

# **African Americans and the Classics: Antiquity, Abolition and Activism**

By Margaret Malamud

Citation: Malamud, Margaret. *African Americans and the Classics: Antiquity, Abolition and Activism*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016. Kindle file.

*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 3**

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 Figuring Classical Resistance**

### **Origin Narratives**

#### **Highlight - Page 84**

At the time of the American Revolution, Caesar was popularly represented as a tyrant whose ruthless ambition brought down the Roman Republic. The colonists invoked Caesar's political opponents—Brutus, Cassius, Cato, and Cicero—as heroes in their own struggle against the British monarchy, disparagingly referring to English government officials as 'Caesars'..... [Even using the] term 'slavery under King George III.'

*From early colonial times, Caesar and his opponents were seen as parallels to what two groups?*

**Highlight - Page 84**

George Buchanan (1763–1808) pointed to what he perceived to be the paradox of the American Revolution and the continued existence of the institution of slavery in a Fourth of July oration delivered in Baltimore to the Maryland Society for the Promotion of the Abolition of Slavery in 1791...  
.....'propagate the growth of the evil, which they boldly sought to eradicate'...

**Highlight - Page 85**

the hypocrisy of the ... American rhetoric of 'liberty or death' and the enslavement of fellow human beings.....'Such are the effects of subjecting man to slavery', Buchanan asserted, 'that it destroys every human principle....

*Briefly restate the "paradoxical hypocrisy of the American Revolution."*

**Highlight - Page 86**

John Quincy Adams (1767–1848) pleaded the cause of the African captives before the United States Supreme Court. On 9 March 1841, the Supreme Court issued its final verdict...

*What was the final verdict of the Supreme Court about the escaping slave ship?*

**Highlight - Page 87**

wealthy African American abolitionist Robert Purvis (1810–98) had a portrait of their African leader Sengbe Pieh (Joseph Cinque) painted.

*How was he depicted? Why?*

**Highlight - Page 89**

*New York Sun* reported, 'Had he (Pieh / Cinque) lived in the days of Greece or Rome, his name would have been handed down to posterity as one who had practiced those most sublime of all virtues—disinterested patriotism and unshrinking courage'....[having] preferred death to political slavery

*What was the similar Revolutionary chant? ‘Give me .....!’  
(Patrick Henry, echoing Cato)*

## **An African Spartacus?**

### **Highlight - Page 92**

The first successful slave revolt [was] on the French colony of Saint-Domingue began in the wake of the French Revolution and resulted in the establishment of the first free black Republic in the Americas in 1804.

*What free Caribbean nation was created?*

### **Highlight - Page 93**

[The leader of this revolt, who had been] appointed second in command [by the new Governor], L’Ouverture, was well read—he had read Plutarch, Caesar, Herodotus, and Nepos, among other classical texts, so he certainly knew of Spartacus and Crassus. [He was soon nicknamed] ‘the Black Spartacus.’ .....[the revolt of ] L’Ouverture triggered a wave of slave insurrections throughout the Caribbean...

*Why did people call L’Ouverture ‘Spartacus?’*

### **Highlight - Page 95**

In the United States, the distance between the wealthy elite and the working class was growing, [and a] new play The Gladiator [became popular.]

### **Highlight - Page 96 -97**

Spartacus’ fight against the Roman aristocrat and general, Crassus, provided a model of resistance for working men [too]....Wage slavery meant more than economic bondage—it degraded the worker and emasculated him. [But with the rebellion for US independence], ‘Sweet liberty was for whites, not black slaves.’

*Where did the parallel between the two Spartacus symbols break down?*

## **Punica Fides?**

### **Highlight - Page 98**

[A]ntislavery activist David Walker (1796–1830) invoked the Carthaginian general Hannibal in 1829 in his famous *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*. ..... he called white slaveholders Romans, and anticipated that God would send African American slaves a Hannibal to overthrow the white Romans of his time....Walker and other abolitionists chose to valorize Carthage and the most famous of Rome's enemies, Hannibal.

*How is this portrayal of Hannibal different from the Roman view of his aggression?*

### **Highlight - Page 98**

Many abolitionists further argued that Hannibal and the Carthaginians and the eminent early North African church fathers were descendants of the ancient Egyptians.....they must unite and fight. If they do, they will defeat the white Southern slaveowners who are oppressing *noble* African Americans, the descendants of the Carthaginians.

*How did it help to make this cultural connection with famous north African nations and leaders?*

### **Highlight - Page 100**

Once the pamphlets [with these proofs of African heritage] reached the South, they were distributed. In response, horrified whites passed laws that forbade African Americans to learn to read and banned the distribution of antislavery literature....

One year after David Walker's death, in August 1831, Nat Turner's slave rebellion broke out near Jerusalem, Virginia,...appealing to the slaves to rise against their masters, saying that all men were born equal, declaring that

Hannibal was a black man and that they also might have great leaders among them....

**Highlight - Page 101**

Henry Cook...hoped that 'one of those boys .....may turn out to be the Hannibal of America'.

*Why was the image of a black Hannibal so powerful?*

**Highlight - Page 102**

Harriet Beecher Stowe, praised the courage and determination of the women of Carthage in resisting Roman conquest and slavery....and I hope every woman who can write will not be silent.

*What did Stowe write? Was it influential?*

**Highlight - Page 102-103**

What access did they have to ancient history and classical texts without knowledge of Greek and Latin? Crucially, translations of Roman and Greek authors were widely available.

[A new publishing firm's] first book was an English translation of Seneca's *Morals*. By the end of the 1820s, the firm was the largest book-printing establishment in the United States and it issued a [huge] series of inexpensive book collections called 'libraries', including the Classical Library.

*What was the name of this new publisher?*

*Give examples of the ancient works it published:*

**Highlight - Page 103**

It will be one means of breaking down the monopoly of knowledge,

*What was one effect of this 'monopoly of knowledge?'*

### **Highlight - Page 104**

....reading aloud and recitation were common practices in early African American literary societies.

*How could these early societies aid the abolitionist cause?*

### **Liberty or Death**

### **Highlight - Page 106-107**

Fugitive Slave Act of 1850.....made the federal government responsible for the apprehension and return of all escaped slaves.....

[A man publishing under the name 'Hannibal' said] "let the slavish doctrine of 'passive obedience and non-resistance' be thrown to the winds ...."

....resistance against slavery linked the right to liberty with the duty to fight for it, and his pseudonym [Hannibal] reminded his readers of the noble African general who spent his life trying to conquer Rome.

*Why was the Fugitive Slave Act a game-changer for both abolitionists and enslaved peoples?*

### **Highlight - Page 108-109**

[Stories like the] wife of the general Hasdrubal who... killed herself and her children in defiance of Roman conquest and slavery.....Virginius, the Roman soldier who, according to the Roman historian Livy, killed his daughter, Virginia, in order to save her from rape by the tyrannical patrician Appius Claudius.

*Why did these images get transferred to stories of enslaved women and mothers?*

### **Highlight - Page 110**

[In] the case of [fugitive slave] Margaret Garner (1834–58), abolitionists invoked Greek and Roman allusions to help make sense of her actions. In

1856, Margaret and Simeon Garner and their four children escaped from their owner in Kentucky and crossed the frozen Ohio River to Cincinnati.

*What happened to her?*

*What happened to her children?*

*Why?*

*This is the story that inspired Toni Morrison to write a novel in 1987. What was that novel? Who was the protagonist?*

### **Highlight - Page 112**

Frederick Douglass [in his Narrative, remarked]...

in coming to a fixed determination to run away, we did more than Patrick Henry, when he resolved upon liberty or death. With us it was a doubtful liberty at most, and most certain death if we failed. For my part, I should prefer death to hopeless bondage.

*How did Douglass interpret Henry's famous saying, 'Give me liberty or give me death?'*

### **Highlight - Page 117**

[The themes of the play] resonated with workers in the antebellum North, who struggled to achieve greater parity with their own 'aristocratic' class.....[audiences] cheered the Roman plebeians' resistance to the aristocracy and their demand for a greater share in the political process. Knowles' [play] *Virinius* spoke directly to the popular insistence that liberty meant social, economic and political equality...

*How did working class struggles align with that of free and enslaved Africans in the antebellum period?*

*What was the result of the uprising in the play?*

*How does it connect to the story of Margaret Garner?*

## **The Greek Revolution and the Greek Slave**

### **Highlight - Page 121**

Athenian democracy seemed a better political model for the populist supporters of Andrew Jackson than the 'mixed' government of the Roman Republic.

*Why did people prefer Athenian democracy model over Roman republican government?*

### **Highlight - Page 122**

identified with the Greek fight against Ottoman tyranny, which they deemed analogous to their own revolutionary rebellion against British oppression.

*How did people see these two rebellions for independence as similar?*

## **The Weapon of Oratory**

### **Highlight - Page 132**

[For one] member of the Philadelphia Female Literary Association ..., the Philadelphia Female Literary Association was like Demosthenes' vault—a protected place to practice and study, safe from the jeers of whites at an African American person's attempt to learn the skills of public speaking....  
...Demosthenes (and Cicero) offered powerful role models for African Americans...

*How did people learn about issues and express their views more widely in this era?*

*How did this make these societies more powerful?*



**Highlight - Page 133**

After Frederick Douglass' dramatic oratorical performance in Nantucket, Massachusetts, on 12 August 1841, [abolitionist] William Lloyd Garrison rose on the stage and challenged the audience: 'Have we been listening to a thing, a piece of property, or to a man'? 'A man!'

*How does Garrison's comment go straight to the debated issue of equality?*

**Highlight – Page 134**

Acquiring the skills necessary to deliver effective and compelling oratory therefore was a powerful skill for African American and white abolitionists in the battle to end slavery.

*How did schools (like the societies) aid in this process of skill-building?  
By the 1840s, how many of these societies were there?*

**Highlight - Page 136-137**

The widespread antebellum American enjoyment and appreciation of oratorical performance was so great it could (temporarily) transcend racism and class difference .....Orators were the era's rock stars, and in an age of dazzling orators, [Henry Highland] Garnet shone. His rhetorical eloquence disarmed those who insisted on African American racial inferiority.

*Therefore, what were two positive results of oratorical training for African Americans?*

**Highlight - Page 137**

African Americans could avail themselves of the translated works of Demosthenes and Cicero,...along with such rhetorical textbooks as John Ward's (1759) System of Oratory, Hugh Blair's (1783) Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, and John Quincy Adams' (1810) Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory. All drew on classical theory and examples, especially Ward and Adams, for whom Cicero's De Oratore was crucial. [There was also] Caleb Bingham's The Columbian Orator.

*What resources allowed for the fast spread of oratorical skills?*

*What did you learn earlier about the availability of these works on oratory?*

### **Highlight - Page 138-139**

Bingham included nearly a dozen speeches and excerpts from classical sources or on classical topics and provided examples from Antiquity to demonstrate the power of oratory.

*What specific skills did Bingham teach by examples from antiquity, so people could ‘speak with classical force?’*

### **Highlight - Page 140**

[Frederick Douglass (and others) learned] how to reason and to argue but also how to structure his ideas and his argument according to clear patterns widely used in American public discourse in the decades leading up to the Civil War.

### **Highlight - Page 141**

Charles Rollin (a French scholar’s comment on title page of *The Columbian Orator*): ‘Cato cultivated eloquence, as a necessary means for defending the rights of the people, and for enforcing the rights of the people, and for enforcing good counsels’.

*How did Douglass offer an example of Rollin’s quote?*

### **Highlight- Page 142**

Douglass also derided southern claims to the moral legacy of Greece and Rome and accused Southerners of lacking intellectual, moral, and civic virtue.

*How did Douglass go straight to the character of his ‘opponents?’*

**Highlight- Page 145**

James M. Gregory, professor of Latin at Howard University, compared him to Cicero: ..... 'Few men equal him in his power over an audience.'

In his obituary for Douglass, [classical scholar Dr. William Sanders] Scarborough wrote that Douglass was: 'A veritable Pylian Nestor.'

*Look up King Nestor of Pylos and his role in Homer's Iliad and Odyssey. Why does Scarborough say this about Douglass?*

**Highlight - Page 146**

William G. Allen (1820–?), professor at New York Central College, in 1852 ... delivered a speech entitled Orators and Oratory ..[and] linked great oratory with the struggle for liberty

*What did Allen feel was an essential element of all good oratory?*

**Highlight - Page 149-150**

Henry Highland Garnet, [in his] The Past and the Present Condition, and the Destiny, of the Coloured Race.... [mentioned] the exercise of this weapon....

*What was this super 'weapon,' and what was its ultimate goal of using it?*