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# Phillis Wheatley

(ca. 1753 – 1784)



A candle flickered on Phillis Wheatley's mahogany writing desk. She sat there as she had done many nights before, composing lines of poetry. But tonight, Phillis wasn't writing. She was thinking about Thomas Wooldridge, a businessman from New York. He was coming the next day to determine if she was the person writing the poems attributed to Phillis Wheatley.



View of Boston Harbor by Franz Xaver Habermann, 1770

As an enslaved Black woman, Phillis was accustomed to having to prove herself, and she was secure in her talent. Very few people, white or Black, in the American colonies could read or even sign their own names, but Phillis had authored enough poems to publish a book—and she was eager to do so. Her poems were her way of advocating for freedom, not just for herself, but for other enslaved Black people.

# What Is Phillis's Boston Massacre Poem Saying?

"On the Affray in King Street on the Evening of the 5th of March, 1770"

With Fire **enwrapt**, **surcharged** with sudden Death,



Lo, [the pois'd Tube] **convolves** its fatal Breath!  
*barrel of the gun*

The **flying Ball** with heav'n-directed Force.

The soul separated from the body

Rids the free Spirit of it's fallen **Corse**.  
*A corpse, the body of someone who died*

Well fated [Shades!] let no unmanly Tear  
*ghosts*

From **Pity's Eye**, [distain] your honour'd **Bier**:  
*dishonor*

Lost to their View, surviving Friends may mourn,

Yet [o'er] thy **Pile** shall Flames **celestial** burn;  
*over*

Long as in [Freedom's Cause] the Wise **contend**.  
*the fight for freedom*

Dear to your Country shall your Fame extend;

While to the World, the [letter'd Stone] shall tell,  
*tombstone*

How Caldwell, Attucks, Grey and Mav'rick fell.

**enwrapt:**  
an old spelling of "enwrapped," meaning wrapped or enveloped in something

**convolves:**  
twists together; entwines

**surcharged:**  
filled or loaded with excess

**Pity's Eye:**  
In Greek mythology, Pitys is a nymph who dies and is turned into a pine tree. She cries over her death every autumn, and her teardrops make the sap of the tree.



The guns used to kill the patriots were called muskets. They often sparked when fired.

**celestial:**  
relating to heaven, divinity, or the sky



Something used to carry a corpse or coffin to the cemetery for burial

**contend:**  
to deal with a challenge

Mound of fresh dirt covering a grave

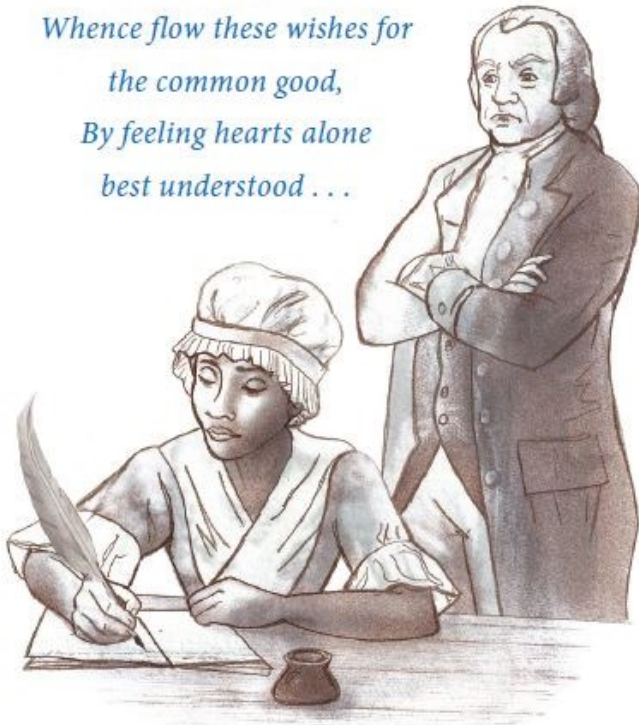


The victims of the Boston Massacre. James Caldwell, Crispus Attucks, Samuel Grey, and Samuel Maverick are referenced in Phillis's poem; Patrick Carr died the next day.

This poem, and Phillis's poem about Christopher Seider, was included in the proposals for her book. When she finally found a publisher in London, England, she removed the two poems about the colonists' struggles for independence from Great Britain.

She wondered if he could perhaps bring freedom, not only for the white colonists but also for African Americans. Inspired by thoughts of liberty, Phillis sat at a desk with Wooldridge watching her intently. She dipped the tip of her quill pen in ink and began to write:

*Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,  
Wonder from whence my love  
of Freedom sprung,  
Whence flow these wishes for  
the common good,  
By feeling hearts alone  
best understood . . .*



As she wrote, Phillis drew on the memory of her parents:

*I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate  
Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat:  
What pangs excruciating must molest,  
What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?  
Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd  
That from a father seiz'd his babe belov'd:  
Such, such my case. And can I then but pray  
Others may never feel tyrannic sway?*

*Excerpts taken from the poem "To the Right Honorable  
William, Earl of Dartmouth" from 1773*

Wooldridge was convinced. He wrote a letter to Lord Dartmouth saying, "I was astonish'd, and could hardly believe my own Eyes. I was present while she wrote and can attest that it is her own production."

Wooldridge wasn't the only person for whom Phillis had to demonstrate her talent. A publisher in England also insisted on proof that Phillis had written her poems before agreeing to publish her book.