

# African American Writers and Classical Tradition

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In *African American Writers and Classical Tradition*, William Cook and James Tatum, professors emeriti of English and African American studies and of Classics, respectively, analyse the influence of classical literature and education on African American writers, from Phillis Wheatley's seminal *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773) to Rita Dove's book of sonnets, *Mother Love* (1995), modelled on the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*. They explicate fine points of style and rhetoric, but their study also offers a grim history of the effects of slavery, Jim Crowism and racism, overt and subtle, on American learning, society, politics and literate culture.

Other figures examined include Frederick Douglass, W.S. Scarborough, W.E.B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Melvin Tolson (who delighted in being a Pindaric "puffer fish" of paralysing complexity) and satiric novelist Fran Ross, who exploits the epic use of significant speaking names and, like Tolson, plays eruditely with etymology and lexicography. Cook and Tatum show how these authors used the classical tradition to respond personally to the violence and psychological and spiritual dislocations they experienced because of race.

African American literature, in Cook and Tatum's view, developed through the occasional accidental negligence of those who would suppress what Du Bois called "the souls of black folk" and through the courage of a select few of those folk. Wheatley's master John Wheatley, in the "authenticating preface" to her poems, stressed that she wrote them for her "Amusement" in "her leisure moments". She had then what Roman writers called *otium*, personal spare time, a true rarity for a slave. She learned the alphabet and Latin. She became familiar with the literature of educated free persons: the Bible, John Milton, John Dryden, Alexander Pope, and eventually Horace and Virgil.

In her poem *On Being Bought*, she accepts her own enslavement as a fortunate fall: "Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain,/May be refin'd, and join th'angelic strain." Nonetheless, slave owner Thomas Jefferson remarked that her "compositions" were "below the dignity of criticism" because "religion ... has produced a Phillis Wheatley, but it could not produce a poet".

Douglass' life as a "public speaker of legendary presence and power" and a brave champion of abolition was founded on a "largely surreptitious self-education". His foolish mistress taught

him his ABCs before her husband forbade further instruction, declaring it "unlawful" and "unsafe", because "learning would spoil the best nigger in the world".

It spoiled Douglass thoroughly. He saw knowledge as "the direct pathway from slavery to freedom". He used the ideas and classical rhetoric he absorbed from Caleb Bingham's popular book *The Columbian Orator* (1797) as weapons, against first slavery and later Jim Crowism.

The path of learning, thinking and using words with classical artistry is direct, but it is long and has not been fully traversed. One stop along this path was the light-skinned Mary Church Terrell reciting Greek at [Oberlin College](#) for the visiting Matthew Arnold. She confounded his belief that "the tongue of the African was so thick he could not be taught to pronounce Greek correctly". Another stop was the 1881 publication of W.S. Scarborough's *First Lessons in Greek*, which refuted John C. Calhoun's claim that "no black man was capable of learning such a challenging subject as Greek grammar".

Classical influence shows up in surprising places. Du Bois used arguments about liberal education from Cicero's *Pro Archia Poeta* to convince dirt-poor black families in rural Tennessee to let their children sit in school and read books. And while it has long been recognised that Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1952) uses Odysseus and the Odyssey as models, Cook and Tatum argue convincingly that Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) served as its *Iliad*.

## **African American Writers and Classical Tradition**

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