

African Americans and the Classics: Antiquity, Abolition and Activism

By Margaret Malamud

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Dr. Malamud responded to NCLG that she had not developed a classroom study guide for her book, since she had not taught the contents of her book with students. She suggested that NCLG create a summary to help guide discussions. This is our humble result, with quotes to guide reflections on the topics of each chapter as it unfolds.

Quotes and Reflections

Study Guide 2

This book explores the diverse strategies that African Americans employed in annexing Classics to master or challenge their own American experiences.

NCLG Study Guide Links: [Introduction](#) [Fighting for Classics](#) [Refiguring Classical Resistance](#) [Ancient and Modern Slavery](#) [Constructing History / Afterword](#)

2 Fighting for Classics

Introduction

Highlight - Page 25

American Negro Academy's first annual address: 'The Attitude of the American Mind Toward the Negro Intellect'. Long after the Civil War, [Alexander Crummell, Episcopalian pastor and abolitionist], one of the co-founders of the Academy,...[challenged the belief summarized by].....John C. Calhoun [who] said that only when he could 'find a Negro who knew the Greek syntax' could he be brought to 'believe that the Negro was a human being and should be treated as a man'.....

[This epitomized the attitude of a] society that denied African Americans access to classical learning and then maintained that they were incapable of it.

What two principles seemed to doom the AfricanAmericans to second class status, as humans and as citizens?

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[This was the] foundation of the complex fiction upon which white Western culture had been constructed...

Was this mindset unique to America?

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Learning Greek meant absorbing not only a linguistic resource—the Greek language—but also a cultural paradigm—the ideological and symbolic value of Greek culture. For...he believed it needed to be brought not only to African Americans in the United States but to Africans as well.....

[Greeks] whose ideals, as expressed in the rhetoric of the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence, they endorsed.

What did Crummell believe was the value of Greek studies?

Race, Reason and Classics

Highlight - Page 28

[There are many] eighteenth-century roots in Enlightenment conversations about race and reason.

Look up Enlightenment. What basic attitudes parallel those of racial bias in the US?

Highlight

[Hume said African American writers were just parroting White or classical authors, not showing personal skill and intellect.] The 'parrot' Hume referred to was the classically educated Jamaican poet and scholar Francis Williams

(1702–70) who wrote a Latin poem, which he dedicated to George Haldane, governor of Jamaica, on his arrival on the island in 1759.

How did Whites try to dismiss excellent poetry and writing of African Americans?

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[Phillis Wheatley] needed subscribers, but as Henry Louis Gates noted, ‘the necessary number of subscribers could not be found, because not enough Bostonians believed that an African slave possessed the requisite degree of reason and wit to write a poem herself’. She therefore endured a ‘tribunal’ of 18 men (including, among others, John Hancock and Thomas Hutchinson, governor of Massachusetts) in Boston in 1772, which interrogated her in order to judge whether she was in fact the author of her poems.

What happened to Phillis Wheatley that parallels the remarks of Hume about Williams?

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After questioning her, they certified that she was the author, and signed the following attestation...

What was the tribunal’s decision?

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Thomas Clarkson (1760–1846), founder of the London Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, discussed Phillis Wheatley in his influential 1786 treatise, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Particularly the African*. Clarkson included excerpts from three of Wheatley’s poems in his Essay to prove his argument.

How did abolitionist Clarkson in London solidify this claim?

Highlight - Page 33-34

Jefferson believed that African Americans had less capacity for rational thought than whites, that they were unable to comprehend higher

mathematics, and that they lacked the imaginative capacity to produce art. 22
'But...the alleged inability of African American people to learn Classics, write poetry, or create art demonstrated that they were not fully human and therefore not worthy of liberty.

How did Thomas Jefferson's view differ?

Highlight - Page 34-35

[Leading women's rights activist] Mary Church Terrell (1863–1954), who graduated from Oberlin College in 1884, and taught Latin at the M Street School in Washington, DC, recounted in her autobiography, *A Coloured Woman in a White World*, [that] Race trumps intellectual ability—racism accounts for the dismissal and denial of the demonstration of knowledge and ability.

What did Terrell see as the crux of the American 'Race problem'?

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Richard T. Greener (1844–1922), the first African American graduate of Harvard University, wrote to [William Sanders Scarborough] to congratulate him for his philological accomplishments, which so decisively refuted Calhoun's infamous charge.....'You may think you are doing little', wrote Greener, 'but it is something worthwhile to have proved Calhoun's statement false, and by your philological success alone you have lifted us all out of the ditch where he proposed we should always live.'

How did Greener feel Scarborough was a symbol of 'racial uplift'?

Highlight

Scarborough knew how important his classical achievements were.
....he prepared to deliver a paper on Plato at the American Philological Association's annual meeting at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville in July 1892. The setting could not have been more dramatic. Not only did the meeting take place in the former Confederate South, it was also held at a

university designed by Thomas Jefferson, and the session took place in the Rotunda Library, designed by Jefferson after the Pantheon, perhaps the most famous of all Roman buildings....The white aristocracy of the city turned out in large numbers. There was hardly standing room. On the walls hung the portraits of Jefferson Davis, the President of the Southern Confederacy, Gen. Robert E. Lee of the Confederate Army and other prominent Southern generals. The feeling that came over me was a strange one, as I stepped forward to present my paper. Every eye was fixed upon me and a peculiar hush seemed to pervade the room. It was a rare moment. Like a flash the past unrolled before my mind, my early Atlanta examinations, Calhoun's famous challenge, that no Negro could learn Greek.....[It was] a victory for myself and for the race.'

How did Scarborough's achievements and contributions soundly refute Calhoun?

Highlight

To have learned Classics was nothing less than a demonstration of the educability, equality, and humanity of African Americans. Mastering the classical languages, therefore, could also become a weapon in the fight for the recognition of the racial equality of African Americans.

These sorts of achievements and successes by many, many African Americans should have turned the tide of opinion. Why do you think stubbornly negative attitudes still prevailed?

A Herculean Task

Highlight - Page 40 - 41

Describe the Classics curriculum in these early schools for African Americans:

In Baltimore in 1820, William Watkins (ca. 1800–ca. 58) created the Watkins' Academy for Negro Youth, and his niece, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825–1911) taught there.....

In that same city in 1825, William M. Lively (dates unknown), a pastor in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, advertised the opening of a day and night school.....

In 1831, the Canal Street High School in New York City.....

[I]n Baltimore, the Reverend Daniel Alexander Payne (1811–93), future bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, established a school attached to the Bethel Church.....

By the 1850s, the coeducational Institute for Coloured Youth in Philadelphia (first opened in 1837)

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From the late 1820s, African American activists tried to establish their own colleges and academies.

Describe the efforts of each:

In 1829, Samuel E. Cornish, co-editor with John Brown Russwurm (1799–1851) of Freedom's Journal, the nation's first African American newspaper....

On 13 June 1832, at the Second Annual Convention for the Improvement of Free People of Colour, held in Philadelphia, the conventional address again called for [founding more] colleges and high schools.....and this led to the founding of the Noyes Academy in Canaan, New Hampshire.....

Alexander Crummell attended the New York African Free School, on Mulberry Street, in 1826.[and] went on to attend the recently established Canal Street High School for classical studies

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What happened to the Canaan school? Why?

Highlight

The boys [Crummell, Sydney, and Garnet] fled Canaan and the following year enrolled at the Oneida Institute in Whitesboro, New York. The Oneida Institute was a Presbyterian institution that the Reverend George Washington Gale (1789–1861) founded in 1827. The Institute offered classes in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew. When Reverend Beriah Green (1795–1874) became president in 1833, the Oneida Institute began to admit African American students, including Sidney, Garnet, and Crummell.

What did each go on to achieve?

Sydney:

Garnet:

Crummell:

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James McCune Smith...He graduated with honors from the African Free School and went to work as an apprentice to a blacksmith to earn a living, working six days a week, studying Latin and Greek in the evenings and all day Sunday. His friend Henry Highland Garnet vividly described him as ‘at a forge with the bellows in one hand and a Latin grammar in the other.’ Smith applied to medical schools but, like Crummell, was denied admission because of his race. With assistance from philanthropists, he went to the University of Glasgow in 1832 where he earned his B.A. (1835), M.A. (1836), and M.D. (1837). Smith was the first professionally trained African American physician. He returned as a hero to the African American community in New York in 1837.

Why did McCune need to go to university in Scotland?

Why was he seen as a ‘hero?’

Highlight - Page 46

New York Central College in McGrawville, New York was incorporated in 1848...initially funded by abolitionists and sponsored by the American Baptist Free Mission Society...[as an] interracial institution. ...the school closed in 1860.

Why do you think colleges like this closed?

Highlight

In the end, no successful or enduring institutions of higher learning were established where African Americans could receive a classical education until after the Civil War, with the notable exception of institutions built for the theological training of African American men wishing to enter the ministry. In 1854, the white Presbyterian minister John Miller Dickey (1806–78) founded the Ashmun Institute, named after the religious leader and social reformer Jehudi Ashmun (1794–1828), in southeastern Pennsylvania to train African American men to become preachers and missionaries.

Why do you think theological seminary colleges had more success?

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Wilberforce University, the nation's oldest private, historically African American university, named to honour the great British abolitionist, William Wilberforce (1759–1833), was founded near Xenia, Ohio, in 1856 with funds provided by the Methodist Episcopal Church.....Bishop Daniel Alexander Payne purchased the institution for the African Methodist Episcopal church. Wilberforce University also initially emphasized theological training.

What initial factors led to greater success for Wilberforce University?

Highlight

Even when some individuals were able to obtain the basic knowledge of the classical languages necessary for admission to colleges and professional schools, African Americans were typically barred from entrance because of their race.

What remained a major, and enduring, roadblock to African American access to a college education?

Highlight

African Americans slowly gained admittance to a few white colleges...Even so, in 1860, only 28 African Americans had received degrees from white American colleges.

Note a detail for each:

In 1824 Dartmouth College

in 1848 Harvard:

Bowdoin College in 1826:

In the 1830s, Western Reserve and Oberlin Collegiate Institute:

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Frederick Douglass (ca. 1818–95):... In his presidential address to the 1848 National Coloured Convention, held in Cleveland, Douglass urged members to ‘Try to get your sons into the mechanical trades....Frederick Douglass advocated a pragmatic education for most African Americans as a cure for what he viewed as the ‘social disease’ of African Americans: ‘poverty, ignorance, and degradation.’ In [an] 1853 letter to abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–96), who had asked for his advice on how best to help African Americans, he insisted that it was not by ‘establishing for our use high schools and colleges ... [for these] are not adapted to our present most pressing wants’.

What did Douglass begin to press for more practical, vocational training for African Americans?

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[Douglass’ opinion] anticipated the celebrated disagreement between Booker T. Washington (1856–1915) and W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) at the end of the nineteenth century over the best education for African American people:

What were the two options for providing education of rising generations of African Americans? Why was this an ideological controversy, more than anything?

Greek for ex-slaves

Highlight - Page 50

By 1879, two years after the end of Reconstruction, 28 African American colleges and universities had been founded, ...

Where were most of these new universities located?

Highlight

The American Missionary Association, the Presbyterian Church, the Methodist Church, and the American Baptists Home Mission Society were all actively engaged in improving the education of African Americans through the founding of colleges and universities.

What kind of groups were founding them?

Highlight

The New England classical liberal arts curriculum was chosen because it offered the best education at the time and African Americans wanted the same education and opportunities as their white contemporaries.

What was their core curriculum?

Highlight

Georgia legislature created a board of visitors to attend public examinations at the recently founded Atlantic University. The chairman of the first board of visitors was ex-slaveholder and former governor Joseph Brown (1821–94), who acknowledged beforehand that he expected the examination to confirm [racial] inferiority.....[he] conceded the racial equality of African Americans.

What did he observe?

Why was this a pivotal moment for him?

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.....most missionary schools offered primary, secondary and college courses. At the secondary level, schools typically offered either a three-to four-year college preparatory course or a two-to four-year normal course. The college preparatory course included Latin, Greek, rhetoric, math, literature, and science courses;

What did colleges often need to offer high school coursework?

What was taught in this high school curriculum?

Highlight - Page 52

...William Sanders Scarborough, James M. Gregory (1849–1915), professor of Latin at Howard University, and Wiley Lane (1852–85), professor of Greek at Howard...

Why are men like these significant? (They aren't the only ones)

A Pick Instead of Latin and Greek?

Highlight - Page 54 - 55

This view of education [like Douglass'] appealed to many former slaves who needed to find a means to support themselves and their families. It also appealed to most Southern whites, who had no wish to see African Americans educated above their 'proper station.'.....The Hampton Institute's most famous graduate was Booker T. Washington, who went on to become the founder and president of the Tuskegee Negro Normal Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama...

What was the emphasis at Tuskegee? How did Booker T. Washington spread that emphasis?

Highlight - Page 57

William Sanders Scarborough.....[felt] life should be intellectually ennobled for the Negro as well as for the white man, even for those serving in menial positions, hence all avenues of life's higher activities should be open to him.'

What approach to education did Scarborough support?

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As W. E. B. Du Bois declared in 1903, the 'Atlanta Compromise' was perceived by many as 'a complete surrender of the demand for civil and political equality.'

What was the Atlanta Compromise?

Highlight

.....Ulysses S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, James A. Garfield, Woodrow Wilson, Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller Jr., and George Eastman, among others, welcomed and financially supported the Hampton-Tuskegee model.

Why do you think they supported it?

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From the 1880s, there was a national conversation about appropriate education not only for African Americans but also for white working class students, many of whom were the children of recently arrived immigrants.By 1905, after the first wave of 'plain people' had entered the high schools, the proportion of students taking Latin had increased [from 35%] to just over 50 percent. Writing in 1911, classicist Francis W. Kelsey, professor at the University of Michigan from 1889 to 1927, noted with pleasure and some amazement that, despite the new science classes and the fact that 'newspapers and magazines at no time previously gave so wide a circulation to comments and articles averse to classical studies.....Not only was such a classical liberal arts education valuable in itself, it might also provide a way out of manual labour and factory work into a white-collar job. The classical languages had an almost talismanic quality: learning them offered the hope of rising above one's condition, moving up in society.

Why would immigrant families be in this same educational conversation?

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Increasingly, from the 1890s, funding by benefactors, foundations, and state and local governments was granted to those African American schools and colleges which adopted Booker T. Washington's utilitarian model of education. ...[but] many resisted the elimination or the diminution of the classical education option.....The study of Classics, they declared, offered more than vocational or scientific preparation: 'it offered culture.'

Why did keeping a broader curriculum remain popular to many?

The Quest for a De-segregated 'Republic of Letters'

Highlight - Page 61

"We wanted to know how to calculate and eclipse, to know what Hesiod and Livy thought; we wished to know the best thoughts of the best minds that lived with us; not merely to gain an honest livelihood, but from a God-given love of all that is beautiful and best, and because we thought we could do it."

Why does the very last comment harken back to Calhoun?

Highlight - Page 62

[H]ad Booker T. Washington's views on education come to prominence at the end of the Civil War, Scarborough's own generation might not have had the opportunity for a classical liberal arts education.

Why is timing important here?

Highlight

Kelly Miller, professor of Latin at Howard University, argued that a classical education and leadership of [our] race went hand in hand...Another use of college is to produce leaders, if any race needs leaders, we do.....[and] when judgment is needed we want the wisdom of college men.

Why do you think Miller drew a connection to leadership abilities?

Highlight - Page 63

[P]rincipal of Princess Ann Academy in Maryland, B. O. Bird, warned..... all students should have enough of a classical education to enable them to read, as a minimum, selections from Homer, Xenophon, Caesar, Cicero, and Virgil.

Does it surprise you that reading these [grammatically challenging] ancient authors would be considered a 'minimum?'

Highlight

[T]he Reverend C. N. Grandison argued passionately at the meeting in Baltimore for the necessity of equality in the 'republic of letters' and for him that meant the opportunity to attend college and learn Greek: I know of one republic where we are equal, that is the republic of letters, when man has that sweep of vision with which the human mind may be conversant there is no white man can say he has what the black man has not, there is no colour in thought, when I can read as much Greek as he can, they can't say I have not got it.

Highlight - Page 64

Unlike the African American body, the mind cannot be segregated.

How do these statements go to the heart of the opinion that Classics was a 'racial leveler?'

Highlight

[In] *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote poignantly of conversing with the classics of world literature beyond 'the colour-line': Across the colour-line..... From out of the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed earth and the tracery of the stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius with what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn or condescension.....the treasures of the humanities are relevant to all races and belong to everyone.

How did Du Bois feel when participating ‘in the cultural conversations of Western civilization?’

Highlight

Booker T. Washington linked the African American ‘craze for Greek and Latin learning’ with political activism...

Highlight - Page 66- 67

Du Bois devastatingly criticized Booker T. Washington [for giving up], at least for the present, three things—First, political power, Second, insistence on civil rights, Third, the higher education...

Why did Washington make this connection and Du Bois support it?

Highlight - Page 68

Anna Julia Cooper (1858–1964), educator and activist, was the author of a collection of essays, *A Voice from the South* (first published in 1892), widely acknowledged as the first African American feminist text. Cooper received her B.A. and her M.S. from Oberlin College and, in 1887, she joined the faculty at Washington Colored High School (soon after renamed the M Street Colored High School). In 1902, she became the principal of M Street High School where she insisted on a college preparatory curriculum for her students, which naturally included Latin and Greek....[she went on to] earn a Ph.D. at the age of 66 from the Sorbonne with a dissertation on French attitudes towards slavery during the French Revolution.

What is Anna Julia Cooper a strong example of?

How does this echo Du Bois criticism of Washington (Highlights above)?

Highlight - Page 69

Fanny Jackson Coppin, mentioned previously, was born a slave in Washington, DC. At the age of ten her aunt purchased her freedom for \$ 123. In 1861, Coppin went to Oberlin College where she completed the four-year classical course that led to the B.A.

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[She was] the second black woman to achieve this. [She became] principal of the female department of the prestigious Institute for Coloured Youth in Philadelphia...founded by Quakers...and in 1869 she was promoted and appointed head principal of the coeducational institution, where she remained until 1902.

Highlight - Page 72

[White-run Philadelphia newspapers supported Booker T. Washington's views and emphasized:] It was 'pitiable' and 'ludicrous' for the less 'clever' race to aspire to become politicians, scholars, doctors, lawyers, or scientists... Latin and History classes were dropped [by the Quaker administration]...Shortly after the new principal's arrival, he ordered the Academic Department of the Institute closed and its faculty fired.

How did Coppin and the situation in Philadelphia both prove racial intellectual equality and the frustratingly enduring power of racial prejudice?

Classics and Activism

Highlight - Page 73

... The first president of the State Normal and Industrial School for Coloured Students [opened in Tallahassee in 1887], Thomas De Sailles Tucker, supported a classical liberal arts as well as a vocational education. Tucker had a B.A. from Oberlin and a law degree from Straight College (now Dillard University). All students at the school were required to take courses in Latin, and Tucker taught both Latin and Rhetoric.

What did Tucker bring to the new college?

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Superintendent William N. Sheats [disavowed Classics], taking away control over appropriated monies and [Tucker's] ability to hire or dismiss teachers...[because] Tucker proclaimed that 'a full rounded teacher ... cannot be indifferent to a knowledge of dead languages, unless he stands self-convicted of ignorance of the bountiful fields of intellectual richness on which success, specially in the arts of his work, depends.'

What lengths did Sheats go to in order to eliminate Classics?

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Tucker's successor, Nathan B. Young, was convinced that a classical liberal arts education and vocational training could be synthesized. 132 Young had a B.A. in liberal arts from Talladega College and a graduate degree in Greek and Latin from Oberlin College. Over the course of 20 years, he quietly improved the academic programmes to such an extent that Florida A. & M. (as it now was called) was on the verge of accreditation [equal to other state colleges].

What did Florida A. & M. gain from keeping strong academics?

Highlight

Young's friend Richard R. Wright had been forced to resign from the presidency of the Georgia State Industrial School for refusing demands that he 'cut this Latin out and teach these boys to farm'.

Why was the state often forcing leaders to move away from classical education?

Highlight

Howard offers a contrasting example in its successful struggle to retain the classical curriculum...[but b]y the time Dyson was writing in 1937, not a single student at Howard was studying Greek, and there were only eight students majoring in Latin.

Highlight - Page 76

[James M. Gregory (first student, first graduate, later a Professor of Classics) remarked that a student] is studying the deeds, the exploits, the struggles, the conflicts, the philosophy, the poetry, the literature, the virtues, the characters of the most remarkable nations that ever existed.

What did Gregory see as the enduring value of Classics?

Highlight - Page 78

[Despite] the pressure of our economic life has reared the hydra-headed monster of industrialism within her walls...in the end, attempts to industrialize Howard University failed.... Howard attracted ambitious students who were drawn to the educational opportunities it offered. Classics, law, and medicine were what they wanted....

How did Howard survive the attack by pro-industrial education proponents?

Highlight - Page 79

[C]lassical curriculum [also] lasted longer in African American missionary-established colleges than in northern white colleges, McPherson has speculated, because 'they still thought it important to meet John C. Calhoun's challenge

Schools founded by abolitionists and funded largely by missionary groups fared better. Why?

Highlight

In 1897, Alexander Crummell, William Sanders Scarborough, Anna Julia Cooper, and W. E. B. Du Bois, among others, founded the American Negro Academy, an institution that vigorously opposed the educational philosophy of Booker T. Washington and the dilution of the classical curriculum in schools, colleges, and universities.

Highlight - Page 81

Alexander Crummell...recognized the 'plan' of white racists to crush African American education.

Why was education the pivotal element of this 'plan?'