

Topic and Scope: Phillis Wheatley, specifically Wheatley's poetry.

Purpose and Main Idea: The author's purpose is to discuss and evaluate Wheatley's poetry. The author's specific main idea is that Wheatley was an accomplished poet who rightly deserves to be known as the first African American poet, though her poetry was not influenced by African traditions and did not contribute to the growth of an African American literary tradition.

Paragraph Structure: ¶1 states that Wheatley quickly became an accomplished poet, even though she was not raised in an English-language environment. ¶2 digresses from the topic in order to discuss the background of African American English. ¶3 reveals the author's belief that Wheatley's poetry was not influenced by her African heritage. ¶4 summarizes the author's feelings about Wheatley: though she did not contribute to the growth of an African American literary tradition, she was nevertheless an accomplished poet who deserves to be recognized as the first African American poet.

The Big Picture:

- **Topic and scope are evident early on in the passage, but purpose and main idea are not. Instead, the passage hits you with a lot of details. It's not until ¶s 3 and 4 that you get a strong sense of authorial purpose and main idea. On Test Day, it might be better to leave a similarly structured passage for later in the section. In general, it's best to begin your work on the Reading Comprehension section with a passage whose purpose and main idea (if there is one) are apparent early in the text.**
- **Don't assume that all the key information is contained in the first ¶. In this passage, for instance, most of the important information emerges toward the end. Always apply your critical reading skills to the entire passage.**

1. (C)

This choice nicely captures the author's main idea. Although Wheatley was an accomplished poet, her poetry did not reflect the traditions of her African heritage.

(A) is beyond the scope of the text. This passage is specifically about Wheatley's poetry. It doesn't directly compare her poetry to the work of folk artists.

(B) is a "half right, half wrong" choice. The first part of this choice is okay, but the second goes awry in suggesting that Wheatley was influenced by African traditions.

(D) and (E) According to the author, Wheatley's poetry was *disconnected* from African traditions and African American literary developments.

- **The correct answer to a "global" question must be broad enough to encompass the contents of the entire passage, yet narrow enough to refer to the specific subject matter of the passage.**

- **Often, the wrong answers to global questions are in direct conflict with the author's point of view. So when you see a choice that represents the opposite of your prephrase, don't panic. You're probably on the right track. Expect to see a few *au contraire* answer choices, and you'll eliminate them with confidence.**

2. (E)

According to the passage, Wheatley's poetry was influenced by the English literary conventions of her day. Her poetry was neither influenced by nor reflected her ethnic heritage. A contemporary Italian immigrant poet who is influenced solely by the conventions of modern American poetry would be following a similar approach to poetry as Wheatley.

(A), (B), (C), (D) All of these choices go wrong in suggesting that Wheatley's work was somehow influenced by or reflected her ethnic heritage.

• **In questions that ask you to compare hypothetical situations to a situation described in the passage, look for the choice that mimics the relationship outlined in the passage.**

3. (D) Lines 19-24 make precisely this point.

(A) and (B) The passage mentions African American religious music and folk art, but not the religious music and folk art of New England colonists. New England colonists themselves, as a matter of fact, aren't even mentioned in the passage. (C) According to lines 19-24, African languages affected spoken English, not formal written English.

(E) The passage doesn't discuss general "eighteenth-century aesthetic principles," and there's nothing in the passage to suggest that African languages had an impact on them.

• **If you're in doubt about a detail, be sure to check back with the passage, using your "roadmap" of the passage to locate the relevant text. Don't answer on a hunch or a vague recollection.**

4. (D)

The phrase "closed system" emerges in the context of the author's remark that eighteenth-century English poetry did not incorporate the informal, popular language of its day. Hence, by a closed system of poetry the author undoubtedly means poetry that "does not admit the use of street language and casual talk."

(A) If anything, the author believes that poetry can be written by someone who isn't raised knowing its conventions. After all, as the author points out, Wheatley wrote poetry based on conventions that she learned quickly, after she had reached New England.

(B) and (E) are beyond the scope of the text. The author never discusses poetry's impact on spoken language (B). Nor does she discuss why poetry might ultimately be rejected (E).

(C) In lines 35-36, the author says that poetry in a "closed system" is based on imitating past works.

• **Whenever a question asks you to interpret the meaning of a word or phrase, read the lines around that word or phrase. The key to understanding what the author means by a word or phrase lies in understanding the context in which it appears.**

5. (A)

Line 41 states that the conventions of eighteenth-century English poetry permitted the poet to express "generalized feelings."

(B), (D), (E) The conventions of this poetry, according to line 40, did not allow "casual talk" (D). The ban on casual talk, of course, would also have eliminated "Americanized English" (B) and "Black speech" (E). Indeed, their absence from Wheatley's poetry is confirmed by lines 36-38.

(C) The lack of "themes from folk art" in Wheatley's poetry is highlighted in lines 42-49.

• **This question illustrates the importance of having an awareness of paragraph structure. If you kept in mind where in the passage the author evaluates Wheatley's poetry, you should have gone directly to ¶3 for the answer to this question.**

6. (E)

In lines 54-56, the author claims that "Wheatley's poetry contributed little to the development of a distinctive African American literary language." Thus, if scholars were to "trace themes and expressions in African American poetry back to the poetry of Wheatley," the author's argument concerning Wheatley's role in the evolution of an African American literary language would be seriously weakened.

(A) Since the author claims that Wheatley's poetry conformed to the conventions of neoclassical poetry, her argument would not be undermined by a finding that Wheatley's poetry was admired in England because of its adherence to English literary traditions.

(B) Why would the author's argument about Wheatley's *poetry* be weakened by the discovery that Wheatley had written a *history* of her family's experiences?

(C) Likewise, why would the author's argument about Wheatley's *poetry* be weakened by the knowledge that other Africans were able to overcome the language barriers that she overcame?

(D) misrepresents the author's criticism. The author argues that Wheatley failed to play a meaningful role in the development of an *African American* literary language. Whether Wheatley was an important poet in the American literary tradition is another issue altogether.

• In questions that ask you to pick the choice that would most strengthen or weaken an authorial position, read the question stem carefully to be sure which you're asked to do. Often, an incorrect choice will do the exact opposite of what you're asked to do, and you could fall for this trap choice if you haven't read the question stem carefully.

• Don't bend over backwards for an answer choice. If the relevance of a choice depends upon making assumptions unsupported by the passage, then that choice is irrelevant. For example, you *could* spend precious time on choice (B) attempting to find a connection between a family history and the evolution of an African American literary language, but what would be the point?

7. (D)

In lines 30-31, the author expresses dismay that Wheatley did not integrate African traditions into her poetry in order to create an African American literary language. It is inferable, therefore, that the author would have praised Wheatley's work even more had Wheatley done so.

(A) "Black English" is mentioned in the third ¶ as a potential source that Wheatley could have used in creating an African American literary language. However, the author never criticizes Wheatley for failing to influence the way English is spoken.

(B) The author would have praised Phillis Wheatley more if she had *invented* an African American literary tradition.

(C) To the extent that the author is critical of Wheatley, it's because Wheatley so strictly adhered to the conventions of eighteenth-century English poetry.

(E) The author doesn't bring up the general issue of "the barriers that written English literary forms presented to Black authors."

• This question illustrates the importance of grasping authorial main idea. If you recognized that the author argues that Wheatley failed to play a role in developing an African American literary language, settling on choice (D) should have been a snap.

8. (B)

While the author praises Wheatley as an accomplished poet, she also notes that Wheatley failed to contribute to the African American literary tradition. Thus, the author's attitude toward Wheatley's work is aptly characterized as one of "qualified admiration." (A) "Enthusiastic advocacy" suggests that the author is uncritical of Wheatley's work.

(C) and (D) "Dispassionate impartiality" (C) and "detached ambivalence" (D) suggest that the author has no real opinion about Wheatley's work. (E) "Perfunctory dismissal" suggests that the author condemns Wheatley's work.

• Watch out for extreme-sounding choices such as (A) and (E). Most Reading Comprehension passages are more moderate in tone.