Phillis Wheatley was born in West Africa, probably in 1753, and became the first African American to publish a book of poetry. In 1761 she was enslaved, brought to Boston, and purchased by a local merchant, John Wheatley. He named the little girl Phillis and gave her to his wife, Susannah. Phillis learned to read and write English very quickly, and the Wheatley family tutored her in Latin, English literature, and the classics. Wheatley was quickly recognized as a remarkable prodigy and respect for her talents soon grew. Phillis’s first published poem appeared in 1767, and by 1770 her work was known throughout the colonies. In 1773 she traveled to London for the publication of her Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral but soon returned to Boston.

Phillis was given her freedom after Susannah Wheatley’s death in 1774. Her life, however, became more difficult as revolution spread through the colonies and as her patrons, wealthy Loyalists, fled the city. In 1778 she married John Peters, but the couple fell into extreme poverty. Their children all died in infancy, and Phillis died in 1784.

Philip Freneau was called the “poet of the American Revolution.” He was born in New York City in 1752. Freneau began writing poetry while studying at Princeton. After graduating in 1771, he briefly worked as a teacher before sailing to the Caribbean, where he developed a deep hatred of slavery.

In 1778 Freneau returned to New Jersey and enlisted in the revolutionary militia. He captained a privateer until he was captured and briefly imprisoned by the British. He started a newspaper in 1790 and supported Thomas Jefferson in his ideological dispute with the Federalists. Freneau left the paper soon after Jefferson became president. He retired to a New Jersey farm and continued to write and publish until his death in 1832.

AS YOU READ Pay attention to details that reveal the tone, or attitude, that the speaker in each poem has toward America.
To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth

His Majesty's Principal Secretary
of State for North America, etc.
by Phillis Wheatley

Hail, happy day, when, smiling like the morn,
Fair Freedom rose New-England to adorn:
The northern clime¹ beneath her genial ray,
Dartmouth, congratulates thy blissful sway:²
Elate with hope her race no longer mourns,
Each soul expands, each grateful bosom burns,
While in thine hand with pleasure we behold
The silken reins, and Freedom's charms unfold.
Long lost to realms beneath the northern skies
She shines supreme, while hated faction dies:
Soon as appeared the Goddess long desir'd,
Sick at the view, she languish'd and expir'd;
Thus from the splendors of the morning light
The owl in sadness seeks the caves of night.

No more, America, in mournful strain³
Of wrongs, and grievance unredress'd complain,
No longer shall thou dread the iron chain,
Which wanton Tyranny with lawless hand
Had made, and with it meant t' enslave the land.

Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,
Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung.
Whence flow these wishes for the common good,
By feeling hearts alone best understood,
I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
Was snatch'd from Africa's fancy'd happy seat:⁴
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 below'd:
Such, such my case. And can I then but pray
Others may never feel tyrannic sway?

¹ clime: climate region.
² sway: control or rule.
³ strain: song.
⁴ seat: location or site.
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 soothe the griefs, which thou did'st once deplore.
May heav'nly grace the sacred sanction give
To all thy works, and thou for ever live
Not only on the wings of fleeting Fame,
Thou shalt find thy God.
Though praise immortal crowns the patriot's name,
But to conduct to heav'n's refulgent fane,*
May fiery coursers sweep th' ethereal plain,
And bear thee upwards to that blest abode,
Where, like the prophet,* thou shalt find thy God.

* soothe: alternate spelling of sooth; relieve or ease pain.
* heav'n's refulgent fane: a shining temple in the sky.
* coursers: fast horses.
* prophet: Elijah; according to the Old Testament, he ascended to heaven in a chariot after overturning an immoral political system.
"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:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable* race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic die."**
Remember, *Christians*, *Negroes*, black as *Cain*,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

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*benighted*: ignorant.
*sable*: dark brown or black.
*diabolic die*: an evil or devilish coloring agent (dye).
On the Emigration to America and Peopling the Western Country
by Philip Freneau

To western woods, and lonely plains,
Palemon from the crowd departs,
Where Nature's wildest genius reigns,
To tame the soil, and plant the arts—
What wonders there shall freedom show,
What mighty states successive grow!

From Europe's proud, despotic shores
Hither the stranger takes his way,
And in our new-found world explores
A happier soil, a milder sway,
Where no proud despot holds him down,
No slaves insult him with a crown.

What charming scenes attract the eye,
On wild Ohio's savage stream!
There Nature reigns, whose works outvie
The boldest pattern art can frame;
There ages past have rolled away,
And forests bloomed but to decay.

From these fair plains, these rural seats,
So long concealed, so lately known,
The unsocial Indian far retreats,
To make some other clime his own,
When other streams, less pleasing, flow,
And darker forests round him grow.

Great Sire of floods! whose varied wave
Through climes and countries takes its way,
To whom creating Nature gave
Ten thousand streams to swell thy sway!
No longer shall they useless prove,
Nor idly through the forests rove;

Nor longer shall your princely flood
From distant lakes be swelled in vain,
Nor longer through a darksome wood

"Palemon: reference to Polemon I, a first-century Roman noble who escaped to form a kingdom in the Baltic region.

"Great Sire: The Mississippi River."
Advance, unnoticed, to the main:  
35 Far other ends, the heavens decree—  
And commerce plans new freights for thee.

While virtue warms the generous breast,  
There heaven-born freedom shall reside,  
Nor shall the voice of war molest,  
Nor Europe's all-aspiring pride—  
There Reason shall new laws devise,  
And order from confusion rise.

Forsaking kings and regal state,  
With all their pomp and fancied bliss,  
45 The traveler owns, convinced though late,  
No realm so free, so blessed as this—  
The east is half to slaves consigned,  
Where kings and priests enchain the mind.

O come the time, and haste the day,  
When man shall man no longer crush,  
When Reason shall enforce her sway,  
Nor these fair regions raise our blush,  
Where still the African complains,  
And mourns his yet unbroken chains.

55 Far brighter scenes a future age,  
The muse predicts, these States will hail,  
Whose genius may the world engage,  
Whose deeds may over death prevail,  
And happier systems bring to view,  
Than all the eastern sages knew.

14main: the sea.

COLLABORATIVE DISCUSSION What is the overall tone toward America—as both a place and an idea—expressed in the poems? What are each speaker's reasons for having that attitude? Discuss these questions with a small group, citing textual details to support your ideas.
Colonial American Poetry

The topic of a work is what it is about. The three poems in this selection all cover the broad topic of colonial America. Two of them suggest more specific topics in their titles: "On Being Brought from Africa to America" and "On the Emigration to America and Peopling the Western Country." To accurately identify the topic of any poem, you must analyze the details it contains and ask yourself what the poem is mostly about.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Details</th>
<th>Topic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;On Being Brought from Africa to America&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land, / Taught my benighted soul to understand&quot; &quot;Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain, / May be refined, and join th' angelic train.&quot;</td>
<td>How coming to America redeemed the speaker's soul through her Christian faith</td>
</tr>
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The theme of a work is a message about life or about human nature that the author communicates through details in the text. This deeper meaning is sometimes stated directly, but more often readers must infer it. The final couplet of "On Being Brought from Africa to America" comes close to stating the theme of the poem. What do these two lines suggest about Wheatley's view of life in the Colonies?

The Wheatley and Freneau poems give you the opportunity to compare how several texts from 18th-century America treat similar themes and topics. As you reread the poems, think about what they have in common and how they differ. The chart shows a comparison between two poems that have themes involving the formation of a better society.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes about Forming a Better Society</th>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth&quot;</td>
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Textual detail: "For favours past, great Sir, our thanks are due, / And thee we ask they favours to renew, / Since in thy pow'rs, as in thy will before, / To sooth the grieves, which thou didst once deplore." (lines 32–35)
Theme: What type of leaders does Wheatley think the colonies need? What words might describe that leader?

Textual detail: "While virtue warms the generous breast, / There heaven-born freedom shall reside, . . . / There Reason shall new laws devise, / And order from confusion rise." (lines 37–42)
Theme: What do these lines reveal about Frenée's views on liberty?
Analyzing the Text

Cite Text Evidence Support your responses with evidence from the selections.

1. Interpret Poets use imagery, or language that appeals to readers' senses, both to create a vivid experience for readers and to communicate ideas. What imagery does Wheatley use in the first stanza of "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth" (lines 1–14)? How does this imagery express her hopes about the Earl?

2. Compare How do Wheatley and Freneau treat themes about being redeemed or saved by coming to America? Compare and contrast how each poem defines or imagines this redemption.

3. Analyze Compare Wheatley’s description of her enslavement and captivity in both of her poems, especially in lines 20–31 of "To the Right Honourable William . . . ." How might her purpose shape her description in each case?

4. Analyze What words does Freneau use to describe Europe and “the east” in “On the Emigration to America . . . .” What does his diction reveal? Why does Freneau believe that America will break away from these two models of civilization?

5. Cite Evidence How does Freneau describe the North American landscape before the arrival of European settlers? What central ideas about Native American culture does he suggest through his diction, imagery, and choice of details?

6. Analyze Wheatley ends her poem addressed to the Earl of Dartmouth with an allusion to the biblical story of Elijah. Elijah performed bold and miraculous works on God’s behalf, after which a fiery horse-drawn chariot transported him to heaven. What meaning does she intend by this allusion, and what effect does she achieve by placing it at the very end of her poem?

7. Compare How is the topic of slavery or oppression treated in each of the three poems? How does each poet’s personal experiences or political opinions shape their view of slavery or oppression?

PERFORMANCE TASK

Speaking Activity How does each poet’s attitude toward authority affect his or her interpretation of life in the colonies? With a partner, discuss similarities and differences.

1. Working independently, review the poems and identify textual evidence for each poet’s attitude toward authority.

2. Meet with your partner to review the evidence you have found. Discuss how each poet’s view of authority affects his or her view of life in the colonies.

3. Write a brief summary of your discussion that includes the similarities and differences you found between the two poets and key textual evidence that supports your analysis.