

Liberty, Then and Now

STUDENT HANDOUT

Race, History, and Narrative — Thomas Paine, Phillis Wheatley, and Emma Lazarus

The materials in this handout are suited for high school Ethnic Studies courses, English language and literature, U.S. history – including Black / African American history and Jewish history – and topics related to immigration and gender. Tags: Revolutionary War, American Slavery, Interwar U.S. immigration.

What's inside?

- Historical Anachronisms: *Wait, does this belong here?!*
 - The Statue of Liberty vs. Lady Liberty
- Close Reading Activity (pairing direct quotes with student paraphrasing)
- Categories Game
- Creative Entry
- Phillis Wheatley, “Poet Laureate” of the American Revolution

Support Note: *If you are teaching these materials in Los Angeles County and would like an ES Resources representative to assist with your planning or classroom application, please email contact@ESResources.org.*

Phillis Wheatley

Read the article from *Black Lives in the Founding Era*, “[Phillis Wheatley: Poet Laureate of the American Revolution](#).” While reading the article, answer the following questions.

Historical Context Question: Setting the Scene

1. Where was George Washington in 1775 and what was he doing?
2. How did Phillis Wheatley come to be in the American colonies? Include both a direct quote and your summary.

Direct quote:

Paraphrase / summary / interpretation:

3. How would you characterize Wheatley’s attitude or personality, based solely on reading the author of this article’s description / perception of her?

Direct quote:

Paraphrase / summary / interpretation:

4. The article states that Wheatley “explicitly links the ideal of freedom from British tyranny with the ideal of freedom for enslaved African Americans.” Provide three examples from the poems and analysis included in the article where you see this happening.

A.

B.

C.

5. How old was Phillis Wheatley when she died?
6. The official US Poet Laureate position was not established until 1986, and there were no state or royal laureateships for an enslaved African American woman in the 1770s.

- A. Is it a historical anachronism to call Phillis Wheatley a “Poet Laureate”? Explain your reasoning.

Definition: Something that is placed in the wrong time period; when something does not belong in the time period being shown, described, or discussed. It occurs when a person, object, event, idea, or technology appears in a historical setting where it did not exist.

- B. Provide **three reasons** why bestowing this title on her today may or may not be seen as an act of reparative justice.

7. According to the article, what are two reasons that Phillis Wheatley wrote the ode to George Washington called “To His Excellency General Washington”?

8. What happened when Phillis Wheatley left London?

Direct quote:

Paraphrase / summary / interpretation:

9. In her poem called, “America,” how does Wheatley use metaphor in a way that “posits a double meaning”? What two groups does she compare?

10. Can historians ever be sure that Phillis Wheatley was the anonymous author behind the “twelve lines ... of lament for these victims of British gunfire”? Why or why not? Explain.

11. Why did Phillis Wheatley go to London?

Direct quote:

Paraphrase / summary / interpretation:

12. Was Phillis Wheatley a British loyalist?

Direct quote:

Paraphrase / summary / interpretation:

13. As a free Black woman writing against British rule, what risks did Phillis Wheatley face?

Direct quote:

Paraphrase / summary / interpretation:

14. What does “Freedom’s Cause” mean in the article?

Direct quote:

Paraphrase / summary / interpretation:

15. How did Wheatley become “a political actor in one of America’s worst crises”?

Direct quote:

Paraphrase / summary / interpretation:

Definitions

Term	Definition
Poet Laureate	
Prodigy	
Elegaic	
Encomiastic	
The Stamp Act	

What is an ode?

Odes by Ariana Brown

As you listen to “Ode to Thrift Stores” and “Ode to the City Bus,” write down:

- Words that describe the speaker’s tone?
- Who or what is this poem an “ode” to? Who or what is the author **praising**?
- Who or what is the author **critiquing**? What is the author upset about?

HISTORICAL ANACHRONISM

Categories Game

In a traditional game of “Categories,” one player names a category – such as plants, foods, types of furniture, and so on – and participants cycle around spitballing the first item in that category that comes to mind with no repeats allowed.

For this classroom version, there will be two rounds:

Round 1: The category is...forms of communication before the 21st century.
All answers must belong in the era before the 21st century

Example of a **correct** answer | written letters, Pony Express

Example of an **incorrect** answer: cell phone, Instagram

Round 2: The category is... things you would pack for a trip to Ancient Egypt. *All answers must belong in the era of Dynastic Egypt, Bronze / Iron Age.*

Example of a **correct** answer | sandals, linen clothing, papyrus, bread.

Example of an **incorrect** answer | sunscreen, iPhone, sneakers.

Applying the Concept

Listen to the rendition of a 1775 ballad, “Liberty Tree” by Thomas Paine:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gAbNFF39MLw>. Find the lyrics in the Liberty Handout on *ESResources.org*.

While Watching / Listening

- Write down images that appear in the video, with a few words to summarize the meaning each one conveys.
- Draw an arrow or bracket to signify which lyrics the image corresponded to in the video.
- Note any reflections or connections between the images and the lyrics that come to mind.

*What images did you notice? What words / phrases from the lyrics did they correspond to? **What meaning together did the lyrics and image convey?***

Historical Anachronisms: Questions

The [video](#) includes images of the Statue of Liberty.

1. Even though the Statue of Liberty is pictured in the “Liberty Tree” video – the monument **did not exist** in the actual time period when Thomas Paine wrote “Liberty Tree.” The Statue of Liberty arrived in New York Harbor in June 1885, whereas Thomas Paine wrote “Liberty Tree” in 1775, *110 years earlier*. Do you think the video creator used a historical anachronism on purpose, or was it an accident?
2. What do the Statue of Liberty and “Liberty Tree” have in common? How are they different? Use examples from class videos, homework, and prior lessons as evidence to support your perspective.
3. When the “Liberty Tree” and Statue of Liberty are presented together, what narrative are they supposed to convey about the United States? Do you agree with that narrative? Why or why not?
4. In your opinion, even though the Statue of Liberty and “Liberty Tree” belong to different time periods separated by more than 100 years, does the historical anachronism work or fail? Use examples to support your argument.
5. The ballad was written in a time period where a group of people was thinking about gaining independence from Great Britain, becoming their own new nation, and rejecting monarchy rule.
 - A. What did Thomas Paine mean by *liberty*?
 - B. Conversely, the Statue of Liberty came to the shores of the United States more than 100 years after the Revolutionary War ended. How does including the image of Statue of Liberty in this video add, change, or reinterpret Thomas Paine’s original word choices, argument, purpose, or historical context?
6. Revisit your answer to Question 1. After analyzing the historical contexts and narratives created by combining the two symbols, have you changed your mind about whether the anachronism was intentional? Why?

Creative Entry

Option 1

Find an example of a historical anachronism in media today, either online / social media, in a TV show, film, news coverage, or song.

- ❖ Write 3 paragraphs, the first explaining the items, the second providing historical research and presenting the issues, and the third offering a solution.
- ❖ Or, draw, design, and / or create a visual model of (1) the historical anachronism and (2) your proposed solution.

Option 2

Purposefully invent a historical anachronism by creating a cartoon, song, image, video, or other visual/audio format. Your submission must be accompanied by a rationale statement, explaining the correct historical context for each component, and what commentary your purposeful anachronism makes obvious or implicit.

Optional Extension

“The New Colossus” & Emma Lazarus

Video 1: [Emma Lazarus/Statue of Liberty segment from New York: A Documentary Film](#) (4:26). While listening, take notes of new ideas, clarifying information, and moments of narratives creation. Instruct students to pay particular attention to any statements about the relationship between past, present, and future. During the second half of the video, follow along as the narrator reads “The New Colossus.”

Question: Which biographical facts from the Emma Lazarus reading helped you understand “The New Colossus” or the meaning of “liberty” differently?

Video 2: Listen to “The New Colossus” read by clients and employees of the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization (IRCO) in Portland, Oregon: [“The New Colossus” by Emma Lazarus, Statue of Liberty poem](#) (1:39).

The New Colossus

By Emma Lazarus

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

Emma Lazarus

Historical ideas are inherited, adapted, and reinterpreted—not created in isolation. As you read, trace the chain of events that made "The New Colossus" possible.

As you annotate, look for ...

- Moments where history is being connected across different time periods:
- Any details that help explain why Emma Lazarus might have connected the symbolism of the Statue of Liberty to immigration, refuge, and refugees:
- Connections between the time period of the American Revolution, late 1800s immigration, and Emma Lazarus' own family history:
- Examples of how history is passed down through families or communities:
- Evidence that one generation influenced the next:
- Connections to the idea of "liberty" historically or today;
- Examples of change over time:

EMMA LAZARUS' “GOLDEN DOOR!”

Emma Lazarus' **“The New Colossus,”** mounted on the Statue of Liberty, travels far beyond the monument—a dream inherited by generations of refugees arriving at “sea-washed, sunset gates,” searching for refuge at “the golden door.” This is an American story—and a Jewish one. Lazarus, a Jewish American writer and refugee advocate, came from a long history of exile. **Her Sephardic ancestors were among the first Jews to establish a permanent community in what would become the United States: 23 refugees, one ship, an enduring beginning.** Jews in the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal) had faced **forced conversion and Inquisition-era persecution.** Some lived as “*Conversos*,” practicing Judaism in secret, some fled. **Those who found refuge in Dutch-controlled Brazil faced uncertainty when, in 1654, the Portuguese regained control. That small ship carrying 23 Jewish refugees from Recife (Brazil) arrived in New Amsterdam—present-day NYC—carrying some of Emma Lazarus’ own ancestors.** Director-General Peter Stuyvesant tried to bar them from staying, but after fierce debate and support from Jewish communal leaders in Amsterdam, the refugees were ultimately permitted to remain.

Centuries later, born in New York City, Emma Lazarus (1849-1887) gave us language that embodies not just her own Jewish family history, but a broader one. With the words, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” she tied the Statue of Liberty to an ongoing, unfinished conversation about immigration, belonging, and who gets to call a place home. Her legacy reminds us how personal history and public voice shape the stories we tell, inviting exploration into the tangled histories of exile, diaspora, and migration as they intersect across religious, linguistic, geographic, national, and family origins.

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Retrieved from Resources Bulletin Archives, Issue No. 1 (May 2026). <https://esresources.org/educator-bulletin/storytelling-to-honor-aapi-jewish-american-heritage/>

Closing question: Based on today’s class activities - including the Categories Game, Phillis Wheatley activity, “Liberty Tree” lyrics and video, and Emma Lazarus’ biography... **How has the meaning of liberty changed over time? What does “liberty” mean to you? Explain using evidence and examples.**

Writing prompt: <https://esresources.org/movies-and-videos/phillis-wheatley-poet-laureate-of-the-american-revolution-the-gilder-lehrman-institute-of-american-history/?preview=true>

**I'm Writing an Ode ...
to Put on the Statue of Liberty.**

A large rectangular box with a dark blue border, intended for writing an ode. The bottom right corner of the box is folded over, creating a triangular flap.