

Unveiling the Literary Legacy: A Comprehensive Exploration of Phillis Wheatley's Complete Writings



Complete Writings by Phillis Wheatley

★★★★☆ 4.8 out of 5

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Phillis Wheatley (c. 1753-1784) was an extraordinary African American poet who left an indelible mark on American literature. Born in Senegal and enslaved at a young age, Wheatley displayed a remarkable talent for poetry that defied the limitations and prejudices of her time. Her complete writings, which include poems, letters, and essays, offer a profound exploration of themes related to slavery, freedom, religion, race, gender, and history.

Early Life and Education

Phillis Wheatley was born in West Africa around 1753. She was captured by slave traders and brought to America, where she was sold to the Wheatley family of Boston in 1761. Despite the horrors of slavery, Wheatley

found solace in literature and education. She quickly mastered English and began writing poetry at the age of 12. Her early poems were published in local newspapers and gained widespread attention for their eloquence and depth.

Publication of "Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral"

In 1773, Wheatley published her first collection of poems, entitled "Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral." The publication of this volume made her the first African American woman to publish a book of poetry in the United States. The collection includes poems on a wide range of topics, from religion and morality to slavery and freedom. Wheatley's poems were praised by prominent figures of the time, including George Washington and John Hancock.

Themes in Wheatley's Poetry

Wheatley's poetry is characterized by its exploration of complex and often contradictory themes. Here are some of the key themes that emerge in her work:

- **Slavery and Freedom:** Wheatley's poems often grapple with the horrors of slavery and the yearning for freedom. In "On Being Brought from Africa to America," she writes: "Twas sad indeed to leave my native shore... But still I hope that Afric's coast shall see / A glorious day, when all shall be free."
- **Religion:** Wheatley was a devout Christian, and her faith played a central role in her poetry. She often expressed her gratitude for God's protection and guidance, and she used her poems to explore religious themes such as sin, salvation, and the afterlife.

- **Race and Gender:** As an African American woman, Wheatley faced double discrimination based on her race and gender. Her poetry challenges prevailing stereotypes and prejudices about black people and women. In "To S.M., a Young African Painter, on Seeing His Works," she writes: "I, too, in humble verse, my friend, have tried / The lyric strains, the bold historic lay... / And, though I must yield the palm of praise to thee, / Yet here a wreath, my youth, I bend to thee."
- **History:** Wheatley's poems often draw inspiration from ancient history and mythology. She references figures such as Homer, Virgil, Ovid, and Caesar, and she uses classical imagery to explore contemporary issues such as slavery and the struggle for independence.

Influence and Legacy

Phillis Wheatley's poetry had a significant impact on American literature and culture. Her work helped to raise awareness about the plight of slaves and to challenge prevailing prejudices about race and gender. Her poems were praised by both white and black readers, and she became a symbol of hope and inspiration for African Americans. Wheatley's legacy continues to inspire contemporary writers and scholars, and her work is still studied and celebrated today.

Phillis Wheatley's complete writings offer a profound and moving exploration of human experience. Her poems are a testament to her resilience, intelligence, and determination. Through her words, Wheatley challenged the oppressive structures of her time and gave voice to the voiceless. Her legacy as a pioneer in American literature and an advocate for freedom and equality continues to inspire generations of readers and writers.



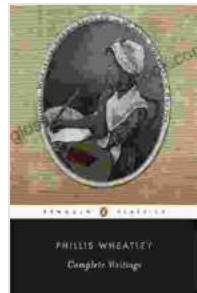
Library of Congress

"Wheatley's poems are a powerful indictment of slavery and a testament to the resilience of the human spirit." - Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

Further Reading

- The Library of Congress: Phillis Wheatley

- Poets.org: Phillis Wheatley
- The Complete Writings of Phillis Wheatley (edited by Vincent Carretta)



Complete Writings by Phillis Wheatley

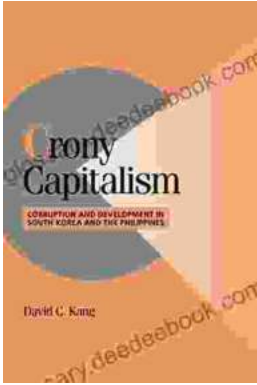
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