

The Mis-Education of the Negro



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CARTER G. WOODSON

The son of illiterate and formerly enslaved parents, Carter G. Woodson spent much of his childhood working on farms and in West Virginia coal mines. He did not go to high school until his early twenties, but he excelled academically, becoming a teacher and then a school principal before even earning his bachelor's degree. He studied at Berea College, the University of Chicago, the Sorbonne, and Harvard University, where he became the second Black American to complete a PhD in 1912. Unable to find work as a professor, Woodson continued teaching high school for several years after finishing his PhD. In 1919, he briefly became a History professor and the Dean of the School of Liberal Arts at Howard University, one of the oldest and most prominent historically Black universities in the United States. He next spent two years at the West Virginia Collegiate Institute, but then he dedicated the rest of his career to directing the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History and promoting the discipline of Black American history more generally. Woodson published more than 30 books in his career, befriended many Harlem Renaissance intellectuals and activists, and also frequently wrote for a popular audience in publications like activist Marcus Garvey's newspaper *Negro World*. To combat the pervasive racism in academia and the discipline of history in particular, Woodson also began promoting "Negro History Week" in the 1920s. In the decades since, this tradition has transformed into Black History Month, which American schools celebrate every February.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Carter G. Woodson strongly promoted the study of Black history, both in the U.S. and around the world. But *The Mis-Education of the Negro* specifically focuses on the history of Black Americans in the U.S. education system between the end of the American Civil War (1865) and the early years of the Great Depression (1933, when Woodson was writing). Before the Civil War, enslaved people generally had no access to education, which slaveowners and the white Southern public generally viewed as a threat to their power. In fact, from the 1830s through the 1860s, the U.S. was the only country in the world to outlaw educating enslaved people. After the Civil War, during the period known as Reconstruction, freed Black people held significant political power throughout the South and established a system of public schools and colleges for Black students. Although racially segregated, inadequately funded, and poorly staffed, these schools helped dramatically improve literacy rates and create numerous economic opportunities for

the Black community. In fact, this was the first major push for public education in U.S. history, and it's largely responsible for spurring the creation of a national public school system. However, from the late 1870s through 1908, white Southerners formed violent militias, massacred Black citizens, and imposed discriminatory voting laws in order to win back political control in the South. They established the regime of legal segregation commonly known as Jim Crow, which lasted until 1965. During this period, white supremacist state governments drained funding from Black schools and instituted the unequal education system that persists in the U.S. to this day. Meanwhile, the small Black elite increasingly pulled away from the Black masses, a process that Woodson heavily criticizes in *The Mis-Education of the Negro*. As a result, Woodson notes, Black students scarcely received a better education in 1930 than they did in 1880, and this jeopardized not only their economic opportunities, but also their prospects of mounting a successful campaign for political equality.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Although *The Mis-Education of the Negro* is by far Woodson's most popular and widely read work, he also wrote numerous other books as part of his quest to popularize Black history. The most significant include *The History of the Negro Church* (1921), *The Negro in Our History* (1921), and the important textbook *The African Background Outlined, or Handbook for the Study of the Negro* (1936). He also founded an extremely influential academic journal, *The Journal of Negro History*, which is still being published today as *The Journal of African American History*. Like Woodson, the influential early 20th-century Black intellectual W. E. B. DuBois was deeply interested in the problem of public education for Black people in the US. He discussed the importance of education in his landmark book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), and his writings on education are collected in the anthology *The Education of Black People: Ten Critiques, 1906-1960* (2001). Biographies of Woodson include Jacqueline Goggin's *Carter G. Woodson: A Life in Black History* (1997) and Robert F. Durden's *The Life of Carter G. Woodson: Father of African American History* (2014). Finally, other books on the history of Black education in the eras of slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow include Henry Allen Bullock's *A History of Negro Education in the South: From 1619 to the Present* (1967), James Anderson's *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (1988), and William H. Watkins's *The White Architects of Black Education: Ideology and Power in America, 1865-1954* (2001).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Mis-Education of the Negro*
- **When Written:** 1933
- **Where Written:** Washington, D.C.
- **When Published:** 1933
- **Literary Period:** Harlem Renaissance
- **Genre:** Social Critique; Black American History
- **Setting:** The United States, 1865–1933
- **Climax:** Woodson calls for the U.S. education system to be reformed and for educated Black people to dedicate themselves to serving their communities.
- **Antagonist:** Racism in education; segregation; corrupt Black elites and leaders
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Blood, Sweat, and Tears. Woodson was a famously hard worker: he frequently worked 16- to 18-hour days, and he never married because he claimed to be “married to [his] work.”



PLOT SUMMARY

In *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, Black American educator and historian Carter G. Woodson argues that, during the period from the end of the American Civil War to the early 1930s, the U.S. education system controlled and oppressed Black students rather than helping them achieve their potential. He proposes reforming this system by developing a new curriculum to meet Black students’ needs, building new academic institutions dedicated to educating them, and taking the academic study of Black life seriously for the first time.

Woodson begins by explaining what Black American students actually learn in early 20th-century U.S. schools. Rather than studying their own community’s history, culture, or achievements, they learn the same prejudiced curriculum as white students. Technical schools teach Black students out-of-date techniques, while academic schools teach them that white people are physically and culturally superior to Black people. This education doesn’t help them develop their skills or succeed in the racially segregated economy, and it wrongly convinces them that their only path to success is by imitating white people. In reality, Woodson argues, Black students have to develop their own talents, interests, and creativity if they want to succeed.

Woodson next examines the roots of the education system’s failures. White officials run most of the school districts that serve Black students, and many white teachers have no meaningful ties to the Black communities they serve. Policymakers worry that they will lose political support if they hire Black administrators to run schools and universities, and many elite Americans care more about educational credentials

than actual learning. Meanwhile, teachers often hope to “transform the Negroes, not to develop them.” To provide Black students with a genuine education, Black leaders need to overcome all these structural barriers.

Thus, Woodson next looks at what these Black leaders are actually doing. Unfortunately, the “highly educated” Black elites who go through the U.S. education system learn to believe in their own inferiority, so they often abandon the Black masses rather than working to uplift them. While white students can generally study a liberal arts curriculum and then find jobs through family and social connections, Black students don’t have this kind of network. Therefore, they often struggle to find jobs after graduation, so they grow pessimistic and blame the Black community. They don’t invest energy or resources in Black businesses or community organizations (like **churches**). And without thriving Black businesses to join or successful Black entrepreneurs as role models, these Black graduates prefer to take low-level jobs in white-owned corporations rather than take the risks that are necessary to build their community’s economic strength. Ultimately, Woodson concludes, the Black elite ends up isolating itself and focusing on making money, rather than contributing to the common good of the Black community. As a result, Woodson argues, the Black masses are as poor and “undeveloped” in the 1930s as they were in the 1880s. In addition, Black churches are corrupt, divided, and unwilling to work for positive change.

Next, Woodson looks at the specific issues with the theological, professional, and political education that Black students receive in the early 20th century. Black theology schools focus on sectarian debates rather than speaking to the community’s needs, while Black professionals (like “physicians, dentists, pharmacists, lawyers, and actors”) have to study at white institutions and face barriers to professional success. Meanwhile, schools prefer not to teach Black students about American history—least of all the Constitution—because this would help them understand their civil rights and demand political equality.

All in all, Woodson concludes, the broken education system is really a strategy for social control, designed to prevent Black people from fighting for political, social, and economic equality. He points out that many educated elites even support segregation because it personally profits them—for instance, Black landlords support housing segregation so that they can force poor Black tenants to pay exorbitant rents. Woodson argues that these elites should strive to *serve* their communities rather than *lead* them (which often really means exploiting them or leaving them behind).

Most importantly, serving the Black community requires first *understanding* that community. Therefore, Woodson concludes by reaffirming that education is the key first step along the long road to racial equality. He argues that Black colleges need to teach their students about African and Black American history,

art, music, philosophy, and literature. And in order to teach these subjects, Black scholars first need to research them—or, in Woodson’s words, undertake “a scientific study of the Negro from within.” Moreover, effective education has to emphasize critical thinking, which will allow Black students to innovate, learn new skills over time, and build original enterprises—rather than just imitating others. In turn, an education system based on critical thinking will train competent Black professionals who can truly serve their communities and inspiring Black political leaders who can transform all levels of the government. Woodson explains that this is why he dedicated his life to promoting the study of Black history and culture, most importantly by founding the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Carter G. Woodson – The author of *The Mis-Education of the Negro* was a prominent Black American historian, educator, and activist who devoted his life to promoting the study of Black history. Both a member and a critic of the educated Black elite, Woodson firmly believed that education and hard work were the best ways for the Black community to advance socially, gain political power in the U.S., and become economically self-sufficient. In *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, Woodson argues that the U.S. education system provides Black students with a false education, indoctrinating them into a distorted view of American society instead of helping them truly understand the world around them and develop their individual abilities. Woodson is perhaps best known for founding the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (now called the Association for the Study of African American Life and History) in 1915.

The “Highly Educated” Black Elite – In the 1930s, the Black elite is the small portion of Black Americans who have completed extensive formal education and/or occupy positions of power in the Black community. This group includes (but isn’t limited to) college-educated professionals like teachers, ministers, doctors, lawyers, researchers, and artists. In addition to having more resources and connections than the Black masses, these Black elites often view themselves as sophisticated and take pride in being “highly educated.” Although Carter G. Woodson belongs to this elite, he’s still sharply critical of it. Most importantly, he thinks that the Black elite’s tendency to imitate white people and look down on other Black people reflects the racist biases built into the American education system. In other words, the elite’s biases show how the school system has mis-educated them. Moreover, Woodson argues that this elite is largely corrupt and self-serving: they prefer to profit at the Black community’s expense rather than help the community advance. Therefore, Woodson’s plan to

reform the American education system is also an attempt to create a new kind of Black elite—one whose education is an asset rather than a hindrance to the race.

The Black Masses – In the 1930s, the Black masses are the vast majority of Black Americans, who are generally poor and received little (if any) formal education beyond primary school. This class includes virtually all of the rural Black people living in the American South, along with most of the urban Black people who moved to Northeastern and Midwestern cities after the Civil War. Carter G. Woodson argues that, while the masses are still “backward” and “underdeveloped” because of their poverty and lack of education, they have not been “mis-educated” by the school system like the Black elite has. Woodson hopes that these masses can lift themselves up economically and socially through private enterprise and a new, more enlightened education system.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Frederick Douglass – Frederick Douglass was a Black American who escaped slavery prior to the American Civil War. He was an influential 19th-century activist and influential slavery abolitionist leader.

TERMS

Back-to-Africa Movement – The Back-to-Africa movement was a short-lived and largely unsuccessful attempt to convince formerly enslaved Black Americans to migrate from the United States to West Africa in the early 1900s.

Reconstruction – The Reconstruction era was the period after the Civil War, from 1865 to 1877, when the Confederacy was reincorporated into the United States and enslaved people became free citizens. During Reconstruction, Black Americans briefly held significant power in federal and state governments.

Talented Tenth – The “talented tenth” was Black American sociologist W. E. B. DuBois’s term for **the Black elite**, whom he hoped could receive a high-quality university education.

Theology – Theology is the branch of religious studies that seeks to understand God through rational analysis and argument.

Minstrelsy – In the United States, minstrel shows were a popular and derogatory type of theater performances in which Black actors—or, more commonly, white actors in blackface—played characters based on racist stereotypes about Black people.

Jim Crow Laws – Jim Crow laws were a variety of laws that Southern U.S. states and cities used to enforce racial segregation between the end of Reconstruction and the 1960s. In addition to segregating public spaces, many Jim Crow laws were specifically designed to prevent Black people from voting

and participating in government.

Association for the Study of Negro Life and History – The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, today called the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, is a prominent nonprofit organization that **Carter G. Woodson** founded in 1915. The purpose of the Association is to promote the study of Black history and culture; it's best known for creating and popularizing Black History Month.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



RACISM AND EDUCATION

In his influential 1933 book *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, Black American historian and educator Carter G. Woodson argues that American schools and universities failed to meaningfully educate Black students during the decades following the Civil War. Like many scholars and activists today, Woodson sees racial inequities in educational access and achievement as a reflection of the U.S. education system's bias in favor of white people and against Black people. In Woodson's time, teachers and curricula in segregated Black schools emphasized white history, art, and literature while minimizing or outright ignoring non-white people's achievements. Meanwhile, most teachers asked their students to simply memorize information, rather than teaching them to think critically about their own lives and society. As a result, Woodson thinks, the more formal education that Black people received, the *less* capable they were of actually making original contributions to society. Woodson concludes that in order to genuinely educate Black students, the early 20th-century American education system needs to transform at all levels. Scholars need to understand Black students' lives and capabilities, then develop a curriculum for them that helps them fulfill their potential, and finally implement this curriculum in American schools. Through this proposal, Woodson argues that *any* education system must connect with its students' lived experience in order to be effective, which means helping students build the knowledge, morals, and skills that they need to live fulfilling lives.

Woodson's central argument is that, at all levels, the U.S. education system fails to educate Black students because it offers them a biased curriculum taught from a white supremacist perspective. This curriculum emphasizes European history, art, and scientific achievement, while virtually ignoring the rest of the world. Moreover, it is explicitly

racist—teachers and textbooks openly proclaim that white people are biologically and culturally inferior to non-white people. This gives Black students the false impression that their people have never achieved anything significant and never will. According to Woodson, this harms Black students' self-esteem and prevents them from developing their abilities and pursuing their dreams. Meanwhile, the curriculum minimizes and rationalizes Black people's suffering. For instance, students are asked to debate the morality of slavery, which history classes suggest was actually good for Black people. Woodson concludes that these misguided lessons help white people justify subjugating Black people and convince Black people that they naturally deserve to be at the bottom of the social hierarchy. The school system also wastes Black students' talent because it sees their potential contributions to society as unimportant. For instance, Woodson notes that schools seldom invest in helping Black writers, musicians, and actors develop their talent because they assume that Black people are naturally meant to create amateur art for a popular audience, as opposed to creatively sophisticated high art (which is associated with white artists and audiences). This means that Black students end up losing out on the resources they need to develop as artists and produce respectable high art.

Woodson sees a misguided theory of education at the root of the U.S. school and university system's problems: the system views education as delivering information to students or forcibly transforming them, rather than helping them develop their own innate abilities. This assumption explains why so many schools teach Black students the same curriculum as white students: rather than adapting lessons to their students, they assume that all children will benefit in the same way from learning the same set of facts. For instance, one school administrator tells Woodson that building a university for Black students just requires hiring any group of men with PhDs in the right subjects. Because he assumes that all students learn in the same way, this administrator thinks that anyone with a PhD can effectively teach any student. More fundamentally, he assumes that PhDs are interchangeable, and education just means memorizing a large set of information. But Woodson disagrees: he thinks that education is really about learning to think in a new way, which means that effective instructors have to adapt to their students. In contrast to the mis-education system's narrow view of learning as the accumulation of knowledge, Woodson argues, true education is about developing students' abilities—especially their ability to think critically and independently—so that they can effectively navigate the challenges they'll face later on in life.

To fulfill his dream of providing Black Americans with a true education, Woodson proposes substantially reforming the existing school system. He wants to rewrite the curriculum, retrain teachers, and create new fields of study that center Black people's history and experiences, without erasing white

people's. Most importantly, Woodson wants to rework the curriculum in order to teach Black students about their own community's achievements, history, and potential. To make this possible, he argues, scholars must undertake a "careful study of the Negro himself and the life which he is forced to lead." In other words, researchers have to start viewing African and Black American history, art, and culture as serious scholarly subjects. Similarly, Woodson argues that teachers must be trained to help develop their students' minds, rather than just reciting information to them. Specifically, Woodson argues that teachers must make strong personal connections in the Black community and empathize with their students.

Although he proposes wide-ranging changes to the American education system, Woodson does not plan to tear it down entirely: rather, he wants to build on existing institutional structures in order to teach students the right lessons. Similarly, he doesn't think that Black people should *only* learn about Black history, art, and literature: rather, he thinks it's important for their curriculum to cover the whole range of human endeavor and experience, but specifically connect these achievements to students' specific life contexts. Woodson dedicated his life to pursuing this vision of a new education system, especially by starting the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History and founding Black History Month, which remains his most well-known legacy.



MIS-EDUCATION AS SOCIAL CONTROL

In *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, which focuses on the period from the end of the American Civil War to the early 1930s, Carter G. Woodson argues that

the U.S. school system doesn't just fail to educate its Black students—it also actively oppresses them in order to preserve white people's disproportionate power, wealth, and privilege. Namely, Woodson argues that the education system is a tool of social control based on convincing Black people of their own inferiority, encouraging them to accept domination by white people, and destroying their hopes for economic advancement and political freedom.

According to Woodson, the education system teaches Black students to believe in their own inferiority, which indirectly encourages them to accept racial segregation and inequality instead of fighting them. First, Woodson argues that the education system conveniently keeps most Black people poor, vulnerable, and ignorant about their own history. This allows white people to keep exploiting Black people as low-wage laborers, while making it more difficult for them to organize and demand political rights. For instance, Woodson points out that Southern schools deliberately refuse to teach Black students about the Constitution, because if they did, then the students might realize that they're supposed to have protected civil rights. This shows that mis-education is a strategy for preserving the U.S. racial hierarchy. Similarly, by convincing

Black students that their capacities are limited, schools lead them to settle for stable but low-paying service jobs, rather than encouraging them to seek better positions or build businesses for themselves. When they do build businesses, Woodson reports, Black entrepreneurs struggle to expand them because they do not believe they can compete with white people. Again, by drilling the idea of racial hierarchy into students' heads, the school system gets Black students to grow complacent and give up on striving for social advancement.

The early 20th-century education system also stifles Black students' creativity and prevents them from succeeding on their own terms, because it teaches them from a white perspective. This explains why Woodson believes that educated Black elites are always one step behind in their business ventures: they don't learn to think critically or creatively, so instead of trying out new ideas, they copy what white people have already done. Meanwhile, those white people have already moved on to pursue new, more profitable innovations. As a result, the Black elite only enters a market once it's already stopped being profitable. Woodson blames this pattern on the school system, which fails to teach Black students critical thinking—the key skill for innovation and success in business. Moreover, the school system teaches Black students that white people are responsible for all important innovations throughout history, leading them to discount their own creative ideas. Still, these educated Black people become elites by virtue of their schooling, so Woodson argues that they instinctively defend the system that has given them this advantage. He calls this mindset a "slave psychology," in which the Black elite prefers to follow an oppressor's lead, rather than having to lead themselves. Surprisingly, some Black elites even advocate for racial segregation, which Woodson compares to drug addicts choosing a comforting short-term fix over their long-term health. As a result, the Black elite ends up reinforcing racial inequality, even though they're in the best position to fight it.

Woodson argues that the school system also prevents Black elites and the Black masses from cooperating, which is the key to winning political rights for the Black community. By encouraging Black elites to identify with white people, the school system makes them turn their backs on their own race. For instance, numerous wealthy Black people refuse to invest in Black businesses, which they consider untrustworthy—but Woodson argues that their lack of investment is actually what causes these businesses to fail. This clearly illustrates how the Black elite's disdain for working-class Black people actually hampers the entire community's progress. Similarly, Woodson explains, Black elites often grow cynical and give up on fighting for political change when they see other Black people around them fail to achieve their goals. Again, they are getting cause and effect backwards: by quitting, they ensure that they will not change the political system. The real problem is their lack of

faith in the Black masses—which originated in their mis-education.

From his perspective as a Black university administrator in the 1930s, Woodson sees mis-education as the single most powerful force maintaining segregation in the U.S. “When you control a man’s thinking,” he points out, “you do not have to worry about his actions.” Therefore, he views educational reform not only as a way to give Black students the critical thinking skills they deserve and the knowledge they need to succeed in life, but also as a crucial step in their long-term fight for equality and justice.



FAILURES OF BLACK LEADERSHIP

Although Carter G. Woodson focuses on the education system’s failures in *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, he points out that other institutions also

contribute to Black people’s subordinate status in the early 20th-century U.S. In particular, Woodson blames Black political and **church** leaders for deceiving Black communities and profiting at their expense, rather than truly representing and serving their political interests. By showing how these influential but selfish leaders have corrupted their positions of power, Woodson suggests that real social change generally stems from those who strive to serve their community, not those who merely claim to lead it.

Woodson argues that Black institutions—especially churches—are too self-interested and don’t use their power to fight for the interests of the race as a whole. Woodson emphasizes that churches are the most powerful organizations in most Black communities because they are generally the only institutions that Black people themselves control.

Furthermore, churches are often a hub for community activity: they support the social networks that can make Black schools and businesses successful. However, despite their influence, churches are also hotbeds for self-interested con artists. For instance, Woodson criticizes the way these churches endlessly divide into smaller and smaller denominations. Rather than a few churches that can meaningfully represent the community, Black communities end up with dozens of different churches, which all fight for power and influence. Selfish, dishonest men become ministers because they know they can easily gain people’s trust and profit off of their parishioners. Worse still, many churches refuse to cooperate because of irrelevant theological differences. For instance, Woodson notes how one town is evenly split between Methodists and Baptists. Since the two groups refuse to work together, the community can’t organize to demand political change. This illustrates why Woodson believes that religious and leadership divisions are holding the race back. Woodson goes on to argue that churches could easily overlook their differences, consolidate, and dedicate their resources to guiding the community and training new leaders. However, preachers aren’t interested, since they

are primarily interested in using their platform to make money, rather than to defend their communities’ interests.

Woodson thinks that Black professionals and political leaders follow the same dangerous pattern as churches: they know that division is more profitable than progress, so they hold people back instead of moving them forward. Like churches, Woodson argues, politicians and spokespeople are often “racial racketeer[s]” rather than true leaders. For instance, many spy on their communities, reporting subversive political activity to the white establishment in exchange for payment. Some Black politicians know they will get most Black people’s votes because they are the only Black candidate, so they sell those votes to national parties in exchange for federal contracts. Thus, rather than doing their jobs and fighting for political rights on behalf of their communities, these politicians view their constituents as pawns to buy and sell. Woodson contrasts this with the way Black people organized to stop slavery and fight the Back-to-Africa Movement—these examples show how Black people can actually mobilize to change the national policies that affect them. But Woodson contends that, in the decades between Reconstruction and the Great Depression, Black leaders grew complacent, and the working-class Black masses gave up on reining them in. Similarly, Woodson accuses Black professionals (like doctors, lawyers, and engineers) of extorting money from their communities instead of helping them. For instance, he notes that many educated Black elites become doctors in the hopes of striking it rich, then give their patients meaningless treatments in order to turn a profit. While such professionals get wealthier, the vast majority of Black people don’t benefit. As evidence that Black leaders have failed, Woodson cites the astonishing fact that the Black working class in Washington D.C. is just as poor in the 1920s and 1930s as it was in the 1880s.

Woodson concludes that Black institutions are not only failing to fulfill their duties to the community: rather, they are actively flouting these duties in order to make a profit. In order to further the struggle for political, social, and economic equality, he argues that people must seek to *serve* the Black community from within, not *lead* it from above. In other words, like the educators who seek to correct for the influence of a racist school system, the real agents of social change have to be part of the community they are improving, and they have to act for the sake of the community as a whole.



BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

In *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, Carter G. Woodson’s primary concern is how Black

Americans can overcome the barriers to their success—including the country’s ineffective education system—and advance as a community. Woodson defines this advancement as a movement toward economic self-sufficiency,

political equality, and artistic achievement. However, he sees economic development as by far the most important of these goals. In addition to helping Black people build more vibrant communities for themselves, he thinks economic development is also the best way for Black communities to support their political and artistic development in the long term. Thus, Woodson encourages young Black people to invest their creative energy into new enterprises because he views business as the most sustainable and rewarding way for Black Americans to fight segregation.

Woodson sees business as the primary definition of success—he thinks that it will allow Black people to become autonomous, build power, and improve their standing in American society. Most importantly, Woodson sees forming industries as a way for Black people to build political bargaining power. To illustrate this point, he quotes Frederick Douglass, who argued that Black people have to become a crucial part of the American economy if they wanted to have their political demands taken seriously. In other words, if they control certain industries, they can threaten to shut those industries down if their rights aren't respected. This is a powerful way for Black people to make their voices heard and fight segregation. Woodson also argues that Black-owned businesses provide greater opportunities and more stability for Black workers. This is because he thinks that, so long as they are working for white people, Black people will always be economically vulnerable. The early years of the Great Depression clearly illustrate this problem: Black workers were often the first to be laid off, since white employers valued them the least. Woodson sees this as a compelling reason for Black people to build their own industries, in which Black workers could work in better conditions. Finally, Woodson sees entrepreneurship as a way for Black people to thrive despite segregation. As the early 20th-century economy is divided along racial lines, Black people generally see no benefit from spending money in white-owned businesses but benefit greatly from contributing to Black-owned businesses. Thus, Woodson thinks that, by creating more Black-owned businesses and redirecting Black consumers' spending to those businesses, it will be possible to raise up the entire community from within.

Woodson argues that the best way to create these new industries is to invest in young Black people, whose creative energy he considers the best source of economic and social change. Woodson points out that young Black people have a choice about how to try to advance economically: they can work for someone else, or they can start their own businesses. He argues that they should choose to build their own businesses, because this gives them far more potential for growth. Whereas a better salary will only slightly improve their lives, starting small businesses can enable enterprising Black people to lift themselves out of poverty, mutually support one another, and improve their lives even in a racially segregated

society. For instance, he suggests that a young washerwoman should try to open a steam-powered laundry, turning her existing skills into a profitable company. While most Black graduates take low-paying jobs at large, white-owned companies, Woodson reiterates that if they create businesses instead, they will help their communities grow and see their opportunities increase over time. Woodson also connects his belief in self-motivated entrepreneurship to his faith in education. Namely, he views effective education as an investment in a student's individual skills and abilities, and he sees successful businesses as the result of such an investment. In other words, Woodson defines success as economic growth, and he sees education as the key to that growth.

In Woodson's estimation, Black Americans were not able to fulfill their potential for centuries because they were shut out of the economy and the school system. But in the early 20th century, Woodson finally sees this possibility on the horizon. In other words, because Black entrepreneurs can participate in a free market for the first time—even if it is an embattled, segregated one—they finally have the chance to unleash their underutilized skills and creative energy. They can develop their neighborhoods, build a self-sufficient economy in the Black community, and contribute monumentally to the United States' success as a whole. But Woodson sees educational reforms as a key first step in making these possibilities into realities.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE BLACK CHURCH

For Carter G. Woodson, the Black church represents Black Americans' potential to organize and uplift their communities from within. But the Black church also demonstrates how exploitative Black elites, the mis-education system, and white institutions' influence have combined to prevent that potential from being realized.

Woodson argues that churches are uniquely positioned to drive political, economic, and social organization in Black communities. First, they're the only institutions that Black people in the 1930s (when Woodson was writing) wholly control, and secondly, they provide a social space for the Black community to physically assemble and coordinate. Unsurprisingly, numerous businesses and political organizations have emerged out of social networks formed at church. Moreover, the church is a model for how the Black community can work together to form institutions. Woodson argues that, by pooling resources at church, the Black community can form and support other institutions (like better schools and Black-owned businesses).

However, in the early 20th century, the church isn't actually fulfilling its potential. Instead of helping Black people pool their resources, form a self-sustaining economy, and build wealth, Black churches have largely divided and preyed on their constituencies. First, they've divided the community by fragmenting into smaller sects and denominations. For instance, Woodson notes that one town is divided between Methodists and Baptists, who refuse to work together and pursue the Black community's shared political goals. Meanwhile, many churches have fallen into the hands of scam artists and charlatans who try to profit by extracting resources from the community, rather than channeling resources into it. Thus, the church simultaneously represents Black communities' potential to achieve self-sufficiency and their failure to do so.




QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Africa World Press edition of *The Mis-Education of the Negro* published in 2006.

Preface Quotes

●● It is merely a matter of exercising common sense in approaching people through their environment in order to deal with conditions as they are rather than as you would like to see them or imagine that they are. There may be a difference in method of attack, but the principle remains the same. "Highly educated" Negroes denounce persons who advocate for the Negro a sort of education different in some respects from that now given the white man. Negroes who have been so long inconvenienced and denied opportunities for development are naturally afraid of anything that sounds like discrimination. They are anxious to have everything the white man has even if it is harmful.

Related Characters: Carter G. Woodson (speaker), The "Highly Educated" Black Elite

Related Themes: 

Page Number: xi

Explanation and Analysis

In his preface to *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, Carter G. Woodson lays out the basic theory of education that motivates him to call for reform in the U.S. school system. He distinguishes between two different visions of how education works: on the one hand, most educators think of their job as passing on information and shaping young

people into better adults and citizens. On the other hand, Woodson thinks that educators have to start by connecting to students themselves, rather than imposing a preconceived notion of what they ought to learn or become. Accordingly, he argues that effectively educating *any* student, regardless of race, requires first understanding that student's actual life conditions, speaking to their experience, and identifying and developing their specific skills.

Thus, Woodson considers empathy and understanding as the most important resources for educators to succeed, and not just information and money. Of course, the U.S. school system fails Black American students because its educators lack all of those things. While Woodson repeatedly emphasizes that there are no inherent differences between Black and white children's intelligence, ability, or potential, he also points out that there *are* severe differences between their life circumstances, and this means that educators have to take specific steps to cater to Black students' needs.

However, Woodson also recognizes that, for most Black people, getting treated *differently* from white people has almost always meant getting treated *worse*. As a result, he's sensitive to Black elites' concern that teachers who adapt lessons to Black students' needs will actually do a poorer job of educating them. But Woodson thinks that this is similar to how teachers give struggling students extra help and advanced students greater challenges: in the 1930s, providing *equal* opportunities to white and Black students actually requires giving them different, personalized educations.

●● The so-called modern education, with all its defects, however, does others so much more good than it does the Negro, because it has been worked out in conformity to the needs of those who have enslaved and oppressed weaker peoples. For example, the philosophy and ethics resulting from our educational system have justified slavery, peonage, segregation, and lynching. The oppressor has the right to exploit, to handicap, and to kill the oppressed. Negroes daily educated in the tenets of such a religion of the strong have accepted the status of the weak as divinely ordained, and during the last three generations of their nominal freedom they have done practically nothing to change it. Their pouting and resolutions indulged in by a few of the race have been of little avail.

Related Characters: Carter G. Woodson (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: xii-xiii

Explanation and Analysis



After arguing that education ought to connect with students' specific needs, skills, and life circumstances, Woodson explains why the conventional school curriculum in the U.S. fails to meet Black students' specific needs. He argues that this curriculum is based on "the needs of those [white people] who have enslaved and oppressed weaker peoples." For instance, white students in the Antebellum (pre-Civil War) South were taught to defend slavery, and white students on the western frontier learned that their cultures were superior to indigenous cultures, which meant they had a right to take over indigenous land. Thus, white people have adapted the U.S. school system to celebrate their history, pass on their culture, and promote their goals.

Woodson clearly thinks that these lessons are immoral in and of themselves, but he's primarily concerned with their effect on Black students. Because Black schools were largely founded by imitating white schools, they teach the same biased curriculum. While this curriculum might support white students' values and goals, Woodson argues, it teaches Black students to hate themselves and accept their subordinate position in U.S. society. In other words, the U.S. school system is quite literally a propaganda machine, designed to teach oppressed groups that their oppression is justified and inevitable. Instead, Woodson thinks that schools ought to develop and uplift their students, which specifically means that they should teach Black students a curriculum that promotes their social and economic advancement, collective self-understanding, and sense of pride in their identity.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☛ When a Negro has finished his education in our schools, then, he has been equipped to begin the life of an Americanized or Europeanized white man, but before he steps from the threshold of his alma mater he is told by his teachers that he must go back to his own people from whom he has been estranged by a vision of ideals which in his disillusionment he will realize that he cannot attain. He goes forth to play his part in life, but he must be both social and bisocial at the same time. While he is a part of the body politic, he is in addition to this a member of a particular race to which he must restrict himself in all matters social. While serving his country he must serve within a special group. While being a good American, he must above all things be a "good Negro"; and to perform this definite function he must learn to stay in a "Negro's place."

Related Characters: Carter G. Woodson (speaker), The "Highly Educated" Black Elite

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 5-6

Explanation and Analysis


In the first chapter, Woodson assesses what the early 20th-century U.S. school system does to the minority of Black people who actually succeed in it. While these elites like to think of themselves as "highly educated," in reality, they're *mis-educated*. This is because the school system isn't designed for Black students: it's designed to teach white Americans about their history, culture, and society. This is why Woodson argues that the school system "equip[s] students] to begin the life of an Americanized or Europeanized white man." It teaches about white Americans' history and achievements, while passing on skills relevant to navigate the formal economy. But Black students don't learn about their own history or figure out how to navigate the segregated, highly unequal economy that white supremacist policies have imposed on them.

Woodson argues that this mismatch between the school system's values and Black students' needs makes "highly educated" Black people "estranged [from their own people] by a vision of ideals which in his disillusionment he will realize that he cannot attain." In other words, education gives Black people dreams that racism will prevent them from fulfilling. They don't learn to cope with the limits that racism places on their ambitions, so they inevitably become confused and disillusioned when they hit this limit. While their education has taught them to view themselves as citizens (or "a part of the body politic"), society teaches them that their entire life has to be restricted because they're "a member of a particular race." They strive to be taken seriously as Americans, but they never are because of their race. Ultimately, Woodson thinks that far too many "highly educated" Black elites either blame racism for their failures and stop trying, or they blame other Black people for holding them back and turn against their own community.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☛ These earnest workers, however, had more enthusiasm than knowledge. They did not understand the task before them. This undertaking, too, was more of an effort toward social uplift than actual education. Their aim was to transform the Negroes, not to develop them.

Related Characters: Carter G. Woodson (speaker), The “Highly Educated” Black Elite

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 17



Explanation and Analysis

After explaining how U.S. schools mis-educate the Black elite by teaching them the same biased curriculum as white students, Woodson examines why and how this became the norm. He points out that missionary leaders and educators led the first push for public education for Black students after the American Civil War. But he argues that, despite their best intentions, these “earnest workers” ultimately put in place a deficient curriculum, because they thought that Black people needed to imitate white people in order to be successful.

Woodson uses these early leaders’ failure to build an effective school system as a basis for distinguishing two competing visions of how education works: transformation versus development. On the one hand, education can mean *transforming* students into a certain kind of adult. This means ensuring that they learn a specific set of information, hard skills, and habits that will help them succeed later on in life. On the other hand, education can also mean helping *develop* students as individuals, learners, and citizens. In this second approach, educators seek to identify and develop their students’ specific talents, interests, and abilities. For Woodson, truly helping students—and truly uplifting the Black community in the long term—requires this second approach to education. This approach starts with listening, empathy, and understanding, rather than the first approach’s one-size-fits-all curriculum.

With “mis-educated Negroes” in control themselves, however, it is doubtful that the system would be very much different from what it is or that it would rapidly undergo change. The Negroes thus placed in charge would be the products of the same system and would show no more conception of the task at hand than do the whites who have educated them and shaped their minds as they would have them function. Negro educators of today may have more sympathy and interest in the race than the whites now exploiting Negro institutions as educators, but the former have no more vision than their competitors. Taught from books of the same bias, trained by Caucasians of the same prejudices or by Negroes of enslaved minds, one generation of Negro teachers after another have served for no higher purpose than to do what they are told to do. In other words, a Negro teacher instructing Negro children is in many respects a white teacher thus engaged, for the program in each case is about the same.

Related Characters: Carter G. Woodson (speaker), The “Highly Educated” Black Elite

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

Woodson argues that the Black community has to take control of its own school systems in order to effectively educate its youth, but he also admits that he doesn’t have much faith in the Black elite’s ability to properly administer these schools. In short, despite their best intentions, mis-educated elites are likely to build a mis-education system. Instead of simply hiring more Black teachers and administrators, then, the school system needs to transform in more radical, structural ways. Specifically, the curriculum needs to change. The school system needs to eliminate “books of the same bias” and replace them with new, fairer, and more diverse history books. The curriculum also needs to shift toward an emphasis on originality and critical thinking skills, so that teachers don’t just “do what they are told to do.” (Woodson doesn’t just think that critical thinking is the essential skill for success in life: he also thinks that it’s the key skill for success as an educator.)

While this argument might seem overly cynical, it actually has an optimistic silver lining. Woodson is pointing out how the school system reproduces certain cultural values, or how education shapes educators; in plainer language, he’s saying that the school system produces the teachers that go on to run that system. Therefore, while it might be very difficult to transform the school system, doing so can create powerful ripple effects throughout society.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☝☝ Real education means to inspire people to live more abundantly, to learn to begin with life as they find it and make it better, but the instruction so far given Negroes in colleges and universities has worked to the contrary.

Related Characters: Carter G. Woodson (speaker), The “Highly Educated” Black Elite

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis



Woodson believes in replacing mis-education with “real education”—or knowledge with critical thinking skills—because he believes that critical thinking is the key to both collective advancement and individual happiness. Whereas traditional education systems teach all students a body of valuable knowledge and skills, they don’t give students the context, confidence, or connections that they need to meaningfully apply what they learn. Therefore, even the best traditional schools create rigid, uninspired thinkers whose expertise quickly becomes outdated.

In contrast, Woodson thinks a real education gives people the skills “to begin with life as they find it and make it better,” which eventually helps them “live more abundantly,” regardless of their life circumstances. It teaches students to analyze situations and make better decisions, which is useful in virtually any situation. Therefore, regardless of how “they find [life],” critical thinkers can figure out how to “make it better,” which allows them to “live more abundantly” than people who lack such critical thinking skills. Woodson thinks that this applies to individuals as much as groups, which is why he thinks that true education is the key to both individual advancement and improving the Black community’s position as a whole.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☝☝ The so-called education of Negro college graduates leads them to throw away opportunities which they have and to go in quest of those which they do not find.

Related Characters: Carter G. Woodson (speaker), The “Highly Educated” Black Elite

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis



In the fifth chapter, Woodson argues that Black colleges, both academic and technical, fail to prepare their students for the real world. Specifically, he argues that they teach students to view the world theoretically, not advance practically within it. For instance, business schools only teach students how to manage a company—and while this knowledge is important, it gives students the misleading expectation that they will actually manage companies in the real world. Therefore, Woodson thinks, too many Black business school graduates refuse to take jobs that don’t involve managing a company, and they find themselves with no job at all.


Woodson doesn’t believe that colleges should focus entirely on practical business knowledge, but rather that they have to teach all students critical thinking skills and offer each student the specific practical knowledge that’s relevant to their particular situation. Students interested in fashion should be able to learn about textiles, washerwomen should be able to learn about new technology, and a fruit-seller should be able to learn about botany and supply-chain management. Instead, however, Black colleges apply a one-size-fits-all model that actually doesn’t fulfill *any* of their students’ needs.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☝☝ Some one recently inquired as to why the religious schools do not teach the people how to tolerate differences of opinion and to cooperate for the common good. This, however, is the thing which these institutions have refused to do. Religious schools have been established, but they are considered necessary to supply workers for denominational outposts and to keep alive the sectarian bias by which the Baptists hope to outstrip the Methodists or the latter the former. No teacher in one of these schools has advanced a single thought which has become a working principle in Christendom, and not one of these centres is worthy of the name of a school of theology.

Related Characters: Carter G. Woodson (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

Woodson reserves some of his strongest criticism for Black



churches and theology schools. Although he believes that they are important pillars of the Black community, he thinks they have largely neglected their responsibility to it.


Therefore, he argues that they have to be reformed if the community is going to advance. Like the Black elite as a whole, churches and theology schools are more interested in personal enrichment than collective advancement. They fight for attention and loyalty rather than working together to help the community achieve its political goals.

However, Woodson also clearly thinks that Christian education can be a powerful force for good, if it channels religious principles to promote cooperation and tolerance. He argues that “No teacher in one of these schools has advanced a single thought which has become a working principle in Christendom.” In other words, religious schools merely circulate the same ideas and maintain “sectarian bias” rather than innovating the field of theology. Therefore, he thinks that reforming religious schools’ curricula is as urgent a priority as reforming curricula in other schools and universities.

☞ This minister had given no attention to the religious background of the Negroes to whom he was trying to preach. He knew nothing of their spiritual endowment and their religious experience as influenced by their traditions and environment in which the religion of the Negro has developed and expressed itself. He did not seem to know anything about their present situation. These honest people, therefore, knew nothing additional when he had finished his discourse. As one communicant pointed out, their wants had not been supplied, and they wondered where they might go to hear a word which had some bearing upon the life which they had to live.

Related Characters: Carter G. Woodson (speaker), The Black Masses, The “Highly Educated” Black Elite

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

Woodson uses this example to illustrate how religious schools actually make Black preachers into *less* effective community leaders. This preacher recites sermons that he learned in theology school, but he doesn’t actually make an effort to understand or connect with his congregation. In other words, just like ineffective teachers, he imposes a


one-size-fits-all solution on his audience.

Instead of simply carrying out the predetermined role they’ve been trained to fulfill, Woodson argues, preachers should view their jobs as an opportunity to connect with their congregation’s specific experiences and influence them for the better. At the end of the day, in order to succeed, they have to prioritize and invest in the specific communities they serve. Again, Woodson returns to the principle that Black leaders are only worthy of their positions if they put the collective good before their own interests and serve people based on a sense of genuine empathy and moral concern.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☞ If you can control a man’s thinking you do not have to worry about his action. When you determine what a man shall think you do not have to concern yourself about what he will do. If you make a man feel that he is inferior, you do not have to compel him to accept an inferior status, for he will seek it himself. If you make a man think that he is justly an outcast, you do not have to order him to the back door. He will go without being told; and if there is no back door, his very nature will demand one.

Related Characters: Carter G. Woodson (speaker), The “Highly Educated” Black Elite

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis



Mis-education isn’t just a missed opportunity for Black people: it also actively harms them, leaving them worse off than before. In Woodson’s eyes, the mis-education system is a propaganda tool designed to control Black Americans by keeping them in a state of relative deprivation and limitation. It’s a way for the white establishment to control their thinking, in order to prevent them from taking political actions that would disrupt the racial balance of power in the U.S. In short, Black people don’t organize to demand freedom and equality in large part because they’re taught from childhood that they don’t deserve that freedom or equality.

This is why Woodson hopes to build a new curriculum that inspires confidence and pride in Black students. By believing in themselves, he thinks, students can recognize that they deserve the same political rights and privileges as white

people (and then organize to secure those rights and privileges). Because education so powerfully shapes people's identities, transforming the school system is an excellent way to help the Black community band together and become an influential political force in the U.S.

●● These rewriters of history fearlessly contended that slavery was a benevolent institution; the masters loved their slaves and treated them humanely; the abolitionists meddled with the institution which the masters eventually would have modified; the Civil War brought about by "fanatics" like William Lloyd Garrison and John Brown was unnecessary; it was a mistake to make the Negro a citizen, for he merely became worse off by incurring the displeasure of the master class that will never tolerate him as an equal; and the Negro must live in this country in a state of recognized inferiority.

Related Characters: Carter G. Woodson (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 85-6



Explanation and Analysis

When Woodson compares mis-education to a system of political control, this isn't just a metaphor: he literally means that white supremacist scholars have designed the curriculum to manipulate students and mislead the American public. In this passage, he offers a list of just a few of the distortions that dishonest historians have introduced into the curriculum in order to justify historical crimes against Black Americans. The cumulative effect of these distortions is clear: they're designed to make Black students accept (or not resist) the racial segregation, political disenfranchisement, and relative poverty that their community faces.

By teaching that slavery was benevolent and humane, schools minimize Black Americans' collective trauma and hide the direct link between slavery and their poverty under Jim Crow (legalized segregation). Moreover, segregation starts to look like just another stage in white people's benevolence toward Black people. Anyone truly educated in American history would see right through these lies, but the Black students who learn them in American schools never hear any other story about their community's past. Accordingly, mis-education is remarkably effective at crushing their aspirations to equality and sense of justice.

●● The elimination of the Negro from politics, then, has been most unfortunate. The whites may have profited thereby temporarily, but they showed very little foresight. How the whites can expect to make of the Negroes better citizens by leading them to think that they should have no part in the government of this country is a mystery. To keep a man above vagabondage and crime he needs among other things the stimulus of patriotism, but how can a man be patriotic when the effect of his education is to the contrary?

Related Characters: Carter G. Woodson (speaker), The Black Masses

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

From the end of Reconstruction in the 1870s until the 1930s, when Woodson wrote *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, Black people had virtually no national-level political power in the United States. Needless to say, this situation did a profound disservice to Black Americans because it deprived them of the representation that they needed to advance their own interests.

However, that's not quite what Woodson is saying here. Instead, he's arguing that, *in addition to* specifically harming Black people, this lack of representation also harms the nation as a whole. It means that the United States isn't fulfilling its promise as a true democracy, and it isn't helping a significant portion of its population become responsible, respectable citizens.


In other words, by refusing to let Black people wield political power and advance socially and economically, the U.S. establishment actually threatens the entire country's progress. It wastes an entire group of people's innate talent and potential. Moreover, it sows division and discord in the long term. Of course, Woodson also knows how to persuade white people: he speaks to their deep racist fears of crime and insurrection when he suggests that Black people might turn to "vagabondage" if they don't find legal means to advance in society through education.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☛☛ At this moment, then, the Negroes must begin to do the very thing which they have been taught that they cannot do. They still have some money, and they have needs to supply. They must begin immediately to pool their earnings and organize industries to participate in supplying social and economic demands. [...]

The lack of confidence of the Negro in himself and in his possibilities is what has kept him down. His mis-education has been a perfect success in this respect.

Related Characters: Carter G. Woodson (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 108-9

Explanation and Analysis

Woodson sees economic development as the best strategy for Black people to overcome the disadvantages they face in the Jim Crow era (a time when racial segregation was legalized), and he argues that the key to this development is the race's confidence in itself. Confidence isn't just a recipe for better political consciousness and self-understanding: it's actually the foundation of the economy, because it's what attracts investors to fund a particular project or company. Just like people's collective confidence in the value of money (or the gold standard behind it) supports its use as a medium of exchange, their confidence in Black-owned businesses' value and growth potential actually determines whether those businesses will get a chance to grow and succeed in the first place. In other words, Woodson thinks that if Black people want to grow their community's economic footprint, they must be willing to bet their money on that community—and the more people that do so, the more their bet will pay off.

Amid racial segregation in the 1930s, economic growth is absolutely crucial because it's the only way for the Black community to build up power and resources. As Woodson repeatedly points out throughout his book, the national political system doesn't look out for Black people because they receive no representation in it. Meanwhile, most of what they purchase flows out of their community because it benefits white-owned corporations that don't spread their profits across the racial divide. Accordingly, Woodson suggests that Black people should build economic influence where they have little political influence. At the same time, he argues that Black people benefit when they spend at Black-owned businesses, because these businesses reinvest their profits in the community. By combining these two principles, he concludes that the Black community ought to

build economic and political power by investing in and spending at innovative Black businesses.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☛☛ The ambitious of this class do more to keep the race in a state of turmoil and to prevent it from serious community effort than all the other elements combined. The one has a job that the other wants; or the one is a leader of a successful faction, and the other is struggling to supplant him. Everything in the community, then, must yield ground to this puerile contest.

Related Characters: Carter G. Woodson (speaker), The "Highly Educated" Black Elite

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

Woodson primarily blames educated elites for the Black community's political divisions (even if he ultimately blames their errors on their mis-education). He argues that these elites have simply given up on the collective good. Instead of serving the community, they fight pointlessly and endlessly among themselves, hoping to grab slightly more money or power than their neighbor. Because of this individualistic competition, the community doesn't band together or organize its resources. In turn, because it doesn't work together, the community doesn't increase its overall prosperity, access to capital, and level of opportunity.

In short, Woodson thinks that Black elites are foolishly fighting over a few scarce opportunities, when they could just as easily choose to cooperate and expand the pool of opportunities. Because they've internalized the individualistic ethic they learned in the mis-education system, they don't value any successes or achievements that they have to share with others. But Woodson argues that, through an improved education, Black youth can learn to view their individual successes as bound up with their whole community's fate. In turn, he hopes that future generations will again learn to value success for the sake of the race as a whole, and not just so that they can out-earn their neighbors.

●● The Negroes, however, will not advance far if they continue to waste their energy abusing those who misdirect and exploit them. The exploiters of the race are not so much at fault as the race itself. If Negroes persist in permitting themselves to be handled in this fashion they will always find some one at hand to impose upon them. The matter is one which rests largely with the Negroes themselves. The race will free itself from exploiters just as soon as it decides to do so. No one else can accomplish this task for the race. It must plan and do for itself.

Related Characters: Carter G. Woodson (speaker), The Black Masses, The “Highly Educated” Black Elite

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis


Woodson strongly criticizes Black people for fighting one another rather than fighting racial oppression and segregation. While he largely blames the elite (or “the exploiters of the race”) for this tendency, he also warns the masses against repeating this pattern when dealing with that elite. They have to remember that they’re battling racism, exploitation, and segregation—but *not* necessarily the people who impose those injustices on them. Instead of fighting the elite’s poor leadership, they should simply become better leaders. Indeed, rather than talking about what true service looks like, they should show it through their actions. (This is precisely Woodson’s goal with this book and his lifelong investment in the discipline of Black history.)

In turn, just like the elite ought to lead the masses rather than divide them, those seeking to improve the elite (like Woodson) ought to win them over rather than defeating and alienating them. Yet again, Woodson returns to the same basic principle: Black people should view their individual success in the context of Black Americans’ collective effort for social and economic advancement, and they should always choose collaboration over conflict.

●● The race needs workers, not leaders. Such workers will solve the problems which race leaders talk about and raise money to enable them to talk more and more about. [...] If we can finally succeed in translating the idea of leadership into that of service, we may soon find it possible to lift the Negro to a higher level.

Related Characters: Carter G. Woodson (speaker), The

“Highly Educated” Black Elite

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 118-9

Explanation and Analysis



Just like he presents two opposing concepts of education in order to explain his vision of a more effective school system, Woodson presents two opposing concepts—leadership and service—to explain how Black people should invest in their community’s future. Like traditional education, leadership is top-down, based on the idea that leaders already know what is best for the community and ought to set an agenda for others to follow. But like true education, service is about what one can do to fulfill others’ needs, desires, and interests.

As Woodson puts it here, leadership involves people telling others what to do, often for a substantial fee, while service involves actually doing things for others out of genuine moral concern. To serve others, one must approach them with understanding, empathy, and a selfless commitment to the common good. In this way, serving others is actually far more challenging than leading them, but it’s also far more important for the Black community’s success in the long term.

Chapter 13 Quotes

●● If the Negro is to be elevated he must be educated in the sense of being developed from what he is, and the public must be so enlightened as to think of the Negro as a man. Furthermore, no one can be thoroughly educated until he learns as much about the Negro as he knows about other people.

Related Characters: Carter G. Woodson (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 136

Explanation and Analysis

While Woodson primarily focuses on reforming education for Black students and building more effective leaders in the Black community, here he also argues that *white* students need to learn a new curriculum in order for the fight for racial justice to succeed. Namely, “the [white] public” needs to receive an education that teaches them “to think of the Negro as a man.” The school curriculum teaches Black



students to think of themselves as racially inferior to white people, but of course, this curriculum was originally developed for white students. It was designed to make white students believe in their racial superiority, and therefore their race's right to control disproportionate money, power, and resources when compared with other groups.

Therefore, mis-education maintains segregation and racial inequities on both sides of the equation: it turns white people into racists and convinces Black people to accept racial hierarchies. On the other hand, this also means that changing the curriculum can fight racism in white schools as well as in Black schools. So, Woodson argues that it's essential for Black students to learn about Black history, art, and culture so that they can value themselves and their communities, but he also thinks that it's essential for *white* students to learn about Black life. By learning that Black people have made important historical and artistic achievements, white students can learn to recognize different races' shared humanity—and possibly even their fundamental equality.

☛ Why should the Negro writer seek a theme abroad when he has the greatest of all at home?

The bondage of the Negro brought captive from Africa is one of the greatest dramas in history, and the writer who merely sees in that ordeal something to approve or condemn fails to understand the evolution of the human race.

Related Characters: Carter G. Woodson (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

Black history isn't just worth studying because of its power to enlighten and inspire Black students: it's also an extremely important, rich, and underexplored area of scholarly research in its own right. While Black writers often believe that they have to write other people's stories in order to be taken seriously by the white public, Woodson argues that they should instead confront this public's prejudice and show them that Black people's stories are just as powerful and universal as any other group's.



Specifically, Woodson presents stories of slavery and the Middle Passage as great historical dramas. He suggests that Black artists, writers, and scholars can interpret this history in a way that affirmatively redefines Black American

identity. In turn, by showing the value in these stories, these artists, writers, and scholars can underline the heritage that all Black Americans share. They can also connect this traumatic history to the universal human struggle for freedom, purpose, and belonging. While this sense of shared heritage could convince young Black people to dedicate themselves to uplifting the race, the universal aspects of this story would also make a strong argument about racial equality for people of all races to hear.

Chapter 14 Quotes

☛ Can you expect teachers to revolutionize the social order for the good of the community? Indeed we must expect this very thing. The educational system of a country is worthless unless it accomplishes this task. Men of scholarship and consequently of prophetic insight must show us the right way and lead us into the light which shines brighter and brighter.

Related Characters: Carter G. Woodson (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 145

Explanation and Analysis



Although Woodson has made this argument in various forms throughout his entire book, in this passage, he clearly states that the education system's job is to promote the common good. In turn, this means that teachers have an obligation to fight injustice and become ethical role models to their students. They aren't just working for the students in their classroom or the principals and university administrators who hire them: rather, they are public servants responsible for the wellbeing of society as a whole. Arguably, for Woodson, teachers represent society's moral conscience, and the common school curriculum represents society's self-image. In the 1930s, this self-image is severely distorted by racism, and it's educators' responsibility to correct it by teaching the truth.

This view of teachers' moral responsibility provides Woodson's answer to a difficult question that hangs over him throughout the book. Namely, he argues that the mis-education system perpetuates itself by training ineffective educators and then giving them power over schools. So, how is it possible to change this system? Who will have both the power and the ability to improve it? Here, Woodson suggests that the answer is people "of scholarship and consequently of prophetic insight." New scholarly work will enable teachers to better educate their communities. Clear,

some (but not all) teachers are drawn to the profession because of its social responsibility to the community, and these select educators will push to reform the school system if they can get the resources they need to do so.

☞ We should not close any accredited Negro colleges or universities, but we should reconstruct the whole system. We should not eliminate many of the courses now being offered, but we should secure men of vision to give them from the point of view of the people to be served. We should not spend less money for the higher education of the Negro, but should redefine higher education as preparation to think and work out a program to serve the lowly rather than to live as an aristocrat.

Related Characters: Carter G. Woodson (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 149


Explanation and Analysis

Although Woodson proposes sweeping reforms to the U.S. school and university systems, he is careful to explain that he doesn't want existing institutions to be torn down or abandoned. Instead, he wants to build on them to create better institutions. Even at predominantly Black institutions that teach from a biased perspective and don't connect with their students' lives, the primary issue isn't what the schools are doing: it's what they're leaving out. For instance, the problem isn't that historically Black colleges and universities *do* teach students about European history and culture in the 1930s: it's that they *don't* teach students about non-European history or culture. So, Woodson doesn't want to replace the existing courses: he wants to supplement them.

Similarly, while Woodson believes in founding some new institutions in order to keep the Black community autonomous from governments' and segregationists' control, he also thinks that simply founding new colleges would likely distract from the problem with U.S. education rather than solving it. Since he's largely interested in how Black Americans can organize and direct their energy toward shared political projects in the long term, he thinks that reforming and improving existing institutions is a much better way to proceed than abandoning them and starting over from scratch.

☞ To educate the Negro we must find out exactly what his background is, what he is today, what his possibilities are, and how to begin with him as he is and make him a better individual of the kind that he is. Instead of cramming the Negro's mind with what others have shown that they can do, we should develop his latent powers that he may perform in society a part of which others are not capable.

Related Characters: Carter G. Woodson (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 151

Explanation and Analysis

Woodson adamantly believes that effective education has to develop students' specific talents and abilities. Based on this idea, he outlines a vision of how a suitable curriculum for Black university students would be structured. It can't simply be based on learning about "what others [Europeans and white Americans] have shown that they can do." Instead, Black people ought to also study African literature, folklore, and philosophy. They should investigate African culture's influence on Black American culture, and they should learn economics with a specific eye to building successful businesses and enriching their community within the 20th-century U.S.'s segregated economy.

In other words, Black scholars need to develop a new curriculum that teaches Black students about their potential and how to realize it. But of course, in order to teach students about Black history, culture, and thought, educators first have to understand these topics. This means that scholars need to conduct in-depth research into all these areas. Moreover, pioneering investigators like Woodson need to establish disciplines like Black American history as legitimate fields of scholarly research.

Therefore, Woodson's three jobs are really all part of the same project. He's an educator because he cares about the future of the Black American community. He's a historian because he knows that effectively educating Black youth requires better understanding Black history. And he runs the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History because he knows that he needs to win broader credibility for Black history as a discipline in order for his mission to spread throughout the nation and continue growing once he's gone.

Chapter 15 Quotes

☞ Right in the heart of the highly educated Negro section of Washington, too, is a restaurant catering through the front door exclusively to the white business men, who must live in the Negroes' section to supply them with the necessities of life, and catering at the same time through the back door to numbers of Negroes who pile into that dingy room to purchase whatever may be thrown at them. Yet less than two blocks away are several Negroes running cafés where they can be served for the same amount and under desirable circumstances. Negroes who do this, we say, do not have the proper attitude toward life and its problems, and for that reason we do not take up time with them. They do not belong to our community. The traducers of the race, however, are guiding these people the wrong way. Why do not the "educated" Negroes change their course by identifying themselves with the masses?

Related Characters: Carter G. Woodson (speaker), The Black Masses, The "Highly Educated" Black Elite

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

In *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, Carter G. Woodson is frustrated by the divisions between the Black elites and the Black masses, who seem to put aside their common political goals precisely when they ought to be pursuing them. Woodson generally blames these divisions on elite Black people's mis-education, which he argues makes them look down on the masses.

This example illustrates why Woodson considers the elites' mindset absurd and self-undermining: the elites actually prefer being second-class citizens in a white establishment to dining in a Black establishment. Woodson has blamed this kind of behavior on "slave psychology"—the elites prefer to be subordinate to white people, as long as they remain superior to other Black people in the social hierarchy. They have completely internalized the racist message that white people are superior to Black people, so they end up choosing to live, work, and eat in objectively worse conditions in order to stay close to whiteness.

Through true education, Woodson repeatedly emphasizes, the elites can learn to value their own community, rather than the white community that they'll never be able to join. He thinks this is the only thing that will enable the elites to "change their course by identifying themselves with the masses."

Chapter 17 Quotes

☞ The race cannot hope to solve any serious problem by the changing fortunes of politics. Real politics, the science of government, is deeply rooted in the economic foundation of the social order. To figure greatly in politics the Negro must be a great figure in politics. A class of people slightly lifted above poverty, therefore, can never have much influence in political circles. The Negro must develop character and worth to make him a desirable everywhere so that he will not have to knock at the doors of political parties but will have them thrown open to him.

Related Characters: Carter G. Woodson (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis



Woodson has already distinguished two versions of education (transforming students from the top down versus developing them from the bottom up) and two approaches to working for the community (leadership versus service). Here, he also distinguishes between two opposite approaches to politics, which are also about building power from the top down versus the bottom up.

Because corrupt Black elites and national parties control Black people's formal political power in the U.S., Woodson argues, the Black community instead needs to build political power from the bottom up. Building this power requires grassroots organizing, so that Black voters become "desirable everywhere," and national politicians want to court them. But more fundamentally, Woodson argues, this power first requires economic development, which will give Black people the material influence and leverage they need to become "a great figure in politics." They will have much greater political leverage if they provide essential economic services to the rest of the nation, if they can shut down workplaces or whole industries, or if their purchasing power as consumers can sway the entire economy.

This view helps explain why Woodson puts so much emphasis on economic development, even to the point of portraying it as the primary result of an effective education. Namely, since Black people don't have access to conventional political power, economic power represents their best shot at influencing policy and achieving equality.

☛ In the failure to see this and the advocacy of the destruction of the whole economic order to right social wrong we see again the tendency of the Negro to look to some force from without to do for him what he must learn to do for himself. The Negro needs to become radical, and the race will never amount to anything until it does become so, but this radicalism should come from within. The Negro will be very foolish to resort to extreme measures in behalf of foreign movements before he learns to suffer and die to right his own wrongs. There is no movement in the world working especially for the Negro. He must learn to do this for himself or be exterminated just as the American Indian has faced his doom in the setting sun.

Related Characters: Carter G. Woodson (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 188

Explanation and Analysis

In the second-to-last chapter, Woodson surveys Black people's chances of achieving racial equality through social change. In the process, he has to address one of the most important questions that is on every scholar's mind during the 1930s: capitalism or communism? Although many of his peers disagree with him, Woodson strongly defends traditional American-style capitalism, which he views as the best promotor of economic growth and Black Americans' best chance at improving their own condition. In a nutshell, he thinks that communists "look for some force from without" to help them "do what [they] must learn to do for [themselves]"—work hard, build businesses, and achieve a high standard of living.

Putting aside the fact that a socialist revolution is incredibly unlikely in the U.S., Woodson thinks that true social change for the Black community has to start from within the community, with dedicated activists, educators, and businesspeople working to improve things. Woodson knows that Black people face problems they didn't create (like racism, segregation, and inequality). But he insists that they are ultimately responsible for overcoming those problems, whether they like it or not.

Throughout the book, Woodson has identified Black people's lack of self-understanding, community-oriented goals, and business and critical thinking skills as the key barriers to their success. These problems' main cause, mis-education, is external to the Black community. But Woodson thinks that the problems themselves are internal to the community, and so are their solutions: developing individual skills and building a collective knowledge base.

Therefore, he believes that his community has to organize itself and take action to improve its circumstances, not just wait for justice and equality to arrive in the form of a revolution.

Chapter 18 Quotes

☛ The Negro can be made proud of his past only by approaching it scientifically himself and giving his own story to the world. What others have written about the Negro during the last three centuries has been mainly for the purpose of bringing him where he is today and holding him there.

Related Characters: Carter G. Woodson (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, Woodson returns to the important link between improving the school system and expanding scholarly research into Black life and history. This also helps him justify his own work as a historian and the founder of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. In fact, all the parts of his argument fit together and provide a coherent theory of the relationship between scholarship, education, and social change. In a way, this can be seen as Woodson's personal mission statement.

First, Woodson thinks that the Black community needs to advance economically, politically, and socially. To do so, it must first develop its critical thinking skills and learn to believe in its own potential. These goals require Black educators to take charge of Black schools and teach a curriculum that affirms their students' identity rather than denigrating it. But developing this kind of positive curriculum first requires understanding Black people and their histories and cultures.

Therefore, Black historians first need to conduct scientific research in order to develop more accurate, positive, and inspiring stories about their peoples' history. As Woodson notes here, histories of Black life written by white scholars are usually designed to justify oppression, which means that it's essential for Black historians to claim back their own history. Of course, this was Woodson's life work. He dedicated his entire career to developing and promoting the field of Black American history, and by all measures, he was incredibly successful.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

FOREWORD

Carter G. Woodson notes that he has been speaking out about his views on education for some time in academic settings. Many of the people he met suggested that he publish a book in order to make his thinking more accessible to the general public, so he decided to summarize his research in *The Mis-Education of the Negro*.

Woodson presents this book as part of his service to the American public, and especially the Black community. As a prominent educator and historian, he's seen how the U.S. education system has failed Black students firsthand. At the same time, he's also an example of an exception to the rule—he managed to succeed despite going through the under-resourced, segregated, and often oppressive schools that he criticizes throughout this book. This is a convincing reason why Woodson's readers should look to him for solutions to problems with the U.S. education system.



PREFACE

Writing in 1933, Carter G. Woodson explains that his book is based on his 40 years of experience working in education and researching school systems at all levels, all around the world. He admits that he once made many of the errors he identifies in this book.

Woodson admits that he was naïve in the past, which led him to make mistakes as an educator and contribute to problems with the U.S. school system. He contrasts this with the wisdom and experience that have led him to better understand the system's problems and campaign to reform it in the present.



Woodson's central argument is that the education system should help Black people meet their potential, rather than simply imposing the will of the white majority on them. To be effective, this education must be based on a "[careful study of the Negro himself and the life which he is forced to lead](#)." Rather than simply delivering information, education must teach people to think for themselves.

In his thesis statement for this book, Woodson combines a theory of education, an evidence-based analysis of where the U.S. system falls short, and a proposal for reform. While the U.S. system focuses on disciplining Black students or teaching them a particular set of information, Woodson believes that schools ought to truly educate them, which means developing their innate talent and potential. Therefore, educators should never use a one-size-fits-all approach—rather, they must adapt to the specific students they are teaching. This is why Woodson argues that scholars must understand Black people before they can educate them.



Rather than asking whether more Black people are receiving an education, Woodson wants to ask whether this education is actually benefitting them, or rather oppressing them. He doesn't mean to say that education means something different for white and Black people: rather, education should prepare *everyone* to deal with the conditions they face in life.

Understandably, “‘highly educated’ Negroes” worry that teaching white and Black students differently is a form of harmful discrimination. As a result, they want Black students to have the exact same thing as white students. However, Woodson argues that modern education doesn't fully meet white people's needs, so it would be senseless for Black people to copy it. Still, this modern education is *closer* to meeting white people's needs because it is designed to serve oppressors' needs. For instance, it teaches students to accept slavery and segregation as morally justifiable.

This education system has led Black people to accept their position of inferiority by controlling their way of thinking. It teaches white people that they have done everything important in history, while telling Black people that they have and will never accomplish anything meaningful. This explains why so-called “‘educated Negro[es]” often look down on other Black people and wish they could become white.

CHAPTER 1: THE SEAT OF THE TROUBLE

Woodson argues that “the ‘educated Negroes’” look down on other Black people because their education teaches them to value white people's accomplishments above Black people's. Even in Black schools and universities, students almost never learn about Black people's history or thought. When they do, their textbooks and teachers often explicitly teach that white people are superior to Black people. This partially explains why, in Woodson's time, most successful Black people have little or no formal education, while educated Black people do nothing to help the race as a whole.

Woodson thinks that the quality of education is just as important as the quantity of students receiving it. In fact, if education is *oppressive* rather than *beneficial* to Black students, then it's *arguably worse* that more of them are going to school. Therefore, this becomes one of the central questions in Woodson's book: *what is the social purpose of the segregated school system that serves Black students? Is it designed to prepare them to succeed in life, or does it serve some other, more nefarious role?*



The “‘highly educated’ Black elites want white and Black students to receive an education of equal quality. But they forget that providing a quality education to white and Black students may require *different things*—teaching a different curriculum, for instance. This is not because of any inherent difference between white and Black people, but rather because of the different social, cultural, and economic conditions that each race experiences.



Woodson answers his own question about the school system's social purpose: *beyond just failing to educate Black students, it also actively oppresses them by feeding them a faulty narrative about their history and abilities. So, it really does the opposite of educating them: it stifles their potential rather than helping them achieve it. In turn, this faulty education also turns the Black community against itself and prevents its advancement. This explains why Woodson so strongly believes in studying Black history: he thinks that, by learning about their history, Black students will start to believe in their potential and take steps toward fulfilling it.*



“The seat of the trouble” is the racist curriculum taught in U.S. schools and universities. In order to succeed in the school system, Black students have to internalize white supremacist values. This creates a *devil's bargain*: in order to build the skills that they need to succeed in life and in business, Black students must learn to stop believing in their own potential. Therefore, on a societal level, the U.S. prevents the majority of Black people from building skills through education, while also ensuring that those who do receive an education learn to support the racist status quo rather than fighting it.



Because the education system teaches Black people to denigrate themselves and abandon their hopes for a better life, Woodson considers fighting it even more important than fighting lynching. Universities in the North and West are largely responsible for mis-training Black scholars, especially in the humanities and social sciences. But even in math and science, the system is inadequate. For instance, in the South, the poor Black children of tenant farmers ought to have more resources to learn math than the wealthy white students who learn to make budgets and financial plans at home.

Meanwhile, theology, business, and journalism schools teach the white establishment's ideology and tools. This makes Black ministers, businesspeople, and journalists ill-equipped to work in their own communities, where segregation forces them to stay. Rather than developing their own creativity, "educated Negroes" end up imitating white people. Eventually, they often grow cynical and turn against other Black people. Their error is thinking that they can achieve equality through imitation, rather than by developing Black people's own talents and creativity. They worry that other Black people justify discrimination against them when they think in race-conscious terms. But they fail to see that race-consciousness is necessary for Black people to overcome oppression, and they wrongly assume that racial differences inherently make one group better than another.

CHAPTER 2: HOW WE MISSED THE MARK

In this chapter, Woodson looks at the history of education for Black people in the United States. This is necessary to understand the problems with the education system in the 1930s (when he's writing this book). After the American Civil War, philanthropists and the federal government helped create **churches** and schools for emancipated Black Southerners. During Reconstruction, these schools became publicly funded. But rather than adapting to Black people's specific needs, these schools taught them about abstract subjects with no relevance to their actual lives. Next, as the nation industrialized, these schools shifted to teaching practical skills, which ignited a fierce debate about which model to follow.

Woodson is careful to fight two of his readers' common assumptions: that racism is only a problem in the South, and that math and science curricula can't be racially biased because they are objective disciplines. In reality, Northern universities hold the primary responsibility for mis-educating Black scholars. Moreover, effectively teaching math and science requires providing rural Black students with a different curriculum than wealthy white students. In this way, he shows that racism is more widely entrenched in policy and society than many of his readers may expect. In turn, if education policy doesn't explicitly take class and race differences into account, it ends up reinforcing those differences.



Mis-education and segregation work together to stifle Black professionals' success: tragically, they receive an education that they can never use, and they can never get the education they actually need. Because they can't get a race-conscious education oriented to Black communities' specific needs, they can't fulfill their duties to these communities. Thus, mis-education is also a detriment to the Black community as a whole, because it turns the people's primary pathway for development into a road to nowhere. Worse still, the "educated Negroes" learn to internalize white supremacist ideas about race, like the idea that race-consciousness is the same as racism or that racial differences automatically justify a racial hierarchy.



Many of Woodson's arguments might seem to apply to any point in U.S. history, including the present, but he's focused on the specific period from 1865–1933. As a historian, he's particularly interested in how past policy decisions have shaped his present (which also speaks to how policy changes in his time can shape the future). Reconstruction, the period from 1865–1877, was particularly significant because it represented the government's first attempt to establish public services for free Black Americans. In retrospect, Reconstruction was also incredibly important because it represented a short window of opportunity for Black Americans to advance in U.S. society before white supremacist backlash became widespread. However, Woodson concludes that the Reconstruction-era school system failed because it was designed to teach Black students the exact same curriculum as white students, rather than adapting to their specific needs.



But neither the industrial nor the classical schools were successful. Rather than teaching their students to use modern machinery, Black industrial schools taught their students outdated techniques that did not help them get jobs. Meanwhile, the classical liberal arts schools have been just as useless. Since most Black people in the early 20th century were poor laborers and farmers, they had no real opportunity to exercise the skills and knowledge that they learned in liberal arts schools. As a result, between the Civil War and the 1930s, Black people found little success as either industrial workers or academic scholars in the United States.

Both the industrial and classical schools taught students to imitate others rather than develop their own technical and critical thinking skills. And more importantly, they taught students to imitate poorly, because they were under-resourced and did not connect these skills to students' lives. Therefore, the school system ensured that Black students would always remain one step behind their white peers. But Woodson is proposing a different model of education: since Black students' greatest resource is their own talent, schools should try to recognize and develop this talent.



CHAPTER 3: HOW WE DRIFTED AWAY FROM THE TRUTH

In this chapter, Woodson looks at how educators' mistakes contributed to the mis-education of Black Americans after the Civil War. Though well-intentioned, missionaries and educators generally wanted to "transform the Negroes, not to develop them." In other words, they used the standard curriculum taught in white schools, without taking their students' specific experiences or perspectives into account.

Just like Woodson in his early days as an educator, other teachers and missionaries naively assume that education means imposing knowledge and discipline on students, rather than understanding and developing their specific skills. In part, this is because of the racist idea that many Black people in the 1930s are poor because there is something wrong with them that needs to be changed. Instead, as Woodson suggests, the truth is that many Black people are poor because they didn't get the chance to develop and apply their inherent talents.



The standard curriculum teaches that white people are physically superior, inhabit more important places, and have made all significant historical achievements in math and science. Schools teach Black students that their own dialect of English is incorrect. Moreover, they focus on European languages, literature, and art, while ignoring African and Asian people's great achievements. Law schools teach Black students that their people are inherently criminal and therefore deserve harsher punishments, while medical schools tell Black students that their people are physically inferior because they suffer higher rates of disease. The curriculum presents history as the story of white Europeans' achievements while ignoring Africans'.

Students often think of the school curriculum as a collection of objective facts, but Woodson points out that the way these facts are organized matters. By only teaching students about white people's accomplishments, the U.S. school system distorts history and encourages students to accept a racial hierarchy in which some lives matter more than others. In this way, the school curriculum is actually designed to subjugate Black students. Of course, Woodson's observation also implies that it would be possible to teach students a different curriculum—one in which white, Black, and other people's achievements are all taught in a balanced way.



In following the official curriculum, even well-intentioned educators teach their Black students to view themselves as inferior to white people. Black educators and community leaders have little power to change the curriculum, so as a result, it is controlled by white people. Moreover, “educated” Black people are products of this school system, so they are ill-equipped to change it in the first place. In schools, they learn to behave like white people, but they’re also taught that they will never rise to the level of white people. This contradiction allows the system to economically exploit and politically oppress educated Black people—who also feel like they have to defend this system.

The structural problems with U.S. education are fundamentally responsible for teachers’, administrators’, and “educated” Black people’s personal racial biases. The biased curriculum encourages teachers to believe that their Black students have no real potential. Therefore, it suggests that they should transform these students into something else—and make them resemble white students—rather than developing their innate talents and interests. On the other hand, this curriculum also imposes racist ideas on everyone who goes through the school system, and therefore it discourages educated people from reforming it. This is why Woodson thinks that reforming the curriculum and building Black-owned educational institutions is crucial to addressing the social and economic inequality between white and Black Americans.



CHAPTER 4: EDUCATION UNDER OUTSIDE CONTROL

Woodson praises the white missionaries and philanthropists who established schools and **churches** in the South after the American Civil War. But he argues that the generation of white teachers and administrators that followed them has completely failed to provide an adequate education for Black students. Moreover, outside of school, many of them still treat their Black students and colleagues as inferiors. Woodson argues that, in practice, history and segregation make it extremely difficult for white teachers to teach Black students.

Woodson suggests that, immediately after the Civil War, missionaries and philanthropists viewed educating the Black population as an important public service and moral duty. But three generations later, in the 1930s, this sense of purpose appears to have faded away. Educators’ personal bias and willingness to uphold racial segregation shows that they no longer view their jobs as part of a broader social or political mission. In part, Woodson’s work is dedicated to revitalizing this mission-driven view of Black education.



Woodson doesn’t mean that qualified white teachers shouldn’t be allowed to teach in Black schools, but rather that Black communities should direct the school systems that educate their youth. This is because true education—which inspires people and improves their lives—requires connection and understanding between students and teachers.

Again, Woodson thinks fixing structural problems—in this case, changing who has power over the school system—is far more important than addressing a few educators’ personal biases. It’s not that he thinks personal bias is irrelevant—rather, he thinks that structural problems are the root cause of personal bias. He’s also careful not to alienate sympathetic white readers by suggesting that white teachers are inherently incapable of educating Black students. Instead, he’s suggesting that communities should control the school systems that educate their youth.



Woodson isn't rejecting interracial cooperation in education—but people who use this term often *really* mean that white people should lead, and Black people should follow. They see it as dangerous to give leadership positions to Black people, because they might start asking for equality or threaten a college's access to charitable donations from the white establishment. But Woodson again argues that Black institutions and teachers cannot simply copy white institutions and teachers if they want to help Black people advance as a community.

Woodson recalls a conversation with one wealthy donor, who believes that it's possible to educate Black people by simply investing money in a new institution and hiring people with the right credentials to teach the right courses. But Woodson knows that this doesn't work. The founder of the University of Chicago built an influential institution by hiring distinguished thinkers to run all the university's departments, regardless of whether they had doctorates. But in Woodson's time, people are so obsessed with getting their doctorates in order to get their job that they begin to view the degree as a replacement for a real education. Scholars with PhDs are often more out-of-touch and less creative than scholars without them.

While Northern universities are busy teaching their own populations, Black people should study with the South's renowned Black scholars and educators, who are designing schools and universities to meet Black people's specific educational and social needs. Woodson doesn't want to discourage people from getting doctorates, but he hopes that these degrees will become a mark of scholarly distinction, and not just a way for people to increase their salaries. One example of a meaningful doctorate is a Black sociology PhD student researching rural Black people's folk sayings and studying their worldview.

Woodson favors "interracial cooperation" if this means integration, but not if it means white people controlling Black institutions. While the government controls the school system, the white establishment can always threaten Black people's control over Black institutions, thereby limiting their ability to effectively educate Black students. This is one of the main reasons that Woodson goes on to advocate for the Black community to come together and form private colleges and universities.



According to Woodson, this donor's fundamental error is that he doesn't understand how education works: he mistakes a credential for an education. He thinks that a one-size-fits-all model can work because he thinks of education as inputting information into students' brains or transforming them to fit a single mold. Therefore, he thinks that all credentialed teachers are equivalent because they've learned the same information and been through the same training process. He also thinks that any of these teachers can provide the same quality education, because they can impart the same information and mold students in the same way that was done to them. In contrast to this model of credential-focused teaching, the University of Chicago was built on Woodson's model of education as a form of personal development. Namely, its founder focused on hiring original, innovative thinkers whose education developed their innate talents and skills.



Woodson envisions a semi-independent university system in which Black scholars help Black students develop the specific talents, knowledge, and abilities that they need to advance in their careers and in life. The U.S. school system was largely segregated in the 1930s, so at this time, it arguably made more practical sense to build a separate Black education system than to integrate schools and universities. Therefore, Woodson defends separate schools not because he believes in segregation, but because he cares about improving education for Black Americans in an already-segregated system.



CHAPTER 5: THE FAILURE TO LEARN TO MAKE A LIVING

Scholars commonly complain that the U.S. education system hasn't taught Black students to make a living. Universities don't teach them better farming techniques, business skills, or knowledge that builds on the abilities they already have. For instance, Woodson suggests that a young washerwoman could learn about science and business, then open a laundromat—but this isn't possible under the current system. Instead, colleges teach irrelevant skills that do not contribute to student development.

Liberal arts education does not prevent white students from getting jobs, since they often have extensive social and family networks. But it does harm Black students' job prospects. Woodson points out that while he—a liberal arts student—has struggled to make a living, one of his friends studied wool and became a wealthy businessman.

Woodson compares a school drop-out who runs a successful fruit stand to an over-educated man who becomes depressed because he can't find a job. This educated man refuses to invest in Black businesses, because he believes they always fail. Actually, this is backwards: Black businesses fail because they lack investor capital. Rather than providing this capital, many "highly educated" Black people complain that white people control all the resources and propose starting a socialist revolution. Woodson considers this an unrealistic solution. He points out that, while these elites are complaining, uneducated Black people are successfully creating small businesses. Woodson remembers one "highly educated" Black woman who refused to work because she thought her salary was too low. But he points out that many white students happily work as unpaid apprentices for years.

The root of the problem is that business schools teach Black students poorly. They teach students to imagine managing a business, but not to work their way up from the lower levels of a company. In Woodson's experience, Black graduates mistakenly choose stable but low-paying salaried jobs in large corporations, instead of taking commission-based positions that depend on their own effort or pursuing entrepreneurial opportunities to grow their own businesses. Because business schools don't teach practical skills, these self-starter jobs seem too overwhelming. When educated Black people do start businesses, many of them make basic mistakes or sell quickly to white corporations. According to Woodson, others lavishly overspend their money, which alienates their customers and community.

Woodson illustrates what he means when he says that schools and universities ought to focus on developing students' specific skills, interests, and talents, rather than teaching them a one-size-fits-all curriculum. By learning information relevant to her existing skills, the washerwoman could advance in the industry she already knows. But instead, colleges teach all students a standard curriculum and leave it up to them to connect this curriculum to their own lives.



This difference in family and social networks is one key reason that white and Black people have different educational needs. Namely, because of these networks, white college students generally don't need to learn practical skills in college to get a job afterward, while Black students do.



Woodson is primarily concerned with how Black people can advance economically, and in this context, traditional education again proves counterproductive. This is because it's too disconnected from the world: it encourages students to think about themselves and the world in abstract terms, rather than addressing the concrete situations and challenges that they face. For Black people in the early 20th century, these challenges prominently include racism, segregation, and a lack of resources. "Highly educated" Black people have the power to help the community as a whole overcome these challenges, since they have access to more resources and can help build a thriving economy within the Black community. But instead, they worry about the way these challenges specifically afflict them, and they abandon the rest of their community.



While "highly educated" white people get to join a wealthy intellectual, business, and political elite, "highly educated" Black people don't. They learn to think of themselves as though they should belong to this elite, but instead, they end up in the same position as their uneducated counterparts. Ironically, they still have more skills and resources than these counterparts, but they are less willing to use them. Woodson thinks that this is because their business education teaches them to compare themselves to the white elite and, as a result, seek jobs in white corporations and organizations. In short, they chase security rather than growth because they evaluate their success in relation to white people rather than the Black community.



CHAPTER 6: THE EDUCATED NEGRO LEAVES THE MASSES

Woodson argues that educated Black people are disconnected from the Black masses, which indicates that their education has failed them. For example, they seldom attend **Black churches**, which are crucial institutions that help support entire communities, including schools and businesses. Yet “highly educated” people also have skills and knowledge that the community needs to develop, and they could put it to use in church if they wanted. Instead, they frequently join churches that are either predominantly white or primarily focused on religious rituals, without strong ties to the community. Woodson considers this an act of “slave psychology,” or preferring to be led by the oppressor. It’s true that many Black churches are corrupt, but accepting segregation is worse than accepting corruption.

In general, Woodson argues, elite Black people have stopped making a meaningful effort to improve the conditions of the masses. In the 1880s, they got educated in the hopes of helping uplift the race as a whole, but by the 1930s, they were mostly interested in getting educated to secure jobs and live selfishly, for themselves. For instance, in Washington, D.C., educated Black people continue to grow wealthier and better off, while the masses remain as “backward” and “undeveloped” as they were 50 years before. The educated don’t make an effort to help the masses—they just abandon them, instead.

The church is the most important institution for uplifting the Black community because it’s the only one that Black people control for themselves (unlike banks and schools). But Woodson argues that Black people have simply copied white people’s versions of Christianity, rather than developing their own authentic interpretation of the religion. By creating a new sect every time white people do, Black people have made so many different churches and institutions that they have become redundant and can’t actually coordinate. They’ve also become tangled up in white theologians’ absurd and dangerous debates, which serve to justify atrocities like slavery and segregation. By imitating white people, Black people have corrupted the church and sabotaged their fight against oppression. “‘Highly educated’ Negroes” rightly understand this corruption but wrongly choose to abandon the church—and the community—rather than help reform them.

Yet again, Woodson shows how succeeding in school requires Black students to accept their own inferiority. Thus, education actually fractures the Black community rather than helping it advance: it creates leaders who disdain themselves and the community, rather than believing in them. Woodson pays special attention to churches because, in his day and age, they’re the only institutions that the Black community truly controls. Even if they’re largely ineffective and corrupt, they still represent Black communities’ potential to become self-sufficient. Therefore, they’re a model for the Black-run schools and universities that Woodson wants to build up. They provide a physical, social, and emotional space for people to connect, which means that they can also provide the basis for Black people to start successful businesses in their own communities.



Much like the teachers who set up Black schools in the South after the American Civil War, the Black elite has given up on its original social mission and embraced self-interest instead. Woodson suggests that they no longer view themselves as connected or responsible to the community as a whole. But he also clearly thinks that education can remedy this problem by helping future generations of Black elites view themselves as connected to and responsible for the “backward” masses. Meanwhile, the masses’ predicament shows how effective Jim Crow (segregation) laws were at preventing Black people from building power, wealth, and autonomy in U.S. society. Namely, although the Black masses made progress during Reconstruction, this abruptly stopped in the 1880s.



Woodson argues that, in the church as in business, Black people have lost a sense of social responsibility and chosen imitation over originality. Every time the church divides, its power to build economic and political power in the Black community diminishes. The same thing happens every time religious leaders focus on white theologians’ debates rather than Black people’s lived experiences. “Highly educated” Black people criticize the church’s abandonment of responsibility and ignorance about people’s struggle against oppression. But after making this criticism, they ironically make the same mistakes as the church: they decide that they’re not responsible for the church’s failures or the fate of the community. Through this response, elites also avoid taking responsibility and ignore the struggle against oppression.



CHAPTER 7: DISSENSION AND WEAKNESS

Black churches continue bickering, which divides the community. For instance, one rural town has no church because every family belongs to a different denomination. Rather than teaching unity and cooperation, sectarian religious schools focus on their own survival and power, so they recycle “worn-out” white theological teachings. For instance, Woodson recalls that Black preachers educated in these schools gave sermons praising European figures like Napoleon, Cicero, and Demosthenes, rather than speaking to their congregation’s needs and experiences. These preachers learn to recite sermons without understanding their meaning but learn nothing about the lives or traditions of the people they serve. Popular preachers even ruin their style and reputation when they go to theology school.

With the rural masses divided between sects and the “talented tenth” attending “refined” services, the Black community gets divided. The masses learn from preachers who understand the people but who haven’t developed their minds through education. Meanwhile, tricksters and con artists take advantage of **the church’s** power to exploit people. This makes honest preachers’ jobs even more difficult. Woodson remembers how one compulsive gambler briefly started preaching in order to pay his debts.

Woodson argues that Black preachers focus too much on scaring people with stories about “mediaeval hell-fire,” and not enough on helping them. He thinks Black worshippers borrowed their emotional, exaggerated style from white Protestants, who have similar practices, like speaking in tongues during church. Woodson also thinks that Black people derived a misguided moral vision from **the church** by imitating people. The early white religious leaders who came to the U.S. from Europe were often drunks, gamblers, and polygamists. In his time, Woodson remembers prominent, religious white men who had two families or bragged about participating in lynching. He concludes that white Southerners formed a deficient concept of morality—and then Black congregations copied it.

In the next three chapters, Woodson looks at the way specific parts of the U.S. school system have failed: namely, the religious, professional, and political education (or lack thereof) that it provides. Here, he explicitly ties poor religious education to the Black church’s failure to lead the Black community. Black preachers learn at white-dominated theology schools that teach a European Christian tradition. Therefore, they end up losing their connection to their parishioners and viewing religion as a primarily spiritual, philosophical, individual practice, rather than as a communal force for social good. Clearly, Woodson thinks that Black churches should work together to establish Black-run theology schools that also teach preachers how to use the church to organize their communities.



In the church as in business, the masses need the educated Black elite, but the elite has learned to disdain and distrust the masses. Meanwhile, con artists are attracted to the church because they recognize that it’s an important seat of power. In a way, it’s the closest thing that Black communities at this time had to an independent political body. (But ironically, actual church leaders didn’t seem to fully recognize this.)



Woodson continues to mix practical advice about how Black leaders should serve their communities with an analysis of the broader systemic and historical contexts that explain how Black leaders fell into their errors. He analyzes white Christian morality in the same way he analyzes the school curriculum: he shows that people adopt distorted ideas and principles in order to justify their position in the world and advance their own interests. But Black people haven’t been able to do this. Again, Woodson sees imitation as the culprit, and he suggests that Black people have to develop their own original approach to religion, theology, and preaching in order for the church to actually serve them. He’s not suggesting that they should develop blindly self-serving moral doctrines. Rather, he thinks their approach to religion and morality should be based on their fundamental social goals: freedom, justice, and equality.



CHAPTER 8: PROFESSIONAL EDUCATED DISCOURAGED

In Woodson's time, Black people have barely entered professional life, except as teachers and preachers. The few Black "physicians, dentists, pharmacists, lawyers, and actors" lack adequate support from their communities. They are also forced to study at white institutions, which often mistreat them and make it difficult for them to practice. But Black schools have been mismanaged, leaving them with no alternative. For instance, most Black law schools closed during after the backlash to Reconstruction, precisely when Black lawyers were most needed.

Black professionals also face monumental hurdles. For instance, Woodson once dealt with a lawyer who couldn't get a minor error fixed on a contract because white lawyers refused to work with him. Similarly, because white professionals portray Black doctors as unreliable, "highly educated" Black people don't trust them. Black people avoid becoming scientists, architects, and engineers because white firms won't hire them.

The education system also poses problems for Black artists. Black musicians reach wide audiences but can seldom develop creatively because they are seen as "popular" musicians, rather than true artists. Similarly, Black people are seen as "natural actor[s]," which is schools' excuse for refusing to train them. This makes it difficult for them to succeed outside of minstrelsy and cabarets. Finally, Black writers don't get recognized if they write about Black people, because white people don't take them seriously.

CHAPTER 9: POLITICAL EDUCATION NEGLECTED

Historically, Black people could not easily learn about U.S. history. In school, they seldom learned about the Constitution and the Founders, as these lessons would have shown them that they are supposed to have civil rights. After the American Civil War, white leaders pushed to keep history out of Black schools, because they knew that Black people can only remain a subordinate class if they continued to believe in their own inferiority. Meanwhile, white scholars rewrote the nation's history in order to portray slavery as benevolent and the Civil War as unnecessary. Despite influential scholarly work to the contrary, many Northern historians have adopted these misguided views and started teaching them to Black students.

Now, Woodson turns to education for Black professionals, who play an essential role in providing the community with the services it needs to flourish. However, they face similar challenges as Black preachers and businesspeople. Schools don't adequately train them because they're not sensitive to specific issues that the Black community faces. Clearly, Woodson sees the mismanagement of Black institutions as a broader social problem and views rebuilding such institutions as an important priority.



These professional hurdles show how racism and segregation make Black professionals' jobs fundamentally different from their white counterparts. Woodson suggests that schools must specifically train Black professionals to overcome such obstacles. Moreover, he argues that forming Black-owned firms is important because it will allow this Black professional class to grow and practice more effectively.



The pervasive racism that Black professionals face is all the more apparent in the arts, where powerful white managers' subjective judgments about value determine who succeeds and who fails. Just like in business and the other professions, this creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. Because industry gatekeepers don't take Black artists and writers seriously as artists, these artists and writers choose to create what Woodson considers unrefined amateur art. This, in turn, reinforces the racist perception that Black artists are naturally inferior.



Whereas poor religious education primarily affects Black clergy and poor professional education primarily affects Black professionals, faulty political education affects all Black students. By rewriting history, white scholars and administrators prevent Black students from learning about their civil rights and understanding how to influence governmental policy change. This is a deliberate strategy designed to prevent Black people from understanding their historical subjugation, protesting against the government, or publicly demanding their constitutionally guaranteed civil rights. Thus, this is a very clear example of how public schooling actually becomes a tool of oppression and white supremacist propaganda.



This distorted education system explains why Black lawyers denounce Reconstruction and Black leaders protest teaching civics in Black schools. While they think political education would disrupt “peaceful [race] relations,” Woodson argues that things are only “peaceful” because white terrorism prevents Black people from talking publicly about politics. For instance, Woodson remembers seeing an education official fire a school principal for talking about voting. Woodson points out that most Black people have given up on voting because they face voter suppression tactics like literacy tests and poll taxes.

As a result of the “one-sided” political education system, even Black professionals know nothing about the basic functions of American government. This system benefits white people in the short term, but in the long term, it prevents Black people from becoming responsible citizens.

In national politics in the 1930s, Black people are only relevant because they support Republican politicians in the South. But rather than helping Black people win equal rights, these politicians just care about winning access to federal money. The “highly educated” Black elite eagerly joins in this corruption—for instance, they collect votes for candidates who give them little in return. Similarly, in the North, politicians view Black voters and community leaders more as pawns to manipulate than constituents to serve.

While the American political system has never taken Black people seriously as constituents, Woodson argues, the Black community continues waiting for the political system to solve its problems. The Black politicians who *do* win elections are often lack insight and are uninspiring: they focus on a few narrow issues relevant to Black voters, but they don’t participate in major national decisions (unlike during Reconstruction).

Woodson shows that distorted education plays a significant role in suppressing Black political activism. Just like Black elites who work in other areas, elite Black educators actually work against their community’s interests by repeating white supremacist talking points. By putting peace before justice, they also put themselves above their communities. Woodson suggests that the first step toward achieving equality is breaking the silence around politics, which requires better educating the public about it.



Woodson is fully aware of how poor political education in Black schools helps white people maintain their political power. But he also makes a plea to the U.S.’s interests as a whole when he suggests that creating an effective government for everyone requires racial integration rather than maintaining racial division. Clearly, political education is a key step toward this integration.



In the 1930s, Black Americans don’t have true political representation at the national level. Instead, they are forced to choose between a party that makes them false promises and another that openly plans to subjugate them and further restrict their rights. As in every other sphere of life and the economy that Woodson has mentioned so far, Black elites also abandon the masses in politics because of their mis-education.



When Woodson analyzes how the political system has abandoned the Black community, he lays out the stakes of political education. Since Black people’s leadership is failing, they have to build political power from the ground up. But without educating themselves about U.S. government, politics, and history, they have no chance of doing so.



CHAPTER 10: THE LOSS OF VISION

Woodson summarizes his argument so far: the failed American education system has not allowed Black people to develop themselves or learn to think critically. This has led the Black community to political inaction. Therefore, mis-education is a system of social control: it leads the Black community to act against their own interests and instead defend the people who oppress them.

In the past, Black people *did* courageously fight for their rights. Black soldiers played a crucial part in the Revolutionary War, and Black abolitionists courageously called for equality in the 18th century. But in the early 20th century, Woodson argues, Black people are starting to accept racial segregation and give up on equality. He claims that Black people have lost the sense of courage and unity that once drove them to oppose the Back-to-Africa movement, fight slavery, and build a better future for their community. Instead, in the early 20th century, they try to get ahead by selling one another out. Many educated Black people actually support Jim Crow laws.

Woodson compares Black people who support racial segregation to addicts who take drugs to temporarily relieve their pain, rather than dealing with their underlying problems. When Black people accept segregation, they end up with inferior jobs and get used to it. They get excluded from politics but accept this as inevitable. They get locked in ghetto neighborhoods but decide to stay. In short, mis-education is the primary force maintaining segregation. It leads Black people to go back and forth between demanding equality and accepting segregation, depending on which is more convenient for them personally. For example, Reconstruction leaders demanded civil rights but supported segregated schools.

Woodson presents his book's central argument after surveying different fields of education in the U.S. and establishing that Black people receive inferior schooling to white people in every area. He's also established that his readers should worry about this mis-education for multiple reasons: first, it prevents individuals from reaching their potential. Second, it limits economic development in Black communities throughout the U.S. And finally, it's a moral stain on the nation as a whole, because it sustains an social, political, and economic inequality.



Woodson wants Black people to stop focusing entirely on their own individual advancement and start asking how they can advance while also advancing the cause of their race as a whole. He's particularly speaking to the Black elites who are most likely to be reading his book. Thus, he invokes the history of Black freedom struggles in order to inspire his readers to take up a new fight against Jim Crow. Even though this fight might seem impossible to win, these historical precedents show that Black people have successfully won greater rights and freedoms for themselves—and the nation as a whole—in even direr circumstances in the past.



Woodson succinctly explains why he thinks that fixing education policy is the single most important step that Black people can take to fight racial segregation. Mis-education fractures the Black community by dividing it between two warring factions: the elites and the masses. The elites accept inequality between races so long as they continue to benefit from inequality within the race. And without support from the elites, the masses don't believe they can do anything to improve their situation collectively—they can only join the elite as individuals. This division prevents Black people from coming together to fix segregation. Therefore, mis-education means maintaining segregation, and fixing mis-education is key to ending Jim Crow. Looking back at the 20th century, it appears that Woodson was right to put education at the center of his analysis of segregation and inequality. Famously, the integration of Southern schools in the 1950s was one of the most important tipping points in the decades-long civil rights movement.



Woodson writes about a group of freed slaves he met in his childhood. When the white farm-owner invited them to eat breakfast with his family, the freedmen insisted that they couldn't mix with white people and should eat in the fields instead. This shows that segregation perpetuates itself: because Black people can never leave their segregated community, they convince themselves that they can never overcome segregation. The educated elite takes advantage of this situation, profiting at the expense of the segregated masses. For instance, some rent to poorer Black people at exorbitant rates, while others start **churches** or overcharge clients for poor service. Black politicians know they will receive the Black vote, so they focus on selling those votes to the highest bidder.

When Woodson is writing during the Great Depression, Black people are losing their jobs in droves—white employers fire them before anyone else, and machines are making their jobs obsolete. This means “highly educated” Black professionals no longer have customers to exploit. To survive, Woodson argues, the Black community needs to band together economically by pooling resources and creating new industries that meet its members' needs.

“Highly educated” Black people lack faith in Black businesses, because many have failed in the past. However, Woodson argues that these businesses failed *because* investors did not place confidence in them. In fact, such investor confidence is the cornerstone of the economy, so Black people's lack of confidence in their own community is the root of their enduring economic problems. The education system further undermines Black people's confidence in themselves, worsening these economic problems.

Woodson thinks that adult education programs can improve the Black community's economic situation by teaching people to cooperate, start businesses, and manage money. But long-term solutions to racial segregation must start within the Black community, whose dependence on outside support is precisely what keeps it poor. As Frederick Douglass argued, if Black people want American society to take them seriously, they have to build up industries that make them essential to the American economy as a whole.

This group of former slaves refused to dine with the farmer as equals because they had internalized American slavery's racial hierarchy. For Woodson, their behavior is a key example of how the oppressed masses accept and even perpetuate their own subjugation when they don't receive a real education. Meanwhile, Woodson again points out how the educated elite exploits the masses rather than guiding or leading them. He thinks that the Black community's future fundamentally depends on which models it chooses: internal division (which leads the minority to exploit the minority) or unification for the sake of shared economic and political advancement.



Black workers' job losses during the Great Depression show that, in the white-dominated economy, they are always expendable and undervalued. In other words, taking low-ranking jobs in the conventional economy will not help them advance in the long term, because they will not gain the real benefits of their labor. But Woodson thinks that, if the Black community can build its own institutions and enterprises, it can ensure that the benefits of Black workers' labor stay and grow within the community.



Without investor confidence, businesses fail—and businesses with a history of failure don't attract investors. Since the economy is fundamentally based on this kind of informal, subjective judgment, the racist values that students learn in the school system deeply shape their decisions and have an enduring economic impact.



Woodson's vision of Black education goes far beyond schools and universities. Rather, he thinks that Black people of all ages, professions, and ability levels should have access to education programs that can help them develop their skills and contribute to the community's economic growth. Because he has seen how the Black elite exploits the masses, Woodson has little faith in top-down solutions that depend on its leadership. Instead, he believes that the masses have to rise up on their own through work, innovation, and true education.



CHAPTER 11: THE NEED FOR SERVICE RATHER THAN LEADERSHIP

Three generations after the end of slavery, Woodson argues, Black people still live in a small world of limited concerns. They cannot engage or compete with society at large. Rather than cooperating to help the masses, the educated Black elite deceives them and fights endlessly for personal profit and “empty honor[s],” like fancy-sounding jobs with no real power. By fighting over “the little things allotted by others,” the Black elite fails to achieve anything of its own. This makes cooperation impossible. Political and religious factions fight over jobs and try to sabotage one another, rather than cooperating to make more jobs. Similarly, too many Black people dream of becoming school principals, and too few want to create better schools. The elite’s selfish bickering can stall progress for generations.

Ever since the beginning of slavery, white leaders have chosen Black spokespeople to serve in prominent community positions and operate as spies. These leaders often secretly report on dissent and try to prevent people from politically organizing. Because Black leaders so often become oppressors, Woodson argues that the Black community shouldn’t count on their help. Rather, the community should organize itself to overcome exploitation. Woodson concludes that “the race needs workers, not leaders.” In other words, Black people should take action, dedicating their energies to businesses and endeavors that benefit the community. The emphasis on *leadership* should be replaced by the idea of *service*.

The small world that Woodson describes is really the psychologically and culturally limited world created by racial segregation. Woodson argues that Black people can either fight for power and position within this segregated world, or they can fight to desegregate the world on behalf of their race as a whole. Whereas the elite’s false education helps them win out in the fight for power, Woodson promotes a true education designed to build perspective and skills. Namely, students build the perspective necessary to understand that desegregation is possible and the skills necessary to pursue that desegregation.



The key difference between leadership and service is that leaders have power over communities, but communities have power over the people serving them. Leadership implies telling communities what to do, while service implies listening to communities in order to determine what to do. Thus, Woodson thinks that the Black elite seeks to lead the Black community in order to gain power over it and use this power for personal gain. But he thinks that they ought to serve others instead, giving up their power to the community in the process. This vision of service is actually very similar to Woodson’s vision of education. He argues that effective educators must focus on meeting a student’s needs and developing their abilities, rather than imposing a predetermined model or goal on them. Thus, effective teaching is also a kind of service to one’s students.



CHAPTER 12: HIRELINGS IN THE PLACES OF PUBLIC SERVANTS

Woodson notes that Black laborers often refuse to work under Black managers, out of jealousy or resentment. Some white employers have promoted qualified Black employees to management positions, only to find their Black workers unwilling to obey them. Many other white employers use this as an excuse for not hiring Black managers at all.

Woodson again suggests that many Black people confuse individual relationships for social hierarchies. Although they rightly want equality, they demand individual equality with all white people, rather than collective equality for their race. Woodson sees this as understandable but lamentable, because even in an equal society, individuals will have to work their way up from the bottom of the labor hierarchy.



Woodson believes that Black workers' resistance to hierarchy will prevent them from accomplishing "the greater things of life." This explains how a small minority of white people divided and conquered the world: they convinced non-white people to never accept a nonwhite person's authority. Because Black people don't organize together and define their political interests, manipulative spokespeople can easily win money and power by misleading them. Meanwhile, Woodson argues that Black people choose their own leaders naïvely, selecting people who cheat them.

Woodson concludes that Black people need to change their own perspective before they can rise socioeconomically. For instance, teachers, **church** leaders, and doctors should stop scamming their clientele and spending beyond their means. These "misleaders" selfishly exploit the masses and contribute to what Woodson considers their lack of moral development, discipline, and intelligence. In turn, these failures become a justification for subjugating Black people under white people's guidance.

While in theory anyone can lead any group of people, regardless of race, in practice most white people who lead Black people are ineffective. Some make a point of punishing Black people because they perceive them as inferior. One white principal of a Black school told Woodson that he does not approve of his Black students and cannot educate them, while another deliberately talks down to them. These white schoolmasters have only taken their jobs for the money: they do not care about actually educating Black students, nor are they knowledgeable enough about Black people's lives to do so.

Woodson blames mis-education for confusing many Black people about personal versus social hierarchies. By making them resist personal hierarchy, the white establishment prevents them from achieving social equality. Woodson agrees that justice demands equality now, but he also knows that the simple fact that something is right doesn't mean it will actually happen. Instead, people have to work hard over the long term to make the world more just. To do meaningful work for the benefit of the Black community, he contends, people have to recognize both sides of this equation. They have to see how plainly unjust the world is, but also how difficult it is to fix.



Woodson again forcefully calls for Black leaders to put the collective good above their individual benefit. He recognizes that one of the greatest barriers to Black people's advancement is the need for incredible discipline and moral strength in order to cope with oppression. It's far too easy to channel one's energies into selfish, individualistic pursuits rather than collective uplift efforts. Needless to say, Woodson thinks that education is the best way to develop the discipline, intelligence, and maturity necessary to put the collective above the individual.



Woodson carefully distinguishes the prejudiced idea that white people are inherently incapable of leading Black people with the truth: that most white people just don't understand or respect Black people enough to lead them. (But they could do so, if they did respect and understand Black people.) The white schoolmasters' racism toward their students suggests that they've taken their positions of leadership in the local Black community for the sake of personal benefit, and not in order to help the community advance by effectively educating its youth. This further strengthens Woodson's argument that Black people ought to fund, own, and run their own schools and universities.



Woodson argues that true leadership is about service, which requires being a genuine part of the community one hopes to benefit. Therefore, if white people want to serve Black communities and institutions, they have to make a substantial effort to study the community and understand its needs. Rather than thinking of Black people as “foreigners” who need to be “miraculously transformed,” they have to genuinely care about improving Black people’s lives. They have to fundamentally view the communities they serve as their equals.

Woodson returns to his argument that true leaders, like true educators, serve their communities by meeting them where they are, rather than trying to impose change on them. The first step in this process is understanding the community. This point leads Woodson into the last portion of his book, which focuses on scholarly knowledge about Black people. Of course, Woodson doesn’t think that white people are the only ones who have to learn about Black Americans’ history, culture, and achievements. Rather, Black people also have to seriously study their communities if they want to effectively lead them.



CHAPTER 13: UNDERSTAND THE NEGRO

In an interview, a professor at a historically Black college tells Woodson that his university curriculum does not cover much Black history or literature, as Black people haven’t accomplished very much throughout history. He argues that focusing on Black issues alienates white people and hurts Black students’ chances in society. For Woodson, this shows that even Black professionals have accepted the idea of Black inferiority. Rather than contributing to Black communities, these professionals assume that Black people can only improve their status if “an executive force” acts on them from the top down.

By pointing out that even historically Black colleges don’t teach Black history and literature, Woodson establishes that Black studies isn’t taken seriously as an academic discipline. This sets the stage for his argument in favor of Black studies throughout the rest of the book. He connects Black people’s invisibility in college curricula to the misleading ideas that Black students learn in school and popular culture. For instance, the principal thinks that Black people have no meaningful history and that their success depends on integrating into white society, rather than building strength in the Black community. But when Black professionals instead invest in top-down “executive” leadership, Woodson has argued, they contribute to the community’s fragmentation and weakness.



Woodson reiterates his central argument: the education that Black people receive in the U.S. enslaves their minds. Black people are invisible in public schools’ curricula because teachers fear that it’s too dangerous to discuss “the race question.” When white students first learn about race in college, they have often already decided that non-white people are inferior. In reality, white people also need a different kind of education about race in order to become responsible members of society.

Mis-education and inequality reinforce each other in a vicious feedback cycle. Mis-education prevents Black people from overcoming inequality. But because racial inequality is so blatant, talking about racism becomes a taboo, so nobody truly learns to fight it. Woodson also argues that education about race is just as important for white students as Black students. He doesn’t just want to reform the curricula in Black schools: he wants all students to learn about Black life and history, so that they can learn to value Black people as equals and work together for social change.



Woodson finds it astonishing that Black colleges teach endless courses about Europe's history, philosophy, art, and music, but virtually none about Africa's. Just like Catholic and Jewish Americans, Black Americans should teach their children about their own heritage. But in the current system, "education" for Black students means learning about other groups' accomplishments and aspiring to imitate them. This kind of education has prevented Black students from recognizing or developing their own capacities. Different groups, generations, and even individuals have different needs—but by focusing on other people's experiences and accomplishments, Black people miss their own.

Black history is a rich topic absolutely worthy of study. In fact, Woodson calls the story of African enslavement "one of the greatest dramas in history." But this story has scarcely been explored. Just like other oppressed groups derived art from their experiences, Black people can produce a whole body of art, literature, and music based on their history. Instead, they are busy imitating white Europeans' art. In the 1930s, educators are starting to introduce children to literature that portrays Black people in a positive light. But Woodson thinks that Black people have a ways to go in terms of redeeming their history through art and literature, as "while the Negro has been idle, propaganda has gone far ahead of history."

Historically Black colleges teach a European-focused curriculum because they are based on two inaccurate and outdated models: the model of education as the accumulation of knowledge and the model of white colleges that teach mostly white students about a specific European tradition. Woodson points to other minority groups' successes in educating their youth about their own collective traditions in order to show that Black Americans can do the same. Of course, he doesn't think that people should only learn about their own group's history—but he does think it's essential for them to value their own group alongside others.



Beyond depriving Black youth of an education, racism has also limited scholarly work about Black history and creative work based on Black experience. Where others insist that Black Americans' history is meaningless or irrelevant, Woodson affirms its value for the Black community, the U.S., and the human race as a whole. Rather than being ashamed of their ancestors' enslavement, Woodson hopes that young Black people can instead feel inspired by those ancestors' resilience and struggle against injustice. And he believes that such an appreciation for history can lead young Black people to appreciate their community, value themselves, and develop their own creative abilities. In turn, he hopes that their creative work will eventually allow them to reinterpret the history they have learned and redefine Black American identity in a positive light.



CHAPTER 14: THE NEW PROBLEM

Since the existing system has failed to educate Black people, Woodson proposes building a new one. It should start with "a scientific study of the Negro from within," which can identify what capacities Black people need to develop in order to succeed. Then, the new system should retrain professionals. Teachers should learn to truly understand their students' lives and support children who fall behind, rather than ignoring them. Exploitative preachers should be replaced, and old-fashioned ministers should learn about their congregation's personal lives and stories, then incorporate this knowledge into their preaching.

So far, Woodson has presented the problems with mis-education and established that the solution to these problems is a more effective education—which involves reforming the school system, building new colleges and universities, and developing a body of scholarly knowledge about Black life and achievement. Now, in the last quarter of his book, he presents a vision of what the Black community's future can look like if it successfully invests in this new, better form of education. The new scholarly knowledge about Black history and culture will become the basis for training new educators and preachers to take a more positive view of Black people. In turn, these educators and preachers can pass down their knowledge to students and congregations. Eventually, the next generation of Black youth can learn to believe in their own potential and genuinely view themselves as equal to white people. In this way, Woodson thinks that the benefits of new scholarship can trickle down to help the community as a whole, while politics is failing to do the same.



Meanwhile, Woodson proposes that Black researchers should reorient their priorities. Black scholars should explore African influences on Black American culture, in order to counteract the dangerous myth that enslaved people had no meaningful traditions. Black preachers should reinterpret the Bible for themselves, and to support this work, **Black churches** should come together to open a few well-funded universities. (In the 1930s, there are too many religious universities, and they are too under-funded, so Black preachers and professionals go to white institutions instead.)

Woodson emphasizes that he doesn't want to close down existing schools or erase the existing curriculum entirely. Rather, he wants to reform these institutions and programs so that higher education becomes a route to critical thinking and public service, rather than wealth. In particular, the social sciences, the humanities, and theology need to be reformed, as their curricula are still based on the oppressive ideas that white people have used to justify slavery and oppression. Black students should study Africa's literature, philosophy, and folklore in addition to Europe's. In history, anthropology, and sociology, they should look at African people's perspectives and experiences. They should study economics in order to help develop businesses and wealth in the Black community. In all subjects, education for Black students must start with Black people's specific situations, backgrounds, and potential.

Woodson offers some examples of how education can effectively take students' experiences and identities into account. For instance, before going to China, a missionary leader named Dr. De Forest told his students to spend years learning about the people's history, customs, and language before trying to convert them. Meanwhile, when the U.S. took control of the Philippines, highly-educated American teachers simply failed to inspire teach Filipino children with their American curriculum. But a wily and empathetic insurance broker succeeded by talking to his students about objects and historical figures that *they* knew, instead of distant ones from the U.S.

By studying the African roots of Black American culture, scholars can show Black Americans that their history is rich, meaningful, and not entirely defined by slavery. Woodson implies that Black people can start to believe in their own potential once they learn how their ancestors have succeeded in the past and become proud of their heritage. Meanwhile, by reinterpreting the Bible, preachers can develop a distinctive, original Black Christian tradition that serves their community's needs (rather than continuing to copy white churches, which preach hierarchy and justify oppression). Finally, because the Black church is the strongest existing institution in the Black community, Woodson argues that it should be the launching pad for new universities that can dedicate themselves to researching Black life and history, then teaching educators and the public about them.



Just like Woodson thinks that it's possible to turn Black churches into a force for good, even though they're mostly corrupt in his day and age, he also thinks that it's possible to transform schools. Thus, he strongly believes in reform, not revolution. In this way, even though he's very pessimistic about the education system's effects, he's optimistic about its ability to change through the Black community's hard work. Importantly, he also doesn't think that centering Black life and history in the curriculum requires erasing white life and history from it. On the contrary, he thinks that students ought to learn about both—as well as other cultures and traditions in the U.S. and around the world. In addition to essentially founding the discipline of Black American history, Woodson is also envisioning the kind of diverse education that the modern-day discipline of ethnic studies promotes.



Woodson's examples show that effective teachers really start out as learners—they have to understand their students before they can effectively teach them. However, if they're willing to put in this work, teachers of any race and background can successfully adapt their lessons to students of any race and background. (Of course, in the U.S., anti-Black racism and segregation make it difficult—but not impossible—for white teachers to do this successfully.) While Woodson obviously thinks that teachers have to know the curriculum, he really sees empathy, open-mindedness, and humility as the most important traits of an effective teacher.



Of course, Woodson emphasizes that it's also important for people to learn about the achievements of other groups. He just thinks that non-Europeans need to get more emphasis, as they're often entirely ignored in the curriculum. For instance, he doesn't think that George Washington or Thomas Jefferson should be removed from the curriculum: rather, he thinks that important Black figures should be added to it, like the poet Phillis Wheatley, the astronomer Benjamin Banneker, and the numerous Black troops who fought in the American Revolutionary and Civil Wars.

Woodson wants educators to approach American history, literature, and politics from a more diverse perspective. In doing so, they don't just teach their students to appreciate Black people's contributions to the nation. They also show their students that the U.S. is fundamentally a multiracial country—in which all groups have made significant contributions—and that everybody deserves equal political rights. Therefore, as an educator, Woodson wants to give all American students this multiracial vision of the U.S., in addition to helping Black students develop and harness their own potential.



CHAPTER 15: VOCATIONAL GUIDANCE

It's important for Black students to learn practical skills in universities, so many Black schools focus on “vocational guidance.” But these schools generally fail to achieve their goals: they often teach outdated methods that are no longer used due to the development of industrial machinery. Despite their training, then, most Black workers get stuck in the worst available jobs, and few advance in their careers.

Readers might have thought that vocational schools were an exception to Woodson's critique, since their goal is to teach technical job skills and not prepare students for the world more broadly. However, Woodson argues that they make the same error as other schools: they assume that their students just need to absorb a certain set of information and develop a predetermined set of technical abilities in order to succeed. They don't care about understanding their students' needs or developing their abilities. And because they have few resources compared to white schools, they can never hope to produce the most technically competent graduates, even within their narrow specialties. This makes flexibility all the more important.



In contrast to what these Black schools teach, true “vocational guidance” must be based on critical thinking. This is because critical thinking allows Black people to build skills and companies for themselves, rather than just imitating the way white people do their jobs. In turn, teaching critical thinking requires training teachers to truly care about their students' condition, rather than just drilling facts into their heads. Woodson finds that many Black teachers resent their students, or even other Black people in general. This suggests that their education has successfully convinced them of their own inferiority. Woodson asks how Black people can unlearn this belief and create new economic opportunities for themselves.

In fact, Woodson opposes the whole idea of narrowly training people for specific job functions. First, he knows that people and jobs transform over time, which means that they eventually require different skills. Critical thinking is essential because it's the foundation of all learning—it's what allows people to acquire other skills. And secondly, Woodson knows that the Black community won't benefit much if a few of its members get better jobs, because the profits they help their companies earn will flow out to white owners and investors. Therefore, while technical skills can be important, they only matter as a supplement to critical thinking skills.



Because most Black elites think of themselves as superior to the rest of their community, they often insist on doing business with white people and institutions that discriminate against them, rather than with other Black people. This has led to the formation of two Black communities: one for the corrupt elites who do business with white people, and another for the disenfranchised masses. Woodson asks how these two communities can reconcile and argues that teachers and educators have to determine the answer.

Woodson argues that the elite has as much to learn from teachers as the masses. He tells anecdotes about selfish Black businesspeople who spend far too extravagantly, then complain about not having enough money to maintain themselves when their fortunes turn around. Woodson argues that Black communities should educate themselves about how to manage money properly and how to compete wisely, without undermining one another. For instance, two identical restaurants, banks, or insurance companies will often open next to each other, causing both to fail and depriving the Black community of the services they are supposed to provide.

Critical thinking can help people start innovative businesses that actually turn a profit and drive the community forward, rather than just repeating what others have already done. Woodson gives examples of innovative Black businessman, like the North Carolina furnituremaker Thomas Day, the bedmaker Henry Boyd, and women who invented new recipes for fried chicken and sweet potato biscuits. While all real fortunes come from innovations, Woodson concludes, Black businesspeople are stuck imitating what other people have already done. In spiritual matters, too, critical and creative thinking can help Black people live more fulfilling lives. With education, Woodson repeats, “the door of opportunity is wide open.”

Woodson returns to his key point about the Black community's division between the elites and the masses, in order to tease out its economic implications. Now that he has presented a vision of a more equitable education system and firmly established the link between education and economic advancement, it's clear that he thinks a better education would allow the elites and the masses to work together. This would, in turn, allow them to build successful Black enterprises that reinvest their profits in the community.



Because Black elites have been mis-educated rather than truly educated, they also desperately need education reform. Woodson hopes that financial literacy classes can help them make financial decisions and build businesses that contribute to the community rather than sucking resources out of it. In the long-term, he hopes that this can create jobs for the masses and prevent wealth from leaking out of the Black community.



Woodson returns to the conclusion that critical thinking—the opposite of imitation—is the most important skill for students to learn through education, regardless of what kind of school they attend. This is because critical thinking gives them the flexibility to successfully cope with a wide range of challenges and adapt to changing social and economic circumstances. Most of all, it's the engine behind innovation, which is the key source of profit (and eventually wealth) in a functioning capitalist economy. Woodson affirms that for scholars, businesspeople, educators, politicians, and artists, originality is the key ingredient for success. Therefore, he concludes that the Black community's future depends on its ability to develop and spread critical thinking skills throughout its ranks.



CHAPTER 16: THE NEW TYPE OF PROFESSIONAL MAN REQUIRED

Woodson argues that Black people should become professionals not only for the purposes of their own careers, but also for the sake of serving their community. It's essential to have Black lawyers, because Black people's rights are always up for debate in the courts. Black lawyers should also develop close ties with the community and learn about the specific challenges that Black people face under racial segregation (like falsified criminal records). Woodson explains that many Black lawyers lose their cases because, despite their sense of justice and obligation to the race, they lack the necessary knowledge of legal precedent and aren't prepared to deal with the court system's own prejudice.

Black doctors have generally been more successful than Black lawyers, but many choose medicine in the hopes of becoming rich. Woodson met one doctor who doesn't even have the equipment to treat his patients—he just briefly looks at them and then takes his fee. Thus, Woodson declares that the Black community needs competent, professional doctors who can address the specific health problems that Black people face in the segregated urban neighborhoods where they live. Beyond clinical practice, doctors also need to push for public health measures and medical research on these topics. They need to reach rural Black populations that still rely on folk medicine and study the particular diseases that Black populations are more likely to suffer.

Woodson argues that Black people need to push for inclusion in other professions besides law and medicine, and not only in the United States. He points out that Europeans take Black artists more seriously than Americans, as they have finally recognized that Black people have an important message for the world. Woodson hopes that these artists can help articulate and bring about a new vision of the future for Black people around the world.

Now that Woodson has offered his vision of a reformed school system, both classical and vocational, he presents his vision of a reformed Black professional class, which puts the good of the community above pure self-interest. He starts with the need to train effective Black lawyers, because this is one of the most important steps that the Black community can take to advance its political rights. Specifically, the law has been white supremacy's most powerful tool against Black Americans, so any meaningful strategy toward integration and equality will require Black lawyers' expertise.



Doctors might address a more pressing biological need than lawyers, but this doesn't prevent them from being opportunistic and self-serving. Regardless of their intentions, most Black doctors actually benefit from segregation, which raises the demand for their services by restricting Black patients' access to non-Black practitioners. To improve and expand medical care, however, it's essential for Black communities to build stronger institutions and hold doctors to higher standards. Needless to say, then, improving medical education is an essential part of improving medicine.



While contemporary readers might not consider artists as professionals of the same order as doctors and lawyers, Woodson thinks that they're extremely important. For one, this is because their creative work can tell inspiring stories that give Black people a sense of pride and identity. Secondly, they are also the most outward-facing people in the Black community, so they largely determine how the world perceives Black American life and culture. By developing a vibrant creative movement, Woodson thinks, Black artists can do as much as lawyers, doctors, or even teachers to help people (whether Black or not) accept the equality of the races.



CHAPTER 17: HIGHER STRIVINGS IN THE SERVICE OF THE COUNTRY

Woodson argues that Black people need selfless, competent, morally upstanding political leaders who truly understand the government. These leaders should start by serving and organizing their local communities, which are only politically significant because corrupt political bosses manipulate them for votes. Instead of being satisfied with a few token positions, Black people must seek to wield meaningful power in the country as a whole, like any other group of citizens. This requires them to economically develop their communities and begin contributing to the nation as a whole. Black leaders should take political offices to serve their country, not to profit from it. Moreover, they should try to serve the common good of the whole nation, rather than focusing solely on policies that affect Black people.

Woodson reapproaches politics through the key principle he's developed in the second half of his book: service is more important than top-down leadership. Therefore, like economic strength, political power must be built from the bottom up. This is the only way to make politicians accountable to the community, and such accountability is the only way to ensure that politicians actually govern in the community's best interests. Thus, fixing Black politics requires a combination of structural and personal reforms. But both indirectly depend on education. The relevant structural change is creating mechanisms for accountability by organizing the community, and this organization requires overcoming the division between the masses and elites. Meanwhile, creating better leaders requires teaching future generations to value their community above themselves and shaping the personal character and talents of future leaders. Woodson thinks this also requires transforming the school system.



Woodson specifically rejects communist ideas about social change. Instead, he defends capitalism, as he thinks that individuals are only motivated to work because they can keep the product of their own labor. Even if there is a revolution, Woodson argues, it's better for Black people to be independent and self-reliant once it's over. In fact, Woodson firmly believes that Black people can compete with white people on equal footing in a capitalist economy. Again, he thinks that Black people must create a self-sufficient economy for themselves in order to build political power, rather than the other way around. He argues that political solutions like revolution amount to waiting around for someone else to solve Black people's problems. Moreover, he believes that communists are selfishly manipulating Black people, just like corrupt politicians.

With the Great Depression and the formation of the Soviet Union, capitalism's value and viability as an economic system were seriously coming into question in Woodson's time. Therefore, it's significant that he squarely places himself on the side of capitalism. In other words, he opposes redistributing resources, and instead he thinks that people and communities (including oppressed groups like Black Americans) should build up their own strength through enterprise and hard work. After all, his social philosophy is very close to the traditional American capitalist worldview: he views individual originality and effort as the basis of economic development, and economic development as the basis for political power. In a nutshell, he thinks that individual creativity and hard work are the fundamental forces behind society, and he views education as a means to hone those forces.



CHAPTER 18: THE STUDY OF THE NEGRO

Based on his decades of experience as a scholar and educator, Woodson argues that very few Black people really care about learning Black history, because most consider it unimportant. They associate "history" with war, conquest, and other "crimes of the strong," but Woodson argues that real history involves the timeless struggle for progress and equality.

Woodson contrasts two visions of what historians should do, study, and teach. On the one hand, conventional historians focus on who has held power and what they have done with it. This history explains the forces that have shaped the world, but it doesn't provide ordinary people with any meaningful models for how to act during their lives. In contrast, Woodson is interested in the history of ordinary people and social groups, which can provide his readers and community with this kind of guidance. In fact, he's following the advice he's given throughout the book: effective educators must speak to their students' fundamental needs, desires, and abilities.



Woodson's Association for the Study of Negro Life and History is committed to promoting the study of Black history, which the Association believes to be just as significant and accomplished as any other group's history. In contrast, the white establishment argues that Black history is insignificant, because this encourages Black people to see themselves as worthless and inferior. Because Black history counters this perception, Woodson considers teaching it an important step toward justice and equality.

The white establishment has successfully subjugated Black people by teaching them a distorted version of their history, which is full of lies and negative stereotypes. But Woodson affirms that, by looking at themselves and their history scientifically, Black people can truly understand their predicament and make better plans for liberating themselves from it. Woodson hopes that this will help Black people, communities, and nations act with "foresight rather than 'hindsight.'"

According to Woodson and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, the solution to "the race problem" is critical thinking, which can help each person take the actions appropriate to their own particular circumstances. In closing, Woodson notes that the Association has published a textbook called *The African Background Outlined*, which presents a broad set of summaries and readings about Black history, art, and social and economic life around the world.

In a brief Appendix, Woodson examines debates about racial terminology, like "Black," "Negro," "Colored," and so on. He argues that it is misguided for a group to try to improve its reputation by changing its name. Rather, he thinks that Black people should focus on improving themselves, so that whatever name they're called gets associated with greatness. Woodson also criticizes Black people for dressing poorly, rather than embracing their beauty by coordinating their clothing with their skin color.

Woodson's association represents his own service to his race and nation: he wants to build the kind of institutions that he believes Black Americans need in order to collectively understand, appreciate, and value their own experiences. As he emphasizes throughout the book, scholarship trickles down to influence curriculum, which then influences students and eventually produces better leaders and citizens.



White supremacist history's lies and stereotypes are designed to give Black people a distorted view of their own past, identity, and potential. In contrast, Woodson proposes teaching Black people verifiable facts about their history—or even teaching this history from a Black perspective, just like white history is taught from a white perspective. This would give Black people ownership over their own story and show them that they have the power to rewrite this story in the future.



Woodson reiterates his conviction that education's power lies specifically in its ability to teach critical thinking, which in turn is the key skill necessary to improve and transform the world. Since critical thinking really just means assessing evidence in order to make judgments and take action, he thinks that Black people have to assess the facts of their own history in order to decide how to improve their situation. Woodson refers his readers to his textbook so that, if they so desire, they can start truly educating themselves about Black life and history.



Woodson uses this Appendix to address some prominent debates in and about the Black community in the 1930s. He sticks to his primary message: even though Black people aren't responsible for their own oppression, the power to overcome that oppression lies primarily in their hands. Woodson thinks that Black people will never get anywhere by trying to manage the feelings, expectations, and behavior of white people who already look down on them.





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