavery) causes. She had poems on various subjects, religious and moral, published in England in 1773. This book made Phillis famous in England and the thirteen colonies. She wrote a poem for George Washington in 1775, and he praised her work. They met in 1776. Phillis supported independence for the colonies during the Revolutionary War.

After her master died, Phillis was emancipated. She married John Peters, a free black man, in 1778. She and her husband lost two children as infants. John would be imprisoned for debt in 1784. Phillis and her remaining child died in December of 1784 and were buried in an unmarked grave. Nevertheless, the legacy of Phillis Wheatley lives on. She became the first African-American and the first slave in the United States to publish a book. She proved that slaves or former slaves had a valuable voice in the Revolutionary era.

1.) Who was George Whitefield?

- a.) Phillis's husband
- b.) A military general
- c.) Somebody who Phillis admired greatly
- d.) A slave owner

2.) Phillis finally became free...

- a.) after her master died.
- b.) when she became wealthy.
- c.) when she published her poems in England.
- d.) after meeting the Countess of Huntingdon.

3.) Phillis's first attempt at selling her poetry in America (the colonies) was...

- a.) unsuccessful
- b.) imaginary
- c.) illegal
- d.) successful

4.) The Wheatley family estimated the age of the slave girl they named "Phillis" by...

- a.) the condition of her teeth.
- b.) her size.
- c.) her weight.
- d.) her color.

5.) Which of the following is TRUE about Phillis Wheatley?

- a.) She was the first African-American and slave to publish a book in the United States.
- b.) She was the first African-American and slave to be able to read and write
- c.) She was the first African-American slave to visit England.
- d.) She was the first African-American and slave to meet George Washington.

6.) The slave owner who sold Phillis to the Wheatley family believed...

- a.) she would soon recover from her illness.
- b.) she was very intelligent.
- c.) she was worth a lot of money.
- d.) she would soon die.

7.) Where is Phillis Wheatley buried?

- a.) Virginia
- b.) Africa
- c.) Boston
- d.) No one knows

8.) What question is answered in last paragraph?

- a.) Who did Phillis marry?
- b.) Why was Phillis a slave?
- c.) What did Phillis prove?
- d.) Where were Phillis's works published?

9.) By the age of twelve, Phillis was...

- a.) Married.
- b.) still not able to read or write.
- c.) no longer a slave.
- d.) a published poet.

10.) It can be inferred from the passage that the Countess of Huntingdon...

- a.) was surprised that Phillis could read and write.
- b.) didn't care about Phillis's poetry.
- c.) helped Phillis get her writings published.
- d.) believed in slavery.

Phillis Wheatley: Main Idea and Supporting Detail Sentences

Name: _____

Below are three headings at the beginnings of paragraphs. Below the chart are the associated supporting detail sentences. Which sentences would appear under which heading? Use the numbers before the sentences so you don't have to write the entire sentence. Order matters!

| Early Life | The 12 year-old Poet | Fame |
|------------|----------------------|------|
| | | |

1. She was named after the ship that brought her to America.
2. She published her first poem, "*On Messrs. Hussey and Coffin*" when she was only twelve years-old.
3. Phillis Wheatley was born in Gambia on May 8, 1753.
4. As the first former slave to have a book published, she got to meet George Washington, who praised her book.
5. When she was seven or eight, she was sold to the Wheatleys.
6. The Wheatley's taught her to read and write; and she quickly showed unusual skill.
7. In 1773, her book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* was published in England, making her famous there and in the colonies.

| Early Life | The 12 year-old Poet | Fame |
|-------------|----------------------|--------|
| 3 5 1 | 6 2 | 7 4 |

Phillis Wheatley: Primary Sources

Name: _____

On October 26, 1775, Phillis Wheatley penned a letter to George Washington in which she enclosed one of her poems, hoping for Washington to publish it. The poem she wrote exalted Washington as the leader of the Revolution. On February 28, 1776, Washington authored the following response:

Mrs Phillis,

Your favour of the 26th of October did not reach my hands 'till the middle of December. Time enough, you will say, to have given an 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 panegyrick, the style and manner exhibit a striking proof of your great poetical Talents. In honour of which, and as a tribute justly due to 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 place in the public Prints

If you should ever come to Cambridge, or near Head Quarters, I shall be happy to see a person so favoured by the Muses, and to whom nature has been so liberal and beneficent in her dispensations. I am, with great Respect, Your obedt humble servant,

G. Washington

Answer the following questions about Washington's response.

1. What is the theme of the first paragraph? What is Washington hoping to express?

2. What does the second paragraph reveal about how Washington feels toward Wheatley?
3. Why does Washington decide against publishing Wheatley's work?
4. What is the tone of the conclusion?
5. Find and define five unfamiliar vocabulary words in Washington's letter to Phillis Wheatley.

Phillis Wheatley Poem to King George III: *To the King's Most Excellent Majesty* 1768

Name: _____

To the King's Most Excellent Majesty 1768

Your subjects hope, dread Sire--
The crown upon your brows may flourish long,
And that your arm may in your God be strong!
O may your sceptre num'rous nations sway,
And all with love and readiness obey!
But how shall we the British king reward!
Rule thou in peace, our father, and our lord!
Midst the remembrance of thy favours past,
The meanest peasants most admire the last
May George, beloved by all the nations round,
Live with heav'ns choicest constant blessings crown'd!
Great God, direct, and guard him from on high,
And from his head let ev'ry evil fly!
And may each clime with equal gladness see
A monarch's smile can set his subjects free

1. What is the tone of Wheatley's poem about King George? Is it positive? Negative? Give evidence from the poem.
2. What role does "God" play in the poem? Explain.

3. Why do you think Phillis Wheatley wrote this poem to King George?

4. Pretend you are King George III. What would you say in return to Phillis Wheatley?

Fact or Fiction?

Name: _____

Below is a biography on Phillis Wheatley. On the following page is a chart with ten statements. Indicate whether each statement is fact or fiction.

Early Life

Phillis Wheatley was born in Gambia on May 8, 1753. When she was 7 or 8, she was sold as a slave to John and Susanna Wheatley of Boston. She was named after the ship that brought her to America, *the Phillis*. The Poetry Foundation describes her sale below:

In August 1761:

"in want of a domestic," Susanna Wheatley, ... purchased "a slender, frail female child ... for a trifle"... The captain of the slave ship believed that the waif was terminally ill, and he wanted ... at least a small profit before she died. ...The family surmised the girl - who was "of slender frame and evidently suffering from a change of climate," nearly naked, with "no other covering than a quantity of dirty carpet about her" - to be "about seven years old ... from the circumstances of shedding her front teeth." (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/phillis-wheatley>)

The 12 Year-old Poet

Phillis was very intelligent. The Wheatley family taught her to read and write, and encouraged her to write poetry. Her first poem *"On Messrs. Hussey and Coffin"* was published when she was only twelve. In 1770, *An Elegiac Poem, on the Death of that Celebrated Divine, and Eminent Servant of Jesus Christ, the Reverend and Learned George Whitefield* made her famous. It was published in Boston, Newport, and Philadelphia.

Short-lived Fame

When she was eighteen, Phillis and Mrs. Wheatley tried to sell a collection containing twenty-eight of her poems. Colonists did not want to buy poetry written by an African. Mrs. Wheatley wrote to England to ask Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon, for help. The countess was a wealthy supporter of evangelical and abolitionist (anti-slavery) causes. She had *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* published in England in 1773. This book made Phillis famous in England and the thirteen colonies. In 1775, Phillis wrote a poem for George Washington, who praised her work. They met in 1776. Phillis supported independence for the colonies during the Revolutionary War. She became the first African American and the first slave in the United States to publish a book.

A Short Life

After her master died, Phillis was emancipated (freed). She married John Peters, a free black man, in 1778. She and her husband lost two children as infants. John would be imprisoned for debt in 1784. Phillis, who suffered from respiratory ailments for most of her life, died in December of 1784, and was buried in an unmarked grave.

| | FACT | FICTION |
|---|------|---------|
| Phillis Wheatley was born in Africa | | |
| Phillis Wheatley was a Loyalist and was against American independence | | |
| Phillis never became famous in America | | |
| The Wheatley's taught Phillis to read and write | | |
| At first, people in America did not seem interested in Wheatley' poetry | | |
| Phillis Wheatley never lived as a free Black woman | | |
| Phillis Wheatley's later life is well-documented | | |
| Phillis was named after the slave ship that brought her to Boston | | |
| Phillis Wheatley met George Washington | | |
| Phillis Wheatley was the first slave to publish a book in America | | |
| Phillis Wheatley married a wealthy former slave owner | | |

Answers:

| | FACT | FICTION |
|---|-------------|----------------|
| Phillis Wheatley was born in Africa | X | |
| Phillis Wheatley was a Loyalist and was against American independence | | X |
| Phillis never became famous in America | | X |
| The Wheatley's taught Phillis to read and write | X | |
| At first, people in America did not seem interested in Wheatley' poetry | X | |
| Phillis Wheatley never lived as a free Black woman | | X |
| Phillis Wheatley's later life is well-documented | | X |
| Phillis was named after the slave ship that brought her to Boston | X | |
| Phillis Wheatley met George Washington | X | |
| Phillis Wheatley was the first slave to publish a book in America | X | |
| Phillis Wheatley married a wealthy former slave owner | | X |