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Forms of Restricted Education and the Enslaved: The Works of Phillis Wheatley and Frederick Douglass as Educational Processes

Katherine Devaney
katherine.devaney@trincoll.edu

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submitted by

Katherine Devaney, Class of 2021

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Director: Christopher Hager

Reader: Diana Paulin

Reader: Hilary Wyss

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INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of American slavery in 1619, a host of laws sought to control the Black population: in South Carolina, literacy laws were passed as early as 1740, while most other states did not implement such laws until the 1800's (Williams 203-213). In this thesis, I aim to focus on the literacy laws preventing the Black enslaved population from gaining an education. While literacy is only one of the rights that were taken from enslaved men and women, the stripping of this particular right had lasting consequences. While each state had its own variation on literacy laws, the communal agreement amongst lawmakers was that people of color were not to be educated. If a Black person, even a freed Black person, were found to be educating themselves, they could be convicted and whipped. In addition, any white individual who was discovered to be educating a Black man or woman could be fined or convicted (209).

In 1998, the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children published an article titled "Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children." The article suggests that the ability to read and write does not come to a child naturally; instead, it requires the child's caretakers to carefully foster the child's education through interaction with literature and with the caretaker themselves. It is suggested by researchers that to obtain high levels of literacy later in life, the interaction should begin as early as infancy and follow into the preschool years. This research is very important to the study of literacy amongst slaves (IRA & NAEYC 3). Slaves, being lawfully denied the right to education, were simultaneously denied the support system that begins a person's literacy development. Without the ability to read, comprehend and write, a person's daily functions are limited, as is their sense of empowerment and identity as they age.

The limiting of Black empowerment was purposeful. If the Black population had access to educational materials and an educator, they would become less compliant with their enslavers. The withholding of education from Black people helped the white population stay in control and power, continuously reinstating the power hierarchy of the races. Janet Cornelius' "'We Slipped and Learned to Read:' Slave Accounts of the Literacy Process: 1830-1865" shows first hand accounts of the limitations in education that slaves had to cope with, leading them to setbacks during their enslavement and also upon entering their life of freedom. The article includes a study of 272 former slaves who accounted for their literacy learning process. According to her findings, while enslaved, only 8-10% of the studied former slaves achieved a level of literacy that was defined as being able to "read, write, cipher," and having an understanding of "some grammar." Others only learned to read, or perhaps only reached a point in which they could recognize letters (Cornelius 185). Another significant statistic Cornelius mentions is that 70.8% of the slaves in the study learned to read before the age of twelve (175). Although this appears to be a high statistic, it is important to read within the context of the NAEYC & IRA's article on developmentally appropriate literacy learning, which highlights the necessity of the learning process beginning as early as infancy. The research presented by Janet Cornelius illustrates the delayed and hindered literacy education of the enslaved population and sets up the parameters of discussion for this thesis.

Literacy education is a privilege often overlooked by our present day American society because education is expected to be provided to all citizens regardless of background, financial status or disability. The discussion becomes relevant here and there, such as in a recent court case which ruled that children in Detroit have a constitutional right to education which was violated and taken from them during the coronavirus pandemic. Often, though, discussion of the right to

education and literacy remains hidden behind other major news topics and stories. Historically, the ability to gain a proper education and become literate has led to a large disparity in the American population, as discussed in the background in the previous paragraphs. My interest in the different modes of literacy education amongst enslaved people has brought me to the topic of this thesis: the historic past of enslaved people finding a voice through reading and writing in an overtly oppressive environment. I would like to study literacy education as a road to empowerment and freedom while reflecting upon the way the education of slaves continues as they write. Specifically, I would like to answer the following question: How does the recovered written work of former slaves who had limited access to education reflect their education and experience as a suppressed minority? In other words, what does the writing of formerly enslaved people show in comparison to someone who always had access to an education?

This thesis will analyze the ways restrictions in early education lead to a longer continuum of the learning process. As cited in the article by the IRA & NAEYC, the early years of a child's life are when literacy education is crucial, and when humans' brains have the most plasticity and capability to grasp new knowledge. Children learn at an incredibly fast rate, which tends to slow later in life when less new knowledge is being provided. In contrast, the writers of this article learned within the confines of their enslavement and were not provided as broad a range of knowledge as white students. Therefore, their later writing shows an evolution from start to finish of each text, indicating that they were still becoming educated as adults. Modern day writers often show stylistic changes across their writing as a result of attempting to appeal to the desires of a growing or changing audience; in contrast, the subjects of this thesis, Phillis Wheatley and Frederick Douglass, show changes over the course of their individual pieces as they learn to navigate their place in a white world. In learning to navigate this white world, the

subjects become more educated on how to express the difficulties of enslaved life when the difficulties were not allowed to be expressed. Because no two enslavement stories are identical, the research will open up further questions about how the differences in educational context among enslaved people have a lasting effect on their writing.

The findings of my research will show the power of education, specifically in literacy, and why it was so valued by those who weren't privileged enough to formally receive it. My findings will show how enslaved people paved their own path to literacy by utilizing and creating their own resources in order to eventually share their stories and struggles to the best of their capability. Additionally, they will show how the circumstances of a slave's education influence their sense of self in writing even years after emancipation, giving insight into the reasons freed slaves' writing might continue to show hindered literacy skills and reflect their desire to prove themselves in a white world.

Literacy among enslaved people has been studied widely amongst a vast range of scholars; their works placed together form the landscape for my thesis. Christopher Hager's *Word by Word: Emancipation and the Act of Writing* describes the attitudes towards such literacy laws in the antebellum South. Hager states:

> For many southerners, the possibility of slave literacy was covered over by their own illusions or their slaves' secrecy. Whether sympathetic or indifferent to the plight of slaves, free Americans before the Civil War knew they were living within a paradox: their society valorized education, abounded in books, and relished the written word, yet it tolerated the legal prohibition of literacy for millions of African Americans (30)

Hager, by noting that pre-civil war free Americans were aware of their own hypocrisy, leaves room for the "why?" question. The reason that validated the white population upholding these

laws was the belief that "if African American slaves acquired literacy, they could be expected to use it more or less as white people did— to communicate with each other and speak their minds. They especially would use it, southerners feared, to rebel or escape" (31). As seen in upcoming sources, the prohibition of literacy amongst slaves meant that the education slaves did get often happened in secret. As my thesis will illuminate, despite the fact that white southerners "[withheld] the light of knowledge from their slaves," even those enslaved in the harshest areas of the antebellum South slyly found ways to read and write (26). The writing of the slave quoted in Hager's book shows hindered literacy including poor spelling and grammar. As Harriet Beecher Stowe recognized in one instance, the particular slave "has [not] been deprived of literacy," but instead "his literacy has been deformed" (30). The slave had clearly learned in some fashion, but his years in slavery had hampered his ability to write in society's standards of proper English. This theme of literacy deformation will be seen through future analyses of Phillis Wheatley and Frederick Douglass's writing. While both enslaved individuals were educated to a notable degree, either by themselves or others, their literacy had been molded to the form of their secluded education. In Wheatley's work, her literacy was molded to the Christian norm and in Douglass's work, his literacy was molded by the oppression of the antebellum South and his secret education.

The reason slaves were denied the right to an education—because the white population believed Black Americans would use their knowledge to rebel against slavery and racial inequality—is exactly why it was crucial that the enslaved population carved their own educational path. Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the "Racial" Self* discusses the empowerment of literacy for the enslaved population, stating: "learning to read, the slave narratives repeat again and again, was a decisive political act; learning to write, as

measures against an eighteenth-century scale of culture and society, was an irreversible step away from the cotton field toward a freedom larger even than physical manumission" (4). While Gates acknowledges that the acts of reading and writing were an active stride towards freedom for the enslaved population, it was also "a commodity with which the African's right to be considered a human being could be traded" (11). The enslaved population was never treated as fully human, which led to the white population continuing to suppress them in denying them the basic human right of education.

The enslaved person reaches a point in their young life in which they come to the realization that they are not living the life of a typical American. They are a part of a prejudiced race that is not granted basic human rights, specifically the right to education. As Melvin Dixon's "Swinging Swords: The Literary Legacy of Slavery" recognizes,

> That crucial self- discovery, which can happen suddenly and by accident, is nonetheless the beginning of a collective consciousness and group identity . . . By the force of this personal alienation the individual began to see himself as a member of an oppressed group. Within the group experience, perhaps because of it, the individual resolved to remedy the situation for himself and the others who were joined to him by the extreme pressures of racial oppression. The slave could openly rebel or secretly escape. He could also accommodate himself to the subservient role slavery defined for him, as no doubt some slaves did (306)

The concept of group identity applies especially to my second chapter on Frederick Douglass. Throughout Douglass's enslavement, he was introduced to many Black Americans in the same position as himself, leading to a group effort to educate one another and, as Dixon would say, "remedy the situation" as best they can. In contrast, Phillis Wheatley was not associated and

educated with other Black individuals and was instead a part of a different group, the Christian church. The collective consciousness and group identity that Wheatley experienced was unique in comparison to many other slaves. Phillis Wheatley's "group" was the Wheatleys, the white family that enslaved her. While both writers had differing motivations and topics behind their writing, they each took a step towards building themselves into recognizable individuals in society, despite their race.

Unlike many enslaved or previously enslaved people at the time, both Wheatley and Douglass exhibit notably impressive English writing. A reader glancing over a page of each of their works might not assume the pair were enslaved for most of their lives. There are, however, distinguishing characteristics of slave narratives and other slave writings that can be detected. James Olney's "I Was Born: *Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature"* discusses the slave narrative as a genre defined by many common features: "If a reader should proceed to take up a half dozen narratives, however, a sense not of uniqueness but of overwhelming *sameness* is almost certain to be the result" (148). This is an intriguing claim, given that across the country every slave had a different experience and different story to tell. Olney continues to explain:

> The writer of a slave narrrative finds himself in an irresolvbly tight bind as a result of the very intention and premise of his narrative, which is to give a picture of "slavery *as* it is." Thus, it is the writer's claim, it must be his claim, that he is not emplotting, he is not fictionalizing, and he is not performing any act of *poiesis* (=shaping, making). To give a true picture of slavery as it really is, he must maintain that he exercises a clearglass, neutral memory that is neither creative nor faulty- indeed, if it were creative it would be *eo ipso* faulty for "creative" would be understood by skeptical readers as a synonym for

> "lying." Thus the ex- slave narrator is debarred from use of a memory that would make anything of his narrative beyond or other than the purely, merely episodic, and he is denied access, by the very nature and intent of his venture, to the configurational dimension of narrative" (150)

Onley's quote applies to Douglass's narrative, as it is a slave narrative that realistically details his experience in slavery. Wheatley, again in contrast with Douglass, wrote in poetic form which contained multitudes of figurative language, scenic imagery and subtle language surrounding the topic of slavery to enhance her writing. Regardless of the tactics the writer chooses to employ, "they were created out of the practical need to adjust to the American environment with a burning passion to be free" (Dixon 299). Apparent throughout Wheatley and Douglass's work, is an adjustment to writing the English language for their white readers, while also exercising speech about their lives as slaves. Despite the contention in regard to the purpose of an enslaved writer, "whatever action the slave finally took was considered not the end of the experience, but the beginning of a long confrontation from which he hoped to wrench his freedom," which will be elucidated in chapters to come (306).

Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* is the main work focused upon in Chapter 1. The work, containing thirty- nine poems, was accompanied by the signatures of sixteen high status, white men of her community. This signing, although necessary for the publication of Wheatley's work, led *Poems on Various Subjects* to be the center of many debates as some critics labeled her an accommodationist, arguing that she did not "address the plight of black people" (Ford 182). The debate begins with Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia,* who stated "religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Whately [*sic*]; but it could not produce a poet" (140). Given that Jefferson became President of the United States, his words

held power. Following Jefferson, a number of reputable critics such as James Weldon Johnson, a Black man himself, critiqued Wheatley for speaking too politely to her white audience and for her apparent lack of outrage towards the institution of slavery (Johnson xxvii). Angelene Jamison, author of "Analysis of Selected Poetry of Phillis Wheatley," furthered the accommodationist lens of critics, stating that Wheatley used Christianity to insulate herself against the criticism of white people—which in Jamison's opinion is the antithesis of what Black writing should do. Jamison went so far as to say that "[Wheatley's] concept of herself as a poet was no better than her concept of herself as a Black" (412). I argue that these critics are neglecting to take into account the circumstances of Wheatley's education, which is that her teachings were proctored by her own slaveholders and they centered around Christian literature. Therefore, the religious words and phrases which she so heavily repeated throughout her work are a product of her education and her belief in Christianity.

Other critics allowed Wheatley more benefit of the doubt, recognizing the intelligence Wheatley displayed as well as the challenging environment she was writing within as an enslaved Black woman. James A. Levernier's "Style as Protest in the Poetry of Phillis Wheatley" argues as the title states. Levernier argues that Wheatley "protested these abuses [slavery] as best she could," appreciating that Wheatley could not make any "overly- militant" accusations against slavery or slaveholders for a multitide of reasons, especially because her work simply would not be published by white patrons if their cruelty was being exposed (172). Levernier therefore sets up one of my arguments which centers around the idea that Wheatley had to use discreet and subtle language to discuss her experience during enslavement, which added to the confusion over the subject of her poetry and the accusation that Wheatley did not address the horrors of slavery. Other critics focused on the larger implications of Wheatley's poetry, stating that the fact of its

publication alone disproved the concept that "blacks were incapable of being fully intelligent and respectable human beings" (Nott 25). This previous statement, while true, is an understatement of the impact of Wheatley's writing. The analyses of several of Wheatley's poems will address each of these viewpoints, focusing on the question of "is Phillis Wheatley an accommodationist?" Wheatley's progression as a poet will become apparent as each poem begins to include more direct allusions to the "excruciating" experience of slavery and the "misery" it caused, therefore igniting empathy amongst her readers ("Earl of Dartmouth"; lines 26-29). I will use this progression to argue that Wheatley was continuously learning and developing her voice to express her opinions on slavery without placing herself in controversy with her white audience.

Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* surprisingly received similar criticism, despite his clear denunciations of slavery. *Narrative* outlines Douglass's experience as a slave, a runaway, and a freeman. Throughout the narrative, readers witness multiple shifts in Douglass's identity as he locates himself as a Black man and soon to be Black author in a white world. Similar to Wheatley, Douglass had to write with the awareness of the restrictions placed upon him. Some critics were not entirely cognizant of these boundaries Douglass was forced into, and expressed issues with the writing of *Narrative.*

The Lives of Frederick Douglass by Robert S. Levine was dedicated to this controversy, stating that Douglass's multiple identities and differing opinions on those involved with his own enslavement led to confusion over Douglass's voice in *Narrative*. In opposition, later African American leaders such as W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington "each sought to claim Douglass as a model for his own version of black leadership" (Levine 8). Many critics agreed, believing that Douglass had a powerful influence on the Civil Rights Movement, but did not

categorize him as a writer. Benjamin Brawley referred to Douglass as an orator rather than a writer and Vernon Loggins referred to the *Narrative* as "childlike in its simplicity" (qtd. in Levine 13-15). The opinions of these writers arose from the belief that Douglass did not display confidence or style in his writing. In opposition, critics such as Benjamin Quarles "[turned] the simplicity that Loggins had seen as negative into a virtue," stating that the readability created an accurate depiction of the life of an enslaved person (qtd. in Levine 17).

Lastly, an important analysis of Douglass was done by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in his chapter of *Figures in Black* titled "Binary Oppositions in Chapter One of *Narrative."* Gates locates several instances in Douglass's first chapter of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* in which Douglass uses binary oppositions to illustrate "[the] counterpoint, between that which is knowable in the world of the slave and that which is not" (90). Gates notes how although Douglass's writing may not be impressively stylistic in the opinion of many critics, he believes the smaller and more subtle literary tactics such as these binary oppositions create symbolic meaning in Douglass's narrative. In turn, Gates challenges the viewpoint of critics who refer to Douglass as an orator or state that his writing is "childish." The judgments of each mentioned critic and additional ones that will be analyzed in the second chapter inform the parameters for my argument, which will analyze Douglass's progression as a writer and argue that his identity shifts were the product of his desire to reinvent himself as a freeman after years of enslavement.

The two chapters of this thesis have different subjects and focuses, but they show a similar arc that will contribute to answering my research question. Both chapters aim to capture a moment in time in which the writer's intention to speak outside of the oppressor's language becomes apparent. Both subjects, Phillis Wheatley and Frederick Douglass, are living in an

oppressive environment designed to keep them manageable and complacent. However, as the arc in each chapter progresses, readers are able to view the writers in a different light and analyze the ways the restrictions upon them led to their own creative choices.

Chapter 1, which is centered around Phillis Wheatley and her writing of *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral,* analyzes numerous of Wheatley's poems for the tactics she uses to articulate her experience in slavery while complying with the expectations of the white Christian men of her community, who were responsible for signing off on and publishing her work. Many critics, as discussed in the literature review, denounce Wheatley for this compliance, referring to her as an accommodationist. Before delving into Wheatley's relationship with the white Christian public, a distinction must be made. Although I will refer to Wheatley being "educated into compliance" with the white Christian norms, I want to clarify that Wheatley was a Christian woman partly by choice. She did embrace the Christian religion and found solace in her prayers to God. This is crucial to recognize as my future analysis of Wheatley's Christian rhetoric may be interpreted to suggest that Wheatley was only Christian because she was forced to be. I do not believe this is the case; I believe that Wheatley was a devout Christian, but her education in Christianity did create a submissive persona for Wheatley. Throughout Chapter 1, I will take each critic's judgments into consideration as I sift through Wheatley's poems closely, while aiming to prove that despite being partly a product of her literacy education in enslavement, Wheatley was still in a process of educating herself during her writing process. Therefore, as seen in the progression of Wheatley's poems, the accommodationist theory does not hold up through an entire reading of *Poems on Various Subjects.* Wheatley's subtle responses to the experience become more detailed and her disdain of the slavery system is revealed.

Chapter 2, on Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, takes a very different path than the previous chapter. This chapter aims to investigate the ways that the lack of a formal education and the building of one's own education informs their later writing. Douglass's writing takes the form of a narrative detailing his life in slavery, as opposed to the way Wheatley discusses it, often metaphorically in poetry. The chapter will focus on how Douglass identifies himself as a writer and how that identification evolves over time. I will explore Douglass's narrative, keeping a close eye upon his use of detail and language in order to tell his own story. In a similar fashion to Phillis Wheatley's progression, I will shed light on the representation of Douglass as an enslaved man to a runaway slave to a free man and how each stage connects to his progression as an educated man.

CHAPTER 1

Can Religion Produce a Poet?: Uncovering the Poetic Creativity of Phillis Wheatley

Being enslaved in New England, where the education of slaves was not outlawed, Phillis Wheatley was provided with the opportunity to read and write by her enslavers. Due to this opportunity and her own creative intelligence, Phillis Wheatley created and published a book of poetry known as *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral.* The mere fact of publication of such a lengthy text by a Black woman shocked the northeast and defied the expectations of the white public, especially given she was the first American slave to have a published work. Her work proved her capability to be an influential activist despite society's constraints. Throughout the thirty- nine poems of *Poems on Various Subjects,* Wheatley steers readers through a range of topics, beginning with her move from Africa to America, the deaths of multiple individuals, and ending with an ode to herself, the author. Wheatley's writing appears confident and articulate but also suggests there were undertones of white influence on her work. This white influence is the aspect of Wheatley's writing that earned criticism from later writers such as Thomas Jefferson, James Weldon Johnson and Angelene Jamison for being an accommodationist and shying away from empowering the enslaved population.

Since the 1700's, many critics have treated Wheatley as little more than a product of her environment. In this chapter, I will analyze several of Wheatley's poems in order to explore the richness of her language as well as dissect the ways in which she re-purposed the vocabulary she acquired during her education. Wheatley's enslavement in a Northern colony granted her more rights than those later in the antebellum South, but historians highlight the challenges in this Northern location. Vincent Carretta's *Biography of a Genius in Bondage* explains, "many slaves in slave societies had very little direct contact with their owners. In societies with slaves, however, a far higher percentage of slaves knew their owners intimately since they usually

worked in the home, especially in town settings"[1] (Carretta 15). In addition to being enslaved in the North and dwelling in proximity to her white Christian slaveowners and educators, Wheatley was very young when she arrived in America. Wheatley was approximated to be around seven years old, a time in which her brain is still elastic and open to suggestion (Semrud-Clikeman). Had Wheatley arrived at age twenty, I speculate her later writing might have reflected her education differently. Her expressive skills may have been further formed in Africa, altering the course of her education and its interaction with white influences. With this in mind, I aim to show that although Wheatley was shaped by her education, and in a sense only held the language of her oppressor, she did with her knowledge what she was able. Wheatley used figurative language, subtle contradictions, and imagery hidden behind a polite syntax to avoid upsetting the white public while also making impressive strides as an influential activist for the enslaved population of her time and for years to come. Readers cannot be certain that the order in which the poems are organized is the same order in which they were written, but my reading of them offers suggestive evidence that they may have been. I will argue that throughout Wheatley's writing process, she advanced her education in literacy and simultaneously became increasingly confident in using subversive language and confronting enslavement.

The White Verification of Wheatley's Authorship

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, before reading Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral,* readers encounter a preface first signed by John Wheatley, stating "THE following POEMS were written originally for the Amusement of the Author, as they were the Products of her leisure Moments. She had no Intention ever to have

[1] "Slave societies" and "societies with slaves" are technical terms used by historians. "Slave societies" are those in which "the institution of bondage was used to produce a staple crop and became a fundamental force in shaping social and political relationships" whereas "societies with slaves" were "those [societies] in which slavery was only one form of labor in a varied economy" (Bolton).

published them. . . .” before giving an explanation of Wheatley’s education for which he credits himself and his wife (John Wheatley). Following this preface comes a “For the Public” announcement in which 18 prominent white men from Boston attest that they believe Phillis is the author of this work. The announcement states,

> WE whose Names are under-written, do assure the World, that the POEMS specified in the following Page,* were (as we verily believe) written by Phillis, a young Negro Girl, who was but a few Years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from Africa, and has ever since been, and now is, under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave in a Family in this Town. She has been examined by some of the best Judges, and is thought qualified to write them.

This brief passage holds a good deal of significance as it prefaces the entire set of poetry. Before even being able to display her own talent, Wheatley must be proven worthy by white men, which simultaneously degrades her. It is important to recognize the gender and race norms enforced by this passage. If the writer of *Poems on Various Subjects* was a white male, there would be no need for a physical attestation by any other members of the community. Kirstin Wilcox’s *The Body into Print: Marketing Phillis Wheatley* addresses this phenomenon: “the attestation itself contributes no new authenticating information; it merely confirms Wheatley's race, sex, youth, and origin, and it repeats the information that ‘she has been examined by some of the best judges and is thought qualified to write’ the poems. Its function lies less in its content than in the way that it delineates critical response” (Wilcox 13). Aside from offensively noting Wheatley an “uncultivated barbarian,” the statement only includes subtle racist remarks. It merely states characteristics of Wheatley. However, the inclusion of the statement characterizes Wheatley as

something other than just a writer. It insinuates she must be judged by these identifying characteristics rather than just by her writing.

Lasting Historical Criticism on Wheatley

Much of the scholarly conversation surrounding Phillis Wheatley's poetry has revolved around the question: is Phillis Wheatley an accommodationist?[2] In terms of Phillis Wheatley's relationship to writing during her enslavement, her accommodationist persona would be one that compromises with the white, Christian point of view and does not seek to confront slavery or the mistreatment of her fellow enslaved people. The conversation began with Thomas Jefferson in the 1700's, who had a number of relentless opinions about Phillis Wheatley's work. In Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia,* he states "never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration… Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Whately [sic]; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism" (Jefferson 140). This statement by Jefferson is not out of the ordinary for his beliefs, as he had previously noted a belief in the intellectual inferiority of African- Americans. Having such an influential member of society who later became the president making such a statement led to an oppressive, discriminatory environment that aimed to degrade and dehumanize the Black population (Ford).

A second important critic of Wheatley was James Weldon Johnson. Johnson arguably had a more damaging influence on Wheatley's reputation, as he had the experience of battling racism as a Black man in America. Johnson was a product of the Jim Crow South. He was the first African American to pass the bar exam, and he had many accomplishments such as publishing a

[2] A person who seeks to mediate between opposing factions or views in the interest of fairness, clarity, etc.; a person considered willing to compromise with opponents in order to preserve social or political stability (Oxford English Dictionary).

book and leading anti- racism groups ("About James Weldon Johnson"). In "The Difficult Miracle" by James Edward Ford III, Johnson is discussed among critics who do not believe Wheatley used her intellect to help her enslaved counterparts. In Johnson's 1922 work *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, he condemns Wheatley for not having an "outburst or even complaint" against the "bondage of her people" (Johnson xxvii). Unlike Thomas Jefferson, Johnson fully recognized and stated his belief in Wheatley's intelligence, however he was one of the harshest critics of Wheatley's "accommodationist" tendencies. Johnson's opinions were largely political and they led to his doubting of Wheatley's commitment to Black empowerment. As a man who spent the majority of his adult life advocating for African American rights, he disagreed greatly with Wheatley's apparent politeness to her enslavers as they did not correlate with his ideals. Most prominently, his involvement with the NAACP[3] left no doubt in the public's mind that Johnson was a leading voice against racism in America ("About James Weldon Johnson"). In turn, his involvement politically and personally led to a dislike of Wheatley (Ford 190). Ford argues with Johnson's stance that Wheatley's inclusion of politeness takes away from her influential writing, adding that "Johnson writes as if the cry has always been the most salient element of black protest in the United States . . . It is mistaken to assume that Wheatley must include such a cry to count as black writing" (194). Johnson recognized Wheatley's connection to white Christianity and did not believe her writing was genuinely "Black." This is a problematic stance as it disallowed Wheatley to be both a Christian follower and a Black woman, while she was both. Ford raises the question, what is the definition of Black writing? Or, should there even be a definition of Black writing? Johnson's assumption was that since she did not dedicate her intellect to issues important to the African American race, she was not worthy of such high praise and recognition. Given Johnson's political beliefs, it can be

[3] The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People ("About James Weldon Johnson").

inferred that he mistook the absence of any sort of outcry for an indifference toward the mistreatment of Black lives on the part of Wheatley.

Some contemporary criticism has treated Wheatley even more harshly. In 1974, another rather harsh stance was taken against Phillis Wheatley's supposed accommodating tendencies. Angelene Jamison, regards Wheatley as someone who shies away from both her blackness, and her womanhood. Jamison writes:

> Her concept of herself as a poet was no better than her concept of herself as a Black. When writing poems to those for whom she had an extreme admiration, she felt it necessary to apologize for even attempting to address these Whites in poetic form. As a matter of fact, Phillis once implied in a response to a poem she had written to a gentleman in the Navy, that her poetry could never equal the poem she had received from him (412)

Other critics had focused largely on the outside influence on Wheatley, rather than her own intentions. Here, Jamison emphasizes her belief in Wheatley's tendency to conform to norms that would appeal to white people. Jamison is suggesting Wheatley accommodates for her own comfort, not for the comfort of others. Another aspect of Wheatley's writing that Jamison took issue with was the overpraising of religious figures in *Poems on Various Subjects.* Jamison noted her aversion to the belief that "God was an impartial and merciful Savior whose works deserved all praises from mankind" (412). It is not to say that Jamison was against the Christian religion or Wheatley's involvement in it; rather, Jamison felt that the way in which Christianity was taught to Wheatley influenced her to be submissive and overly humble. This submissiveness is noted in many of Jamison's criticisms of Wheatley, including the one analyzed prior. Although she judges Wheatley unfavorably, Jamison also mentions reasoning for why Wheatley may write the way

that she does: she was educated to be submissive to Christan beliefs and figures whilst recognizing she was of a lower standing than the white population, specifically men.

At this point in time, we have seen this accommodationist critique, but it is important to read those who have alternate stances: the stances of critics who believe Wheatley was a literary genius, but more importantly, made strides for both the enslaved and the overall African American population. One of the more forgiving critics of Phillis Wheatley was James A. Levernier, author of "Style as Protest in the Poetry of Phillis Wheatley." Levernier recognizes many critics' viewpoints and the potential validity of them but responds with his own evidence of Phillis Wheatley's poetic strength and influence on the Black population. First, Levernier addresses two critics' points who collectively conclude that Wheatley was a "moral and social embarrassment to subsequent generations of African-American writers and readers" (Levernier 172). In recognizing the critics' statement on Wheatley's legacy, Levernier responds:

> With the publication, however, of newly discovered poems, letters, and documents by or relating to Wheatley, it is becoming increasingly clear that far from "oblivious to the lot of her fellow blacks," Wheatley was indeed quite aware of the terrible injustices done her and other slaves, that she protested these abuses as best she could, that she took pride in her African identity, and that she cultivated relationships with anyone else-- black or white-- who might directly or indirectly help to end slavery (172)

Levernier recognizes a crucial aspect of Wheatley's attestations on slavery and racism- that she "protested these abuses as best she could." This point is thoroughly elaborated on later in the text, to elucidate the under- appreciated aspect of Wheatley's work: that she had limited room for political creativity, but did the best she could. When referring to James Weldon Johnson, who believed Wheatley's writing didn't qualify as "Black writing," Levernier has strong

counterarguments. When discussing the editing that likely took place following the initial drafts of *Poems on Various Subjects,* Levernier states that if Phillis Wheatley had written any "overtly militant statements" she would likely have faced severe consequences as they would insult the Wheatley family (174). This statement, along with the suggestion that "explicit poetry of racial protest" . . . . "simply would not have been published," aids my point of view that Wheatley only holds the language of her oppressor. Wheatley had to get creative in her protests against slavery and the oppression of African Americans, hence why her poetry is intricate and flowery in language. This is all with the understanding, as well, that outward displays of anti-slavery activism might simply be edited out if they had been written initially.

A second critic who thought highly of Wheatley was Walt Nott. Author of "From 'Uncultivated Barbarian' to 'Poetical Genius': The Public Presence of Phillis Wheatley," Nott focuses specifically on the reputation of Wheatley in America's literary world. Instead of attributing all Wheatley's success to her white, Anglo- American enslavers, Nott measures Wheatley's success by her transformation in America as a Black woman. After recognizing that Wheatley didn't have any American reputation prior to arriving, Nott writes,

> However, seen from a more critical perspective, Wheatley's symbolic transformation in the eyes of contemporary white Anglo- American culture from "Barbarian" to "Genius" suggests her successful crafting of a public persona, her subsequent participation in the public discourse of her time, and, most important, her acquisition of a power such public participation entailed (21-22)

Nott raises an important concept that is not widely discussed amongst critics, that is, the visibility of the author behind the text; whether or not Wheatley was truthfully recognized by the public. Nott critically analyzes several parts of Wheatley's published *Poems on Various Subjects,*

and the public effect they created. The first aspect of the collection of poetry Nott examines actually has nothing to do with the poetry itself. Instead, Nott addresses the portrait of Phillis Wheatley that is printed opposite of the title page. The portrait, shown in "The Public Presence of Phillis Wheatley," pictures Wheatley in her poetic element. She is in deep thought, writing lines with her hand resting in a contemplating position on her chin (24).

Within this portrait, outer details removed, Wheatley and her publishers are making a public statement. Portraits are not required in a book of poetry, so critics must contemplate why it was included, and they do. Critic Betsy Erkkila refers to the inclusion of the portrait as "[the emblem of] Wheatley's complex position as a Black woman slave in revolutionary America" (Erkkila, qtd in Nott 25). Additionally, David Grimsted stated that the portrait disproved the prejudice that many citizens, Thomas Jefferson included, had about Black men and women, that they were intellectually inferior and incapable of being respectful human beings. Grimsted's assertion alludes to the positioning of Wheatley and the action she is taking part in. She is sitting up politely, dressed well and appears very well mannered in intellectual thought. Barring the race of Wheatley, she does not appear any less advantaged than other women. She likely could have been pictured in more of a drab manner, in manual labor perhaps, that illuminates her societal position as an enslaved woman. Wheatley made an impression on Boston and more broadly on the United States, making herself an influential public figure in the eyes of the people.

Rereading Wheatley's Rhetoric

Early in Wheatley's collection of thirty- nine poems is one of her more famous works, "On Being Brought from Africa to America." In a brief eight- line poem, Wheatley describes her experience of the middle passage. This poem raises confusion and controversy, as Wheatley discusses her kidnapping and sale as being "merciful" and uses other terms to rejoice in her

coming to America. The opening lines of the poem are: "'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,/ Taught my benighted soul to understand/ That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too" (Wheatley lines 1-3). These opening lines can be analyzed as Wheatley recognizing God's presence in her travel to America and believing she was being saved or shown mercy in the process. The way in which Wheatley writes about her trip to America neglects to include that she was kidnapped, which is not an act of mercy. Additionally, sources have described the conditions of the ship Phillis Wheatley traveled to America on, actually known as *The Phillis,* which is where her name originated. In his biography of Wheatley, Vincent Carretta describes the voyage that took approximately 240 days and had a mortality rate of nearly 25 percent. The author additionally describes Wheatley's condition upon arriving in Boston in 1761, noting she was a "poor naked child" who appeared to be slender and unhealthy (Carretta 14). This information begs the question, was Wheatley's trip to America really "merciful" or was she just trying to appeal to the Christian audience she was writing with the support of? Or, perhaps by the time she was writing the poem, Christianity had been so engrained in Wheatley's life that she had viewed her slavery as an act of God?

The moral discussion of the word "mercy" is vital to this discussion. In a sense, Wheatley could have used mercy as a word to counteract the epidemic of racism against her own. In other words, Wheatley feels that she must call her own situation merciful in comparison to the other African American men and women who were brought over on *The Phillis.* Perhaps Wheatley feels that she is fortunate that she was purchased by the Wheatleys while others were bought by potentially harsher slaveholders. To the white Christian men who reviewed Wheatley's work, the word mercy could have been interpreted as praise of their control, but to Phillis Wheatley the word also could have meant that the Wheatley family provided her mercy by taking her in from

an illness infested, food lacking journey and providing her with a sense of structure. To a person who has experienced so much loss and torture, the simplest acts could be skewed as merciful- even if they were for the personal benefit of outsiders. Wheatley is using hidden rhetoric here- making unclear the true meaning behind the key word "merciful." Wheatley seemed to be praising Christianity and her integration into it- whether or not she actually was.

Either potential meaning is possible, and perhaps both are true. By analyzing the last two lines of the poem, "Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,/ May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train," it appears Wheatley is attempting to nudge at her readers and state that she, an African American woman, is dedicated to Christianity and wants to be welcomed into the Christian community, which she refers to as "th' angelic train" (Wheatley, "On Being Brought"; Lines 7-8). Doing this signals to her white audience and slave owners, who were largely involved in the publication of her poetry, that she was obedient to the Christian norm of the community, assisting in her ability to gain their respect.

Additionally, Wheatley really began to believe in her Christian upbringing given how thoroughly integrated into her life it was. According to Carretta's biography, Susanna Wheatley was incredibly serious about the religious education of Phillis, and raising Phillis as a Christian was as important as raising her own children as Christian. Therefore, one can assume that, because Phillis's education was centered around Christianity, the thoughts and beliefs of the religion became largely engrained in her life.

"On Being Brought from Africa to America" is an early example of Wheatley's literacy education having a deep influence on the writing she produced. Wheatley's upbringing and the work produced from her upbringing creates an interesting comparison with other slave writings, as will be shown in the next chapter. Although Wheatley was educated and treated generally

better than slaves in the South, her writing is still tightly constrained by other forces exclusive to her. Most broadly, Wheatley most likely had to walk on eggshells around her white audience. As a poet, Wheatley is articulate and creative, although there are precise limits on what she is able to do with her words, and unspoken suggestions as to what her words should mean.

The unspoken suggestion here is to include Christian praises, seen in "On Being Brought from Africa to America." Would Phillis feel comfortable referring to John and Suzanna Wheatley, the couple who educated her and allowed her to produce her most famous and profitable work, as the couple who bought her from her kidnappers? Would she want to describe the ship that brought her to this couple as a deadly journey of human trafficking? Wheatley understood her role on American soil under the control of white men and tended to abide by it, especially in the early poems of her collection.

A second significant poem of Phillis Wheatley's collection is titled "To the University of Cambridge, New England," today known as Harvard University. Similar to "On Being Brought," Wheatley begins the poem by seemingly referring to her kidnapping as a blessing. The implications of this statement are long lasting over the work, as she indirectly thanks those who stole her from Africa for the violation of her own rights. Wheatley states "'Twas not long since I left my native shore/ The land of errors, and Egyptian gloom:/ Father of mercy, 'twas thy gracious hand/ Brought me in safety from those dark abodes" (lines 3-5). Here, Wheatley again suggests that she had willingly left her origin country, when in reality she had been kidnapped and sold in the most inhumane way possible. Wheatley refers to her home land as a "land of errors" which must lead readers to question the origin of such beliefs. It is hard to see how Wheatley, being such a young child when she was stripped from her family and culture, can

understand her homeland as a “land of errors”—unless it was a belief instilled by her captors, enslavers and now family members, the Wheatleys.

Moving on, Wheatley progresses to the main audience of her poem, the students of the University of Cambridge. Knowing she does not have the opportunity to attend such a prestigious university, given her status as a Black woman and a slave, Wheatley speaks to the men of the University as if they are above her. The introductory lines to the second stanza are, “Students, to you ’tis giv’n to scan the heights/ Above, to traverse the ethereal space,/ And mark the systems of revolving worlds” (lines 7-9). There is potential for a double meaning here. Either Wheatley would like to suggest that the men of Cambridge University are given the chance to make a mark on the world and reach accomplishments; or, more literally, they are privileged enough to study astronomy, an opportunity which would not be given to a woman of Wheatley’s stature. Wheatley continues by naming her audience “ye sons of science” in line 10, before flipping the script to preach the power of Christianity,

> What matchless mercy in the Son of God!
> When the whole human race by sin had fall’n,
> He deign’d to die that they might rise again,
> And share with him in the sublimest skies,
> Life without death, and glory without end.
> Improve your privileges while they stay,
> Ye pupils, and each hour redeem, that bears
> Or good or bad report of you to heav’n (lines 16- 23)

These lines are powerful for multiple reasons. After gaining the attention of these white males by praising their intellect and privilege, Wheatley has the ability to shift the narrative with their

focus still intact. Wheatley scales back her praise for the males, with a daring presentation of a sermon, with the lines “What matchless mercy in the Son of God!/….. Improve your privileges while they stay” (lines 16-21). The first of the two lines suggests the identity of the men as “sons of science,” presumably sons of wealthy and educated families, are of no high standing if they are not followers of God. The latter line, “Improve your privileges while they stay,” suggests that any privilege they now feel due to their stance in a prominent institution will one day be gone. Lastly, Wheatley informs the students of the communication between those on earth and those in heaven in announcing “Or good or bad report of you to heav’n” (line 23). This serves as an act of intimidation, suggesting the students cannot hide their actions from God. Additionally, Wheatley lessens the hierarchy present between a Black slave and white male students. In society, the males are undoubtedly more respected, however Wheatley attempts to change their point of view. To Wheatley, God is so powerful that everyone below him becomes equal. Wheatley would gain the favor of her majority of Christian readers when telling these men, in paraphrase, that they may be educated and privileged, but they are powerless without Christianity. Phillis Wheatley’s education in a strictly Christian household had taught her to follow and preach Christian beliefs. While upholding those beliefs, Wheatley is simultaneously asserting theological knowledge over the men of Cambridge. Had she been doing so in any other form than with Christianity, she may not have been as widely respected. However, Wheatley managed to comply while still showing her adaptability. She manipulates the norms of her time by speaking to the men of Cambridge by taking on the role of a preacher in this poem. Even more obscure, Wheatley is taking on the role of a Black female preacher, rather unheard of at this time. This is both a dangerous tactic for Wheatley to use, while also being a rewarding one.

The initial reading of Wheatley's relationship to America in "On Being Brought" illustrates Wheatley's apparent contentment with her societal position as a slave in Boston. This reading becomes unsettled by the reading of "To the Right and Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth." William, Earl of Dartmouth was a royal governor, high in political, social and financial standing. Therefore, for Phillis to be formally addressing him shows a level of confidence not presented in the last two analyzed poems. Wheatley begins the poem with the lines "HAIL, happy day, when, smiling like the morn,/ Fair Freedom rose New-England to adorn" (lines 1-2). From the very start of the poem, Wheatley has already introduced a freedom paradox, given that she is a slave of New Englanders and therefore as far from free as one could be. It is significant to note the first usage of "freedom" in this poem, as Wheatley uses it three more times throughout the course of it. This is the most the word "free," "freedom," or any variation has been used in any of *Poems On Various Subjects*.

Within the first few lines of "Earl of Dartmouth," the subject and intent of Wheatley's writing already seems different than in previous poems. The later placement of "Earl of Dartmouth" carries strategic weight. Wheatley has thus far lulled the readers into a sense of security-- as readers recognize Wheatley as a Christian who does not openly oppose her enslavement. However, a freedom paradox again appears in the mention of chains and tyranny, symbols of enslavement. Wheatley's lines: "No more, America, in mournful strain/ Of wrongs, and grievance unredress'd complain,/ No longer shalt thou dread the iron chain,/ Which wanton Tyranny with lawless hand/ Had made, and with it meant t' enslave the land" (lines 15-19). These lines represent some of Wheatley's most prominent disagreements with the slave system of America. In previous poems, such as "On Being Brought from Africa to America," America had been described as a symbol for hope and mercy. Here, however, Wheatley pairs America

with a “mournful strain of wrongs” and insists that no one should have to “dread the iron chain.” Similar to many of the points Wheatley makes, there can be a double meaning found. With the political information known of the Earl and his power in England, an individual may assume Wheatley is speaking on behalf of the American people in requesting the release of tyranny over the colonies. Additionally, given her state of enslavement and the observed freedom rhetoric in her writing, Wheatley could have been calling on the hypocrisy of America, that it is not a free country for all when it is a tyranny for some.[4] Wheatley has progressively moved from imagery that would be conservative and comfortable to the white ear, to using more subversive and aggressive language about her enslavement.

The third time the word “freedom” is used in “The Earl of Dartmouth” is the most telling of Wheatley’s experience in enslavement. In lines 21 and 22, Wheatley writes, “Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung,/ Whence flow these wishes for the common good.” These lines are written nearly as a question, in which she makes her readers curious about where her desire for freedom came from. This is important when reviewing critics' questions of why Wheatley does not desire freedom, as discussed above in the section “Lating Historical Criticism on Wheatley.” Now, it seems Wheatley has come to terms with the definition of freedom and that freedom has been taken from her. She may have felt in past times that she had been saved and that she was fortunate to be educated and housed; in some ways, Wheatley may not have recognized she wasn’t truthfully free until years into enslavement. The second line of the two, “whence flow these wishes for the common good,” seems to evoke a request to the Earl of Dartmouth to allow “the common good” to gain freedom.

[4] The Earl of Dartmouth controlled the American colonies whilst remaining an idol of respect by the Americans. The Earl was not an aggressive enemy against the Americans whereas the King of England was an enemy. In line with his cooperation with American colonies, Wheatley likely viewed The Earl as a source of support for American freedom (“William Legge, 2nd Earl of Dartmouth”).

After a discussion pleading for freedom with the Earl of Dartmouth, Wheatley advances to discussing the point in which she lost her freedom to the American slave trade: “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?” (lines 26-29). These lines reflect a stark difference in Wheatley’s processing of her kidnapping from Africa. Compared with “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” where coming to America was associated with mercy and redemption, Wheatley becomes more honest about her experience. Her words now include: snatch’d, excruciating, sorrows, labour, steel’d, misery, seiz’d. Wheatley does not indicate any sort of pleasant experience leaving Africa, but rather a very traumatic, terrifying experience. She includes mention of her father, which is rare in her poems. After articulating her own emotions regarding her kidnapping prior, the line “That from a father seiz’d his babe belov’d” allows readers to attempt to comprehend her father and family members’ emotions, humanizing them and inviting sympathy.

Wheatley has thus far shared the emotion she wants both the Earl and her readers to feel. The lines following state, “And can I then but pray,/ Others may never feel tyrannic sway?/For favours past, great Sir, our thanks are due,/ And thee we ask thy favours to renew,/ Since in thy pow’r, as in thy will before,/ To sooth the griefs, which thou did’st once deplore” (lines 30-35). The inclusion of these lines together works to accomplish several of Wheatley’s tasks. First, Wheatley has made her readers feel sympathy for both her and her family as she was stripped from them at such a young age. Wheatley uses religious rhetoric before making a request to end the tyranny over the African American population, using the phrase “And then I can but pray” (line 30). She continues her prayer with the purpose of the poem, which holds a double meaning. On one hand, the prayer could be requesting freedom from England’s tyranny over America.

Secondly, the prayer could be requesting freedom for the African American population. The last possible explanation is Wheatley is drawing a comparison between the two tyrannies: the tyranny of England and that of slavery. To place her suppression in terms the Earl could understand, they must be political terms.

From Perceived Accommodationist to Activist

"Whether poetic imitation distracts her, Christian devotion constrains her, or social norms assuage her, the scholarly consensus says Wheatley's poetry does not address the plight of black people, especially the enslaved, save in slightly subversive ways" (Ford 182). Wheatley's critics all recognize the aspects of *Poems on Various Subjects* that suggest she is an accommodationist, however also the constraints that made *Poems* the work of literature that it is. In fairness to Wheatley, the way in which she was raised and educated led to specific writing techniques that she likely could not fight. Her "accommodation" was not a choice, but rather something that was normalized by her education. The language Wheatley knows is the language taught by her educators, who in a sense were also her oppressors. While Wheatley was a Christian woman who was additionally educated into compliance with conventions of Christian rhetoric, she also broke with those conventions in many creative ways by using literary techniques and complex language.

Upon analysis of the poems above, it is clear that Wheatley had taken positions against slavery, just in discreet ways. I aim to analyze one last poem in Wheatley's collection that uses Christian rhetoric to make assertions about the horrors of slavery within the confines of those conventions. Wheatley uses a number of rhetorical references to slavery in order to create a mood of powerlessness and despair. Although subtle, the references create a strong persona for Wheatley, proving the depths she can reach with her literary skills.

The poem “Hymn to the Evening” makes stark contrasts between the ideals of Heaven and the unspoken hell she is living in on earth. Wheatley strategically uses the religious references to Heaven, perhaps in order to keep her white Christian readers content, whilst differentiating the praising of God in Heaven with the unspecified sins, which with our new understanding of Wheatley’s covert rhetoric, we can connect to slavery. However, perhaps Wheatley is also setting up a paradox within her own Christian religion. Despite Wheatley being educated into compliance with Christianity, she also embraces it as her own religion and finds solace in it. In the context Christianity placed within the poem, Wheatley suggests that there is a real difference between being a Black Christian and a white Christian, one that she addresses in her writing to come.

The poem begins with a praise of the heavenly land that Wheatley can sense: “the incense of the blooming spring./ Soft purl the streams, the birds renew their notes,/ And through the air their mingled music floats” (lines 4-6). The opening to Wheatley’s poem is charged with natural imagery taking the reader into a feeling of serenity. However, this perspective quickly shifts when Wheatley continues “Through all the heav’ns what beauteous dies are spread!/ But the west glories in the deepest red” (lines 7-8). A paradox is now created- suggesting that not all subjects of the poem are able to experience the same bliss; that some are living in a state of red. The reference is still vague, however, and not much can be interpreted besides the symbol of red which often connotes blood, fear or death.

Wheatley concludes the poem with the mention of waking up in the morning, insinuating that the scenery previously mentioned was the product of a dream that concluded as a nightmare- in the realization of Wheatley’s reality. The poet describes “At morn to wake more heav’nly, more refin’d;/ So shall the labours of the day begin/ More pure, more guarded from the snares of

sin./ Night's leaden sceptre seals my drowsy eyes,/ Then cease, my song, till fair Aurora rise" (lines 14-18). There is a lot of hidden meaning to unpack in these lines. To begin, Wheatley describes herself as "heav'nly, more refin'd" as she wakes, an assumption that she is rested and content during the phase of awakening -- almost, maybe, forgetting for a moment what the morning breaking means for a slave. As Wheatley continues to write, she reaches the realization of what "the labours the day" are to bring. But, as she lies there in bed before rising, she feels "guarded from the snares of sin" for the meantime. The mental processing that Wheatley takes us readers through seems like a denial of the enslavement she must endure, day in and day out. Wheatley wakes up pure from a night of sleep and dreaming, only to be awakened by the "snares of sin" and looks forward to the night time in which she can rest her eyes and dream again. The duality between night and day is crucial to our understanding of a life in slavery. The imagery of night and darkness evokes the Christian concept of sin. Wheatley associates the pressure of sinning with the daytime; in contrast, the nighttime is filled with heavenly thoughts of scenes of serenity. Christianity is being placed in question with this line alone- seeing as a Black slave does not reap the same benefits of Christianity as a white freeman. This revelation begs the question: what does it mean to be a Black Christian slave? To Wheatley, it means noticing hypocrisy in the values of Christianity, and being forced to pray for safety and protection from the devil during the day, whereas white Christians experience this feeling of serenity and peace during the day, as described in the introduction of "Hymn to the Evening." Wheatley can only dream about such pleasures. Wheatley's only peace is in the night whilst being hidden from the reality of her enslaved life. The poem concludes with "Then cease, my song, till fair Aurora rise," further insinuating Wheatley's feeling of having to turn off her dreams of peace and serenity and begin her day.

The dissection of this poem evokes a re-reading of the prior analyzed poems in search of similarities. In “On Being Brought from Africa to America," the lines “Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,/ May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train” conclude the poem (lines 7-8). Although Wheatley is not initially read as being condescending towards white Christians, there are similarities with the way Wheatley writes in “Hymn to the Evening.” Wheatley calls out white Christians and politely asks that she and other African Americans may be involved in Christianity. By the looks of the progression between “On Being Brought” and “Hymn to the Evening" much later into the collection, it doesn’t appear that Wheatley ended up feeling included in the white version of Christianity by the white population, and certainly didn’t feel that she reaped the benefits of Christianity. Wheatley’s references to Christianity shift back and forth from praising to actually criticizing the hypocrisy of the religion in many cases. However, a detailed evaluation of her writing must be completed in order to come to this realization.

Although Wheatley wrote in a way pleasing to her white readers—avoiding explicit references to the violent and inhumane nature of slavery—she was still writing. Wheatley could have taken the education she was provided coupled with her own natural born talent and decided to write fiction stories, simply use her literacy for the assistance of her enslavers, or not have used it at all. But still, she wrote. Wheatley fought against the very tight constraints that were placed on her as a slave and aided the fight against the stigmas of African Americans’ intellectual incapacity that continued to be fought for many years.

Circling back to a discussion of the heavy influence of education on an individual’s writing, it is crucial to again recognize Wheatley’s state of being when she arrived in the United States as a slave. She was likely under the age of eight, she was frail and malnourished. If she had education in Africa, it was minimal and only until the age of seven or eight. With this

information in mind, it becomes easier to comprehend Wheatley's tendency to turn away from forwardly confronting the issues her race and social position face. Elizabeth J. West addresses this phenomenon in a comparison that could be more widely understood by those who have not been as heavily oppressed as Wheatley: "However, just as the slave who speaking to her master avoids meeting her master's eyes but sees him quite clearly nonetheless, Wheatley, as poet, avoids direct confrontation with her white audience" (41). This quote from West's "Whiteness in African American Antebellum Literature" highlights Wheatley's inherent need to walk on eggshells with her white audience. Wheatley needed to find a way to be a Black writer in a society that had little desire to listen to what Black writers had to say. She was well aware that she would be restricted by the boundaries of white influence, and used her writing and poetic capabilities to poke holes in this barrier, although she would never be able to break it entirely. So far, we have investigated an enslaved woman who had a formal education, but the research question can be further explored and answered through the analysis of the writings of Frederick Douglass, a man who had no formal education and wrote past the period of his enslavement.

CHAPTER 2

A Black Man in a White World: Douglass's Search for Identity

The chapter on Phillis Wheatley considered the question: if an enslaved Black person is educated by her white slave holders, how does that influence her writing to a white readership? Wheatley had to battle criticism of those who believed she was an accommodationist, as her writing was not received by many as advocating for the Black and enslaved population. In contrast, this chapter will explore Frederick Douglass and center around his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave.* Douglass had a contrasting educational experience in that he was not educated by white people and instead had to hide his growing knowledge from his enslavers and, until he escaped to the North, from the white public. So, how does this education inform the writing that emerges following Douglass's enslavement? Douglass was also writing for a white audience, however he was able to cross many more barriers and include anti-slavery detail that Wheatley could not and did not. In this chapter, I will explore the ways in which an enslaved man articulates his own identity and understands the role of literacy as empowering at a time when enslaved people had no power.

Douglass's Battling Identities

"The central thrust of his thinking, consequently, was to resolve the dynamic tension between his identities as a Negro and as an American" (Martin ix). Frederick Douglass was an intelligent man, undoubtedly a strong one, who persevered through the physical and mental torture of slavery. Douglass struggled to define his own identity, as shown through the memoir *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass.* In reading the memoir, I hope to explore the question, how does Douglass identify as a writer? If he struggles to find an identity, how is he working to find one? I suspect the answer may not be explicitly given but that the process of writing brings empowerment and a sense of identity.

The first chapter of Douglass's narrative offers insight to the challenges Douglass encountered in identifying himself. While it may not seem like a privilege to a person to know their date of birth, it is a privilege that Douglass could not attain. In explaining this challenge, Douglass states,

> A want of information concerning my own was a source of unhappiness to me even during childhood. The white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege. . . . The nearest estimate I can give makes me now between twenty-seven and twenty-eight years of age. I come to this, from hearing my master say, some time during 1835, I was about seventeen years old (1)

Not only could Douglass not identify with other children, perhaps those of his slave owners, due to his status as a Black slave, he could not even identify with them in terms of age. In gaining literacy skills, which became important to Douglass and will be described in detail further in this chapter, how was Douglass to measure his skills as a young child? Was he reading at the level of a five year old at age ten? In processing one's own identity, which is often derived by one's own skill set, Douglass was left in the dark.

Understanding one's own family ties, a factor that assists identification with ancestors, was an additional privilege that Douglass lacked. Douglass did not have more than a few snippets of information about his parents, nevermind their characteristics. Douglass explains the confusing information or misinformation all together early in his narrative as well:

> My father was a white man. He was admitted to be such by all I ever heard speak of my parentage. The opinion was also whispered that my master was my father; but of the correctness of this opinion, I know nothing; the means of knowing was withheld from me. My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant—before I knew her as my

> mother. It is a common custom, in the part of Maryland from which I ran away, to part children from their mothers at a very early age. . . I do not know, unless it be to hinder the development of the child's affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child. This is the inevitable result (2)

There is much to be said about this description of Douglass's knowledge, or lack thereof. He knows his father is a white man, signaling an incongruence with his status as a Black slave. Perhaps more challenging to understand, there is a possibility his master is his father. The fact that his father, whoever it may be, is a white man, appears to aid his self- understanding, whether in a helpful way or not. Douglass exemplifies the issues of identity that arise with the potential of being fathered by his white slaveholder in a description of a violent beating of a mixed-race slave. Douglass paints the scene: the master "stand[s] by and see[s] one white son tie up his brother, of but few shades darker complexion than himself, and ply the gory lash to his naked back" (4). The most noteworthy phrase in this sentence is "see one white son tie up his brother." Although the beating Douglass describes is brutal and even challenging to read, the word "brother" prevails as most important. At this point in the narrative, no context has been given to the relationship between the slavemaster's son and Douglass, whether they have a relationship or they do not. What can be concluded from reading Douglass's statement about his potential white father(s), coupled with the mention of the theoretical son being "but a few shades darker complexion," leads to the assumption that his partly- white heritage could draw him into identification with his master's son. However, the identification between a Black slave and his suspected white slave owner father is not an acceptable identification. If Frederick Douglass was the son of his master, that would mean that the master had an affair with Frederick's enslaved mother. Due to this, the master must not show favoritism towards his Black son, as it would

expose his infidelity to his wife. The situation Douglass described was theoretical, however it could apply to his real life. Although identification with another human could be empowering, it is all the more degrading to be beaten by someone he identifies with.

Scholarly Work: Douglass's Perceived Identity as a Writer

The concept of Douglass's battling identities is not a new or scarcely discussed topic. In fact, Robert S. Levine has an entire book dedicated to this discussion. Levine begins his introduction to *The Lives of Frederick Douglass* with one of Douglass's own quotes, which states "it will be seen in these pages that I have lived several lives as one: first, the life of slavery; secondly, the life of a fugitive from slavery; thirdly, the life of comparative freedom; fourthly, the life of conflict and battle; and, fifthly, the life of victory, if not complete, at least assured" (1). Levine takes the words of Douglass and analyzes them across Douglass's multiple autobiographical narratives and discusses identity on a larger scale. Levine notes the troubling differences he found across Douglass's writing in the opinions expressed about slaveholders:

> Douglass wrote and spoke about his slave master Thomas Auld over an approximately forty- year period. At times he seems fond of the man; at other times he conveys his disdain. Auld in some tellings is relatively kind and in others is absolutely vile. Where in Douglass's extensive comments and descriptions of Auld is the true Auld, and if Douglass lived a life in relation to Auld, how should we read that life? (3)

This observation is poignant throughout Douglass's writing, addressing the question of identity which this chapter poses. If a self-educated enslaved man writes of his life experience as an oppressed minority whose only initial identity is that of "a slave," how can he form and express his own identity? For Douglass, it took reinventing himself a few times to become the man he desired.

Frederick Douglass's identity was and still is long lived, as he became a publicly known name across America as an activist and writer. Some of the most famous anti-slavery and anti-racism activists such as W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington "each sought to claim Douglass as a model for his own version of black leadership" (8). With this in mind, as well as other critics such as James Monroe Gregory referring to Douglass's "influence on the colored race [being] greater than that of any other man," these opinions demonstrate the impact of Douglass on the anti-slavery, anti-racism and Civil Rights Movement (qtd. in Levine 7).

Aside from the praise Douglass received following *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and his subsequent narratives, there was an audience of readers who challenged Douglass's title as an author. Benjamin Brawley, "whose numerous works on African American literature helped to establish the field" is a critic of this audience. In Brawley's *The Negro in Literature and Art in the United States,* Brawley wrote Douglass into his chapter titled "The Stage, Orators, Readers" and left Douglass *out* of his chapter which discusses slave narratives and Black autobiographies (13). Douglass, by being placed in a chapter on orators and barred from a chapter which discusses the actual genre of writing Douglass wrote, a slave narrative, is discounted as an author and stylistic writer. The title of "orator" alludes to the idea that Brawley read Douglass as more of a public speaker than a writer. Additionally, Vernon Loggins refers to Douglass's narrative as "childlike in its simplicity" and additionally states that "What [Douglass] did not dare say in the *Narrative* he now says with boldness. The book [*Life and Times of Frederick Douglass]* is in every sense a surer and bigger work than the earlier autobiography" (qtd. in Levine 15). Here, Loggins points out that Douglass exhibits a lack of confidence in himself as a writer in his narrative. What Loggins fails to recognize is the state of being Douglass was in during the writing of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass.* Douglass was a newly

free man, educated by himself only, writing an expose on the slavery institution he was so long a victim of. Given the circumstances, one cannot expect Douglass to have written with the sureness of himself that he later gained.

Other critics have analyzed Douglass's writing in opposition, some arguing for "turning the simplicity that Loggins had seen as negative into a virtue." Benjamin Quarles stressed the simple prose and readability being the reason that "Douglass' autobiography was in many respects symbolic of the Negro's role in American life" (qtd. in Levine 17). Although many critics had opposing views on the simple nature of Douglass's writing, some also found subtle tactics used in Douglass's work that were representative of his literary skill. In the chapter of *Figures in Black* titled "Binary Oppositions in Chapter One of *Narrative*," Henry Louis Gates Jr. notes the binary oppositions in the first chapter of the narrative, pointing to Douglass's ability to "create a unity on a symbolic level, not only through physical opposition but also through an opposition of space and time" (90). The two most apparent binary oppositions introduced early in the chapter are that Douglass knows his place of birth but not his date of birth, and knows his mother but does not know who his father is. By doing this, "Douglass's narrative demonstrates not only how the deprivation of the hallmarks of identity can affect the slave but also how the slaveowner's world negates and even perverts those very values on which it was built" (93). Reading the chapter "Binary Oppositions in Chapter One of *Narrative"* in conjunction with the past critics' readings help readers recognize how Douglass's identity was handed to him at birth. Douglass was only aware of the knowledge his slave owners wanted him to be aware of. Therefore, the progression of Douglass's identity is not only an expected but vital part to his narrative. The criticism of such changes in Douglass's expression toward the slave industry fails to recognize the necessity of Douglass's identity shifts.

Hidden Literacy: Challenges in the Education of an Enslaved Man

The concept of forbidden action always led to a deeper desire on the part of those being forbidden. When Douglass entered the home of his second master and was introduced to Mistress Sophia Auld, he was briefly taught the ABC's before Sophia Auld was forbidden to continue Douglass's education. Although Douglass's master, Thomas Auld, had been hoping the forbiddance would present a scaring tactic to Douglass, it instead provided a deeper motivation. As Douglass listens in on his master's conversation, he hears "if you teach that n---- (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master" (Douglass 29). The idea of being "unmanageable" became intriguing to Douglass. If he was unmanageable, he could not be kept. Douglass was reaching an age in which the horrors of slavery were becoming more apparent than ever before- although he had believed he was treated better than many slaves where he was currently living in Baltimore. In turn, Douglass stated his motivation:

> I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. It was just what I wanted, and I got it at a time when I the least expected it. (29)

The purpose of keeping slaves illiterate, Douglass now realizes, was not simply because slavemasters wanted their slaves to be spending more time in labor than educating themselves. Instead, there was an inhumane motivation grounded in the desire to overpower slaves. If slaves never learned the basics of American education, they would not have the capability to take on any role in society apart from as a slave. As discussed in Chapter 1, Wheatley's road to an identity as something other than a slave, a successful poet, came from her literary skills. This

was an empowerment Douglass craved and he made a promise to himself to work towards gaining an education.

And so Douglass's commitment to gain an education in literacy began. Early into the narrative, Douglass explains how when slaves are asked about their livelihood in enslavement, they often say they are content and that their masters are kind. Douglass states:

> I have been frequently asked, when a slave, if I had a kind master, and do not remember ever to have given a negative answer; nor did I, in pursuing this course, consider myself as uttering what was absolutely false; for I always measured the kindness of my master by the standard of kindness set up among slaveholders around us (16)

Douglass recognizes the hesitation the enslaved population feels when discussing their masters prior to explaining the death of a fellow slave, Demby. Douglass witnesses the horrific murder of Demby in front of his own eyes, with no explanation for the murder other than that Demby had become "unmanagable" and was setting a "dangerous example" for the rest of the plantation (20). It wasn't until slightly later, when Douglass overhears Mrs. Auld being scolded for educating Douglass, that he realizes the power literacy and education have in making him "unmanageable," and thus his goal to read, write and learn is born—although, as exemplified by Demby's death prior, Douglass understands the consequences of partaking in behavior that would deem him unmanageable. The act of reading and writing is a risk in itself, but writing the honest experience of enslavement is even more of a risk. At this point in the narrative, Douglass has taken the first risk mentioned, the act of reading and writing.

The process of gaining literary skills also allowed Douglass to assess the world in a new light, understanding the grip slavery had over the Black population in the antebellum South. Douglass explains the sneaking around he did in order to become more literate, proving just how

dedicated he was to his own education while gaining little to no support from others. Those who did assist Douglass, especially in the beginning stages of his literacy, may not have had full awareness of the vital skill they were assisting a slave in. Douglass recalls running errands in his neighborhood for his slaveholders and simultaneously retrieving books from the young white children nearby. In doing so, he gained a better understanding of the literacy skills white children at a young age are able to attain in their education as well as an understanding of the steps he needed to take in order to read and write at a productive level.

Douglass was very creative in his means of unconventional education while under the reign of anti-literacy slaveholders. In addition to reading with the young boys on his block, he turned other slave errands into educational experiences. While working in a shipyard and moving timber, Douglass paid close attention to each of the letters that labeled each piece of timber, and the sounds the white men would make when referring to each letter. He would then go home, and take hold of the work books his master's son brought home, sneaking writing into each of the spaces little Thomas had not written on (38).

Now, after a number of years, Frederick Douglass succeeded in learning to write. Douglass was not only educated into the art of writing, however, he also gained a better understanding of the world around him, and the power structure that kept the Black population enslaved and the white population in total control. In one of the books Douglass obtained from the children on his block, *The Columbian Orator,* he read interactions between a slave and a master. Douglass recalls, "the more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers. I could regard them in no other light than a band of successful robbers, who had left their homes, and gone to Africa, and stolen us from our homes, and in a strange land reduced us to slavery" (35). Although Douglass was already angry with his state of enslavement, his ability to read and

write drove him further down a path of anger and desire for freedom. This recognition of slavery's horrors and desire for freedom was precisely what Thomas Auld and other slave holders feared, as their power could be stripped away by a slave who empowers himself.

As Douglass's reading skills sharpened, so did his awareness of his social status in the antebellum South. Douglass is engaged in an ongoing process of building a repertoire of knowledge, beginning to understand how he can protect himself against a white society while defying the orders of his slave owners. In one instance, Douglass had run into and had a brief conversation with two Irishmen in which he revealed his lifelong status as a slave. When one Irishman appeared saddened by the fact and suggested Douglass run away and find freedom in the North, Douglass writes "I pretended not to be interested in what they said, and treated them as if I did not understand them; for I feared they might be treacherous. White men have been known to encourage slaves to escape, and then, to get the reward, catch them and return them to their masters" (37). Douglass's skepticism of the Irishmen was a protective factor for him as he learned how enslavement works, which his readings helped him understand. Slavery and racism were so deeply engrained in the antebellum South that Douglass suspected even those who may not own slaves were still a danger to him. Instead, Douglass assumes, he can be self- sufficient in his own escape by writing his own slave pass. From here on out, readers witness a change in Douglass as he becomes more confident in his own capabilities and only allows a small number of people into his trusted circle.

While some of the experiences Douglass had while learning to read and write led to rage within him, they also granted him something he never had before. Through this growing experience Douglass became a part of a family and was the closest to having an identity of his own as he had ever been. Douglass explains that once he had gathered the skills to process words

and read, that he wanted to share his knowledge with others. Douglass would gather the other slaves he lived with at Mr. Freeland's and hold Sabbath School at the home of a free colored man, whom he refuses to name. Through this learning process, Douglass recognized the other slaves as not only friends, but family. Douglass writes:

> They were noble souls; they not only possessed loving hearts, but brave ones. We were linked and interlinked with each other. I loved them with a love stronger than any thing I have experienced since. It is sometimes said that we slaves do not love and confide in each other. In answer to this assertion, I can say, I never loved any or confided in any people more than my fellow-slaves, and especially those with whom I lived at Mr. Freeland's. I believe we would have died for each other (71)

At this point in Douglass's narrative, there is a stronger sense of Douglass's confidence as well as identity as an educated man. Douglass's concern with his heritage, race and identity has been replaced with feelings of purpose, capability and belongingness. As the narrative progresses, Douglass realizes Thomas Auld's concerns: he empowers himself and the slaves around him against the cause of slavery.

No Longer Keeping the Powerless, Powerless

When Douglass slowly started building his own family and felt a sense of identity, he became what his prior slaveholder, Thomas Auld, would consider "unmanageable." Here rises the stark contrast in the educational experiences of Phillis Wheatley and Frederick Douglass. Over the course of history, schooling was a way to assist children in growing into well read, experienced individuals. The expectation was that educated children would eventually take on important roles and occupations in a given society. The International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children published an article on

developmentally appropriate reading and writing practices for children stating: “Learning to read and write is critical to a child’s success in school and later in life. One of the best predictors of whether a child will function competently in school and go on to contribute actively in our increasingly literate society is the level to which the child progresses in reading and writing” (IRA & NAEYC, 7). The key words in this quote are “function competently.” What does it mean exactly to “function competently”? In many ways, it does simply mean to be able to take care of oneself and act appropriately, but it also means to follow society's rules, which in turn lead to following society’s unspoken norms and ideals. In other words, education is a way to manage children and make them compliant members of society.

So why were the Wheatleys not only accepting of, but actually supportive of, Phillis’s education, while Douglass’s enslavers looked at the idea of Douglass being educated with fear? The reason for the difference in attitude partly has to do with the motivation and techniques behind each writer’s literacy education. The Wheatley family brought Phillis to church and taught her how to read by use of the Bible. Since Wheatley was educated through the Christian word, she wrote within the boundaries of said Christian word. Wheatley would have never been provided a book that showed the power struggle between freeman and slave that Douglass encountered in *The Columbian Orator*; she likely would never be presented with anti-slavery propaganda, or texts mentioning slave relations at all. She was educated into compliance with both the Christian religion and the norms of the white community. As discussed in the previous chapter, Wheatley found unique ways to break the boundaries and unveil her own struggles in slavery while remaining quiet and polite with her complaints in the eyes of the public. Although Wheatley’s writing was empowering to herself, there was never a blatant statement of

empowerment over slavery through her literacy; Wheatley's publication was not intended to free her from slavery, and if it was, the fact was not discernible to the public.

If enslavers refused to educate their slaves through the Bible and Christianity, there was likely no plausible way to educate the slave and have him remain "manageable." Frederick Douglass falls under this category. He did not have to face the restrictions of writing under Christian rhetoric or having his writing reviewed by his slave owners, but instead he was challenged with a number of boundaries outside of just what could be placed in his writing. Douglass had to read and write in secret, as being exposed for his actions would lead to severe violence at the hands of his masters.

The more that Douglass read and wrote, the more that he recognized the thirst for power that his slaveholders had. Oftentimes, Douglass thought, the reason a slave was whipped was not because they were behaving poorly. Instead, a slave would be whipped because the slaveholder was craving respect and power. In a description of one of Douglass's previous slaveholders, the author describes "Captain Auld was not born a slaveholder. He had been a poor man, master only of a Bay craft. He came into possession of all his slaves by marriage; and of all men, adopted slaveholders are the worst" (46). Figuring slaveholders learn from their elders how to own and treat a slave, one would think the worst slaveholders would come from a generation of slaveholding individuals. Instead, however, Douglass recognizes something peculiar about slaveholding men who haven't come from a long line of rich and powerful. Douglass is aware that adopted slaveholders must go to a new extent in order to ensure there is a great power difference between the slave and slave master. If a white man grows up poor, there are inevitably fewer power differences between himself and a Black slave than if the white man grew up rich. They are more cruel and more power hungry because they have not previously had power over

others. In order to further exacerbate the status of whiteness over blackness, the white man will deny any chance of a Black man becoming powerful, and this includes slaves' access to education. The recognition of the power structure in slavery becomes important to Douglass's motivation and growth as an educated and educating man. On multiple occasions, Douglass mentions the disgust he feels with the institution of slavery's witholding of education from slaves. In regard to educating his fellow slaves, Douglass writes "their minds had been starved by their cruel masters. They had been shut up in mental darkness" (71). One by one, Douglass places the pieces together in recognition of the goal of generations of slavery: to keep the powerless, powerless and to disallow any access to freedom in doing so.

Douglass shifts into a more autonomous narration with the line "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man" (57). With this line, he begins to focus on his growth out of slavery. Douglass has reached a breaking point in his enslavement in which he can no longer accept the cruelty of his slaveholders in silence. Douglass explains earlier in the text how most slaves, when asked about their opinion on their slaveholders, respond with at least contentment. This appears to be in fear of being reprimanded by the slaveholders for speaking negatively. Douglass had recognized what happens to slaves when they become unmanageable and feared the consequences of such, for a while that is. The moment in which Douglass makes his own personal shift from identifying as a "career" slave to a man is when he decides to become unmanageable. First, readers witness in written word the ways in which Douglass became unmanageable to his slave holders in a physical sense, and later analysis of writing techniques reveal what the physical actions described meant to Douglass's growing autonomous identity. The physical sense of becoming unmanageable occurred when Douglass found it within himself to confront Mr. Covey, otherwise known as the slave breaker,

both verbally and physically. Despite being outnumbered and otherwise "losing" the battle in that he did not gain any freedom from the matter, it intensified his own self concept as an aspiring free man. Douglass writes:

> This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free. The gratification afforded by the triumph was a full compensation for whatever else might follow, even death itself. He only can understand the deep satisfaction which I experienced, who has himself repelled by force the bloody arm of slavery. . . I did not hesitate to let it be known of me, that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me (63)

For once in his enslavement, Douglass felt as if he was not the subordinate person in the relationship. This is elucidated by Douglass's satisfaction in striking Covey with "the bloody arm of slavery."

There is a very transparent shift in Douglass's growing autonomy made visible in his physical altercation, but there is also a shift made visible in his writing. At the start of the previous passage, Douglass refers to a "turning- point in his career as a slave." The word choice of "career as a slave" stands out amongst a multitude of previous identifications of himself as "a slave." The minute shift in language proves Douglass's growing feeling of autonomy over his enslavement. Whereas he once was a slave with no agency over the outcome of his enslavement, speaking of his enslavement as a "career" indicates there is a choice to leave the career behind as if he has agency over his freedom. The passage concludes with "I did not hesitate to let it be known of me, that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in

killing me." Through the written word, Douglass has explicitly detailed his opposition to slavery. He would rather be dead than made manageable by Mr. Covey. As much as Mr. Covey wants to beat Douglass into shape, Douglass is of no use as a slave if he is dead.

Lastly, following the fight with Covey, there is a rehabilitation of Douglass's desire to become educated and even educate others. Prior to this altercation, Douglass's education in literacy had plateaued. He had learned the basics of literature and had been able to read, but because of the hardships he faced while living with Mr. Covey his intellect had "languished" (55). After asserting physical power over Covey, his desire for an education was rejuvenated. A few pages of writing following the description of his fight, Douglass explains the Sabbath school he had held every Sunday to learn and help other slaves learn. As his desire to learn and educate grew, his hatred for the institution of slavery grew, and the two feelings continuously reinforced eachother:

> I succeeded in creating in them a strong desire to learn how to read. This desire soon sprang up in the others also. They very soon mustered up some old spelling-books, and nothing would do but that I must keep a Sabbath school. I agreed to do so, and accordingly devoted my Sundays to teaching these my loved fellow-slaves how to read . . . My blood boils as I think of the bloody manner in which Messrs. Wright Fairbanks and Garrison West, both class-leaders, in connection with many others, rushed in upon us with sticks and stones, and broke up our virtuous little Sabbath school, at St. Michael's—all calling themselves Christians! humble followers of the Lord Jesus Christ! But I am again digressing (70)

The sentence Douglass uses to conclude this passage reiterates the inherent bias within the enslaved population to withhold their real perspective of enslavement. Douglass reins back his

outrage in this final sentence following several statements in which he mocks the offending men for calling themselves Christians. It seems as if the telling of his own story is acceptable in his eyes, but expressing the feelings attached to his story is not acceptable. There are similarities in the way Douglass halts himself, with "I am digressing," and the way Phillis Wheatley encrypts her emotions subtly throughout her poetry. Each writer wants to tell their own story but feels a pressure from the intended audience of their work. Douglass, as seen in the following section, later navigates a more direct and forthright tactic to inform his audience of his experience in slavery.

The Bitter Truth: Empowerment in Gory Detail

By 1845, Douglass was a free, educated man. In order to further explore our research question, it is imperative to consider the text as a writing process rather than just an experience. How did Douglass attempt to put the experience of slavery into words? Who does he name and how explicit does he become with his descriptions of the violence and brutality of his enslavement?

As Douglass describes the violence that occurs within the institution of slavery, he recognizes the role that power plays in the brutality above any other factor. Douglass does not shy away from clarifying the intentions behind violence of the institution, rather he highlights them thoroughly in his narrative. In one instance, Douglass detailed a whipping of a young woman by one of his enslavers:

> I have said my master found religious sanction for his cruelty . . . I have seen him tie up a lame young woman, and whip her with a heavy cowskin upon her naked shoulders, causing the warm red blood to drip; and, in justification of the bloody deed, he would

> quote this passage of Scripture—"He that knoweth his master's will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes" (49)

Reflecting upon this passage, one can gather that a grown man would have physical power over a "lame young woman" without even tying her up and whipping her. The slave holder could have gained power over the young woman with one slap on the wrist, or one whip. The continuing whipping elucidates the slaveholder's thirst for power. The language that Douglass uses to describe the physical beating of the young woman creates imagery to incite a shudder within the reader. Although all readers are aware that blood is red and that it feels warm as it leaves a wound on our body, the words strung together allow us to imagine the sensation and fear of dripping blood.

Further, Douglass explains his own experience with the slave breaker named Mr. Covey, telling his readers:

> I was somewhat unmanageable when I first went there, but a few months of this discipline tamed me. Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute! (55)

The concept of a slave breaker alone proves the power structure that the institution of slavery is built upon. The sole purpose of Mr. Covey's occupation was to break apart the "body, soul and spirit" of slaves and make them manageable and otherwise powerless. After reading Douglass's building inclination to gain an education, the claim that his "intellect languished, the disposition to read departed" notes that Covey has completed one of the goals of slave breaking. Covey has forced Douglass to give up hope and has made him manageable. Douglass has been aware of the

power of education and its necessity for his freedom. Mr. Covey has ripped even the slightest desire to become an educated man from him. In conjunction with losing the thirst for education, Douglass appears to give up his fight against slavery. In the past two passages, Douglass utilizes a different vocabulary when discussing the slowing progress of his education versus when he describes the brutality of enslavement. When speaking of the suffering felt by the young female slave, Douglass details the blood and gore as central aspects of his description. In contrast, when Douglass recalls his time with Mr. Covey, his emphasis is less on the physicality of the abuse, but on the effect of the experience on his soul. Writing this narrative in the 1840's, following his enslavement, these details were important for Douglass to include in order to properly articulate the intensity of Mr. Covey's slave breaking, that it goes beyond physical abuse and crosses over into his writing tactics in the present day of his writing.

Although alluding to it prior, Douglass furthers his connection between slaveholder's violence and the desire for power in talking about the actions of Mr. Hopkins, a notably religious man: "a mere look, word, or motion,—a mistake, accident, or want of power,—are all matters for which a slave may be whipped at any time" (68). By clarifying that the violence and whippings that were enforced upon the slaves were rarely necessary and instead for power and status as a slaveholder, Douglass exposes the entire system of slavery as a society of power hungry white people. Additionally, as noted in these prior passages, religion seemed to be an additional factor leading to harsher brutality amongst slaveholders. Again, Douglass did not shy away from raising these validated accusations in his writing:

> I assert most unhesitatingly, that the religion of the south is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes,—a justifier of the most appalling barbarity,—a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds,—and a dark shelter under, which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most

> infernal deeds of slaveholders find the strongest protection. . . . For of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have ever found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all others (67)

In the appendix of Douglass's narrative, Douglass clarifies his descriptions of Christian slaveholders in opposition to the Christian religion as a whole:

> What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the slaveholding religion of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper; . . . To be the friend of the one, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other. I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land (101)

Between the earlier passage and the clarification in the appendix, Douglass is strategic in the way that he calls on the hypocrisy of religious slaveholders. He does not denounce the entire Christian religion but rather states a love for it in the same way Wheatley does. However, Douglass has witnessed the most sacrilegious actions of those who consider themselves holy, referring to them as using religion as a "sanctifier of the most hateful frauds" which he also exemplifies in the appendix:

> We have men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members. The man who wields the blood-clotted cowskin during the week fills the pulpit on Sunday, and claims to be a minister of the meek and lowly Jesus. The man who robs me of my earnings at the end of each week meets me as a class-leader on Sunday morning, to show me the way of life, and the path of salvation.

> He who sells my sister, for purposes of prostitution, stands forth as the pious advocate of purity (102)

Where Christianity preaches kindness, acceptance and peace with one another, Douglass describes the slaveholders using religion as protection over their cruelty and cowardness. By using the polar opposite descriptions of the morals expected to be upheld by Christians, Douglass alerts his readership of the mask Christianity provided for some of the harshest slaveholders in the antebellum South.

There is a striking contrast between the relationships Frederick Douglass and Phillis Wheatley each have with Christianity. Where Wheatley writes of finding solace in religion and religious education, Douglass finds religion something to be feared. The reason for this revolves around Wheatley's education stemming from religious texts, whereas the withholding of education from Douglass was often justified by religion. As discussed in the previous chapter, Phillis Wheatley was bound by many restrictions in her white Christian community and it is seen in her writing. Douglass, instead of being bound by restrictions in his white community, is bound by his lack of formal education. These restrictions are reflected in both works of literature. Wheatley could use her formal education to her advantage but could only write in a way that would be accepted by her white overseers. In contrast, Douglass was restricted by the lack of formal education, but could write freely to his own desire. Douglass utilizes this freedom of speech and his own knowledge of the white community and their Christian ties to expose the hypocrisy that is displayed by white Christian slaveholders.

Aside from his writing techniques, Douglass was meticulous about the content of his work, including some details of how he escaped slavery and who those who assisted him were,

and leaving others out all together. Douglass begins to outline his escape when he pauses and states,

> First, were I to give a minute statement of all the facts, it is not only possible, but quite probable, that others would thereby be involved in the most embarrassing difficulties. Secondly, such a statement would most undoubtedly induce greater vigilance on the part of slaveholders than has existed heretofore among them; which would, of course, be the means of guarding a door whereby some dear brother bondman might escape his galling chains (85)

The reasoning for Douglass withholding certain details from his narrative is not for the protection of himself, but for the protection of those who assisted his escape and also for slaves who were still fighting their way to freedom. In the present day, reading these lines incites a bit of anger, as it should not be "embarrassing," but rather admirable for a white man to give a Black slave basic human rights and an education. Given the time of publication, however, a white man would truly receive backlash for this type of treatment towards a Black slave. Additionally due to the period of time, revealing his escape tactics would not do any good to those still enslaved as white slaveholders would not allow slaves to read, nevermind read this slave narrative.

The inclusion of Douglass's regret for excluding these details is significant to the persona that he is building throughout the narrative. Instead of appearing as if he did not want to credit those who were helpful in his escape or assist other slaves in escaping, he notes how the credit would actually harm and not help others. By Douglass clarifying this to his readers, he is validating himself as an educated man who is well versed in his role in society as a Black, previously enslaved man. He is allowing readers to understand his desire but incapability to

expose every detail, disabling the possibility of being thought of or referred to as an accommodationist.

Aftereffects of Slavery

The honesty Douglass writes with leads to questions regarding Phillis Wheatley's writing techniques. Through analysis, it becomes clear that Wheatley did speak on behalf of enslaved people and their experience, but did so in a more covert way by using subtle literary techniques that may not be recognized upon first glance. Douglass brings a different writing style to the table and readers are able to witness an honest depiction of enslaved life without the restraints and proofreading of the white public. Although the experience of slavery is not and never can be entirely intelligible or made understandable by those who have not experienced it, close readers must place the works in comparison to ask, how truthful was Wheatley with her readers regarding her relationship to religion, whiteness and the Wheatley family? If she were in the position of Douglass, who wrote past the period of his enslavement, would she have been more candid about her experience? Due to Wheatley's place in society, the answer to these questions will never be fully revealed. Wheatley, regardless of being held back by white societal norms, still formed an identity as an intelligent, accomplished female writer. Douglass's identity is still being established as he shows his readers throughout his narrative.

As the narrative progresses, the growing aspects of Douglass's identity come together as one. The fight against Mr. Covey and the physical escape from slavery ensured the physical aspect of Douglass's identity: he is strong, capable, and encapsulates masculine qualities, however physicality cannot alone define Douglass; physicality will not alone build a life for Douglass outside of slavery. So, while Douglass has grown physically, Douglass has also grown mentally and emotionally: he understands the reality of the Antebellum South and the twisted

nature of the slave system. And Douglass has grown educationally: his literacy skills have sharpened, and he has gained confidence in teaching others. When Douglass finally reaches freedom, he technically identifies as a free man, but his identity remains complicated:

> There I was in the midst of thousands, and yet a perfect stranger; without home and without friends, in the midst of thousands of my own brethren—children of a common Father, and yet I dared not to unfold to any one of them my sad condition. I was afraid to speak to any one for fear of speaking to the wrong one, and thereby falling into the hands of money-loving kidnappers (92)

Unfortunately, freedom from slavery did not lead to freedom from the racist Southern world. Douglass now had to use the knowledge he gained about the antebellum South to navigate life and build an identity as a freeman. His identity is complicated, however, and the word "freeman" will never truly encapsulate the man Douglass grew to be. As exemplified in the quote above, Douglass will forever fear the constraints of slavery, never feeling entirely free from the distrust of the world it implanted inside of him.

As Douglass's life story progresses into his third narrative, readers witness Douglass coming full circle with his complicated identity as a freeman. In *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, first published in 1881, Douglass returns to the home of his old, dying master, Capt. Thomas Auld. The visitation occurred by choice- which leads to several conclusions on behalf of Douglass. For one, that he is returning to the captain by choice, and actually upon request by another colored man. Douglass is sure to clarify that his colored friend, Charles Caldwell, was the person who requested Douglass's presence:

> It should in the first place be understood that I did not go to St. Michaels upon Capt. Auld's invitation, but upon that of my colored friend, Charles Caldwell; but when once

> there, Capt. Auld sent Mr. Green, a man in constant attendance upon him during his sickness, to tell me he would be very glad to see me, and wished me to accompany Green to his house, with which request I complied (447)

This fact of the matter exemplifies the institution of slavery having lost its grip on Douglass. He was not ordered by a white man and he did not arrive because of a white man, he arrived because he wanted to. Secondly, showing up to Captain Auld's home shows an immense amount of courage. Douglass describes emotional details of his time with Auld:

> He had struck down my personality, had subjected me to his will, made property of my body and soul, reduced me to a chattel, hired me out to a noted slave breaker to be worked like a beast and flogged into submission; he had taken my hard earnings, sent me to prison, offered me for sale, broken up my Sunday-school, forbidden me to teach my fellow slaves to read on pain of nine and thirty lashes on my bare back; he had sold my body to his brother Hugh, and pocketed the price of my flesh and blood without any apparent disturbance of his conscience (446)

Given the series of traumatic experiences Douglass can recall, on the surface there is little purpose to ever return to this man, unless Douglass intended to gloat about his freedom in his master's face. However, Douglass exemplified two shocking emotions when writing up his discussion of the past with Mr. Auld. Douglass describes a friendly conversation that was able to occur only under the condition of abolished slavery,

> But now that slavery was destroyed, and the slave and the master stood upon equal ground, I was not only willing to meet him, but was very glad to do so. The conditions were favorable for remembrance of all his good deeds, and generous extenuation of all his evil ones. He was to me no longer a slaveholder either in fact or in spirit, and I

> regarded him as I did myself, a victim of the circumstances of birth, education, law, and custom (447)

This passage contains a few revealing characteristics about Douglass. For one, he is able to view himself and his former slave owner as equals, which is a huge milestone for the development of Douglass's identity as a freeman. Douglass, using the word "destroy" to describe the current state of slavery, stands out amongst his prior discussion of his life as a freeman. Previously, Douglass's faith in his freedom was still interrupted by his fear of the white public and the potential of being recaptured. The word destroyed, as Douglass walks into the room with the man that made him what Douglass once thought would be a slave for life, signifies the empowerment he is feeling. Slavery is not on hold, slavery is not looming around him. With slavery destroyed, the only difference between Douglass and his prior master is their race. Douglass notes the equalizing of the slave and slave master in the opening line stating, "the slave and the master stood upon equal ground." This quote, however, does not signify the total equality between Douglass himself and Thomas Auld. Today, they stand upon equal ground as Douglass is no longer owned by Thomas Auld, but the rhetoric of this quote speaks volumes. Douglass did not state that they are equals in society, likewise because they are not. Unfortunately, in the South, this difference in race will persist as prejudice, segregation and violence targeting Black Americans, but for the time being Douglass is a free man. The formation of Douglass's words build upon his growing identification as a Black freeman. Douglass has experienced the ordeals of slavery, learned the racially motivated prejudice of America, and found his place in it.

Secondly, Douglass displays a forgiving attitude toward Captain Auld in the concluding lines of this excerpt. Douglass has now been a slave and a Black freeman, experiencing slavery in the Antebellum South as a vicious cycle that a child is born into- whether as a slave or a

slaveholder. The quote “he was to me no longer a slaveholder either in fact or in spirit, and I regarded him as I did myself, a victim of the circumstances of birth, education, law, and custom” symbolizes forgiveness for Auld. Douglass recognizes that just as he had been born into slavery, Thomas Auld had been born a slaveholder. The forgiveness symbolizes Douglass’s understanding of slavery and how engrained it was in the antebellum South, but also shows his maturity in accepting the horrid ordeal his life has been up until this point.

Although the famous line, “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man” arrived much earlier in the text, it is here that I believe it belongs. Throughout each narrative, we have witnessed Douglass claw away at the potential for his own identity, to not just be one a statistic in the slave system. Perhaps Douglass was unaware that his identity would become a literate freeman and a published author, but he refused to accept the life he was born into. An additional detail about Douglass was revealed in this conversation. Although Douglass recognizes he will never be sure of his exact birthday, Thomas Auld stated that Douglass’s approximate birthday was in February of 1818 (449). Here, in Douglass’s interview with Captain Auld, each of the crucial aspects of Douglass’s identity have come together as one, concluded with the confrontation and acceptance of his past.

At the start of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, readers meet a young Black boy born into slavery. This young boy, Frederick Douglass, was about to evolve into a successful Black freeman, embracing his past as a slave but thriving in his identity as a published author and historical figure. The evolution Douglass underwent was neither brief nor easy, rather it took the bending and breaking of the societal boundaries that stood before him resulting in punishment, beatings and the total loss of self concept for Douglass.

When readers are first introduced to Douglass, he knows nothing about his born identity. Essentially, Douglass knew he was a Black slave. For many years, Douglass's identity to the outside world was that of a Black slave and nothing more, even if Douglass himself knew he was more than that. As Douglass recognizes in the most recent excerpt, he was a product of the circumstances of birth for a Black child. Douglass would not allow enslavement to encapsulate his identity, and he built his own. When Douglass reached his final destination, before his death in 1895, he had been a slave, a secret student, an educator of his fellow slaves, a survivor of slave breaking, an escaped slave and an author. Although Douglass was much more than just these characteristics and is known now as an abolitionist and popular historical figure, his story will reign on as one of self- improvement with little to no assistance from others. While Douglass will be known as a success story, it is crucial to recognize the growth Douglass made as his own success story- not anyone else's.

CONCLUSION

Educational Inequity in America: The Unsolved and Under- Represented Implications of the Educational Hierarchy

"Literacy is, finally, the road to human progress and the means through which every man, woman and child can realize his or her full potential. These aspirations merit our strongest possible support" (Kofi Annan)[5]

While literacy can be a road to empowerment, the previous chapters have elucidated that this road is direct for some, but not for all. While being lawfully denied the right to read and write, the enslaved population had to formulate their own means of an education which resulted in a more complex pathway to becoming literate enough to reach their full potential. My interest in this topic stemmed from Professor Hager's course *Literacy and Literature* in which we discussed the ways readers and writers became literate and studied the associations of class, gender and race with one's personal literacy. We analyzed the writing of enslaved individuals and noted the particular hints in syntax and diction that suggested they had not been formally educated. Over the course of thesis research and writing, the intended conclusion of this thesis has shifted. What began as an analysis of how previously enslaved writers will show hindered literacy skills in their writing morphed into an analysis of how enslaved writers take part in an ongoing education process as they learn to manipulate the restrictions placed upon them to thoughtfully articulate their own experiences.

Despite having exceptionally different enslavement experiences, Phillis Wheatley and Frederick Douglass were consistent in one category: their education process was not linear. The pair arguably became as educated during their formal writing process as they did during the earlier years of their lives when most white children were learning at an accelerated rate. This

[5] Kofi Annan: Former Secretary General of the United Nations

ongoing education process is due in part to their later access to literacy skills, but also in part to the overarching degrading effect of slavery over Wheatley and Douglass. While the writing process became a creative outlet for the writers, I speculate that a substantial amount of their time was spent debating ways to establish their identities as Black writers in a racially oppressive world.

Regardless of what this thesis proves, the implications of my studies steadily reflect education's impact on one's ability to perform academically and socially later in life. While the era of slavery in the United States has passed and all children across America have at the very least the right to a formal education, the education system in America is still flawed. There has been a historical hierarchy in the education system that has favored the upper and middle classes, leaving children born into lower-socioeconomic status at a disadvantage.

To be able to articulate this educational divide between classes, I spoke with a friend of mine who works in Worcester Massachusetts Public Schools. Colleen Reilly, a second grade teacher, discussed the multiple vicious cycles she believes reinforce the educational disadvantages of the lower class: the parents of children of lower-socioeconomic status are pushed to work longer hours in order to provide the basic needs for their families; in turn, by lack of choice, they are not always capable of being as present and providing a strong academic support system as those in the middle and upper- classes. A second vicious cycle that reinforces the disparity in education relates to the accessibility to a good education. Many underserved neighborhood schools, and their teachers, are not funded enough leading to burnout among educators. A child in an underserved school district could be assigned to the most caring, educated and passionate teacher, but without the proper funding and resources, they will likely

not be given the same level of education as those of higher-socioeconomic stature that attend better funded schools.

As a future educator, the issue of educational inequity is very near to my heart. In March of 2020, in my application for the Teach for America Corps, I wrote the following: “Educational opportunities should not depend on the socioeconomic circumstances children are born into.” The COVID-19 pandemic has only further elucidated already apparent disparities in the American education system. Aside from the issue of physical resources a lesser funded school can provide, such as technology for each student, there has been economic fallout across the country. While many lower- socioeconomic families struggle to remain working while educating their children at home, the parents of wealthier children additionally have the capability to pay for extra childcare, private schooling and tutoring.

The obstacles placed in the educational paths of America’s lower socioeconomic class suggest that the fight for equality in education has not yet been won. If they were ever granted the chance to become educated or educate themselves, the enslaved population was nevertheless stuck in the paradox of white America: a country that preaches all are created equal, but does not provide all the same opportunity to all. While I hope that readers of my thesis recognize the struggles of the enslaved population and commend their relentless effort to become literate, I also hope they regard the present day effects of education on identity. Both Phillis Wheatley and Frederick Douglass exemplified the challenges of searching for identity and a respectable place in America after being restricted in their education process, and my analyses exemplified the critiques the two faced during their search. While students today do not face identical challenges to that of Wheatley and Douglass, the implications of educational inequity remain; those who are seated on the lower end of the educational hierarchy will likely encounter more challenges and

more critique coming to terms with an identity in their professional and societal lives. My interest in this topic has not wavered throughout my thesis writing process and there is still more research to be done. If I were to keep researching, I would focus on the present day consequences of America's educational inequity. I would like to broaden my research question to include the education system of today's America and compare the outcomes of education, particularly education in literacy, amongst those across the socioeconomic and educational hierarchy.

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