Phillis Wheatley was born probably in 1753, perhaps along the Gambia River in West Africa. She is thought to have been of the Fulani people. Wheatley was captured and brought across the ocean to America in a slave boat. Some reports say she was nearly dead by the time she arrived in Boston. She was about 7 or 8 years old when Susanna Wheatley, wife of John Wheatley, purchased her July 11, 1761.

Wheatley soon distinguished herself in the Wheatley household by learning to read and write English when she was only about 9. The Wheatley family encouraged her education and young Phillis learned Latin as well and began to write poetry. In 1768 Wheatley wrote the original version of what would become her best-known work, "On Being Brought from Africa to America." This piece was first published in 1773 in her first full-length collection titled Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral.

Wheatley's 1773 volume was the first full-length published work by an African-American author. No one except the family she worked for believed that Wheatley had written the poems. To prove that she had in fact written them, Wheatley had to go before a group of 18 of the most respectable white men in Boston and answer a series of questions. No one knows exactly what they asked her, but her responses were sufficient. The men signed a letter to the public assuring readers that Wheatley did write the poems. The letter was published with the collection.
On Being Brought from Africa to America

'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.

- Phillis Wheatley, 1773

1. Write down your initial reaction to the poem.
2. In addition to being Wheatley's most popular poem, "On Being Brought from Africa to America" may well be her most controversial work. Why do you think this poem would be controversial?
3. In your own words, summarize the message of the first four lines.
4. How does the message of the piece change in the second half of the poem?
5. Why is the use of the word "our" in line 5 important?
6. Discuss the biblical allusion in line 7. Does comparing her race to Cain help or hurt Wheatley's argument? Explain.
7. Now the attached excerpt of June Jordan's essay "The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America." Record your initial thoughts about the piece.
8. Did Jordan's essay change your opinion of Wheatley and her poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America" or did it affirm your interpretation of the poem? Explain.
9. Though this excerpt is from an essay, Jordan uses poetic devices such as a refrain. Identify the refrain used in the essay. What effect do you believe Jordan tries to create with this refrain? Is it successful?
It was not natural. And she was the first. Come from a country of many tongues tortured by rupture, by theft, by travel like mismatched clothing packed down into the cargo hold of evil ships sailing, irreversible, into slavery. Come to a country to be docile and dumb, to be big and breeding, easily, to be turkey/horse/cow, to be cook/carpenter/plow, to be 5'6" 140 lbs., in good condition and answering to the name of Tom or Mary: to be bed bait: to be legally spread legs for rape by the master/the master's son/the master's overseer/the master's visiting nephew: to be nothing human nothing family nothing from nowhere nothing that screams nothing that weeps nothing that dreams nothing that keeps anyone deep in your heart: to live forcibly illiterate, forcibly itinerant: to live eyes lowered head bowed: to be worked without rest, to be worked without pay, to be worked without thanks, to be worked day up to nightfall: to be three-fifths of a human being at best: to be this valuable/this hated thing among strangers who purchased your life and then cursed it unceasingly: to be a slave: to be a slave. Come to this country a slave and how should you sing? After the flogging the lynch rope the general terror and weariness what should you know of a lyrical life? How could you, belonging to no one, but property to those despising the smiles of your soul, how could you dare to create yourself: a poet?
bodies for sale. They looked and they looked. This one could be useful for that. That one might be useful for this. But then they looked at that child, that Black child standing nearly naked, by herself. Seven or eight years old, at the most, and frail. Now that was a different proposal! Not a strong body, not a well-built body, not a promising wide set of hips, but a little body, a delicate body, a young, surely terrified face! John Wheatley agreed to the whim of his wife, Suzannah. He put in his bid. He put down his cash. He called out the numbers. He competed successfully. He had a good time. He got what he wanted. He purchased yet another slave. He bought that Black girl standing on the platform, nearly naked. He gave this new slave to his wife and Suzannah Wheatley was delighted. She and her husband went home. They rode there by carriage. They took that new slave with them. An old slave commanded the horses that pulled the carriage that carried the Wheatleys home, along with the new slave, that little girl they named Phillis.

Why did they give her that name? Was it a nice day? Does it matter?

It was not natural. And she was the first: Phillis Miracle. Phillis Miracle Wheatley: the first Black human being to be published in America. She was the second female to be published in America.

And the miracle begins in Africa. It was there that a bitterly anonymous man and a woman conjoined to create this genius, this lost child of such prodigious aptitude and such beguiling attributes that she very soon interpolated the reality of her particular, dear life between the Wheatleys' notions about slaves and the predictable outcome of such usual blasphemies against Black human beings.

Seven year old Phillis changed the slaveholding Wheatleys. She altered their minds. She entered their hearts. She made them see her and when they truly saw her, Phillis, darkly amazing them with the sweetness of her spirit and the alacrity of her forbidden, strange intelligence, they, in their own way, loved her as a prodigy, as a girl mysterious but godly.

Sixteen months after her entry into the Wheatley household Phillis was talking the language of her owners. Phillis was fluently reading the Scriptures. At eight and a half years of age, this Black child, or "Africa's Muse," as she would later describe herself, was fully literate in the language of this slaveholding land. She was competent and eagerly asking for more: more books, more and more information. And Suzannah Wheatley loved this child of her whimsical good luck. It pleased her to teach and to train and to tutor this Black girl, this Black darling of God. And so Phillis delved into kitchen studies commensurate, finally, to a classical education available to young white men at Harvard.

She was nine years old.

What did she read? What did she memorize? What did the Wheatleys give to this African child? Of course, it was white, all of it: white. It was English, most of it, from England. It was written, all of it, by white men taking their pleasure, their walks, their pipes, their pens and their paper, rather seriously, while somebody else cleaned the house, washed the clothes, cooked the food, watched the children: probably not slaves, but possibly a servant, or, commonly, a wife. It was written, this white man's literature of England, while somebody else did the other things that have to be done. And that was the literature absorbed by the slave, Phillis Wheatley. That was the writing, the thoughts, the nostalgia, the lust, the conceits, the ambitions, the mannerisms, the games, the illusions, the discoveries, the filth and the flowers that filled up the mind of the African child.

At fourteen, Phillis published her first poem, "To the University of Cambridge": not a brief limerick or desultory teenager's verse, but thirty-two lines of blank verse telling those fellows what for and whereas, according to their own strict Christian codes of behavior. It is in that poem that Phillis describes the miracle of her own Black poetry in America:

While an intrinsic ardor bids me write
the muse doth promise to assist my pen

She says that her poetry results from "an intrinsic ardor," not to dismiss the extraordinary kindness of the Wheatleys, and not to diminish the wealth of white men's literature with which she found herself quite saturated, but it was none of these extrinsic factors that compelled the labors of her poetry. It was she who created herself a poet, notwithstanding and in despite of everything around her.
Two years later, Phillis Wheatley, at the age of sixteen, had composed three additional, noteworthy poems. This is one of them, "On Being Brought from Africa to America":

Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a Savior too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their color is a diabolic die."
Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,
May be refin'd, and join the angelic train.

Where did Phillis get these ideas?
It's simple enough to track the nonsense about herself "benighted": benighted means surrounded and preyed upon by darkness. That clearly reverses what had happened to that African child, surrounded by and captured by the greed of white men. Nor should we find puzzling her depiction of Africa as "Pagan" versus somewhere "refined." Even her bizarre interpretation of slavery's theft of Black life as a merciful rescue should not bewilder anyone. These are regular kinds of iniquitous nonsense found in white literature, the literature that Phillis Wheatley assimilated, with no choice in the matter.

But here, in this surprising poem, this first Black poet presents us with something wholly her own, something entirely new. It is her matter of fact assertion that, "Once I redemption neither sought nor knew," as in: once I existed beyond and without these terms under consideration. Once I existed on other than your terms. And, she says, but since we are talking your talk about good and evil/redemption and damnation, let me tell you something you had better understand. I am Black as Cain and I may very well be an angel of the Lord. Take care not to offend the Lord!

Where did that thought come to Phillis Wheatley?
Was it a nice day?
Does it matter?

Following her "intrinsic ardor," and attuned to the core of her own person, this girl, the first Black poet in America, had dared to redefine herself from house slave to, possibly, an angel of the Almighty.