

***The Souls of Black Folk* Notes from Selected Chapters**

Summary

W.E.B. DuBois's concepts of life behind the veil of race and the resulting "double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others," have become touchstones for thinking about race in America. In addition to these enduring concepts, *The Souls of Black Folk* offers an assessment of the progress of the race, the obstacles to that progress, and the possibilities for future progress as the nation entered the twentieth century.

Du Bois examines the years immediately following the Civil War and, in particular, the Freedmen's Bureau's role in Reconstruction. The Bureau's failures were due not only to southern opposition and "national neglect," but also to mismanagement and courts that were biased "in favor of black litigants." The Bureau did have successes as well, and its most important contribution to progress was the founding of African American schools. Since the end of Reconstruction in 1876, Du Bois claims that the most significant event in African American history has been the rise of the educator, Booker T. Washington, to the role of spokesman for the race. Du Bois argues that Washington's approach to race relations is counterproductive to the long-term progress of the race. Washington's acceptance of segregation and his emphasis on material progress represent an "old attitude of adjustment and submission." Du Bois asserts that this policy has damaged African Americans by contributing to the loss of the vote, the loss of civil status, and the loss of aid for institutions of higher education. Du Bois insists that "the right to vote," "civic equality," and "the education of youth according to ability" are essential for African American progress.

In terms of education, African Americans should not be taught merely to earn money. Rather, Du Bois argues there should be a balance between the "standards of lower training" and the "standards of human culture and lofty ideals of life." In effect, the African American college should train the "Talented Tenth" who can in turn contribute to lower education and also act as liaisons in improving race relations.

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/duboissouls/summary.html>

Audience

The audience for *The Souls of Black Folk* was broad. Several of the essays had already appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine, one of the nation's leading mainstream publications. Accordingly, the book attracted attention from both the black and the white intelligentsia and went through several editions. The author's purposes were to convince white readers of the essential humanity of African Americans and to promote among black readers a new consciousness.

Style

- This is a collection of essays, which are loosely grouped according to theme
- DuBois writes in a poetic style, using lots of metaphors and very formal to archaic (outdated) words.
- Du Bois begins his work by stating his objective in no uncertain terms; his goal is to represent what it is like to be black in America at the beginning of the twentieth century because he is convinced that race is the central problem of the century to come (the 1900's). He states this in his forethought and follows with a loose thematic grouping of the essays to follow.
- Each of the chapters (an essay or story) opens with a quotation of verse from a famous source (from mainstream literature), followed by lines of music from an African-American spiritual (the Af. Am oral tradition). The result is a frame for each essay, both from the

recognized cultural establishment and from the unrecognized, yet widely known tradition of slave songs and spirituals. The effect is an impression of support, both from within the black community and from without, and puts the two formats on par with one another.

- The first essay, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," begins with verse depicting ceaseless yearning, and the final piece, "The Song of Sorrows," ends in song cheering the weary traveler with hope, effectively enclosing all of the essays in brackets of song describing the poles of black experience.

Historical Context

- All of the essays written near the turn of the century (late 1800's to early 1900's), which was a critical time in U.S. history regarding race relations.
- End of the Civil War and, in response, the 14th and 15th Amendments had been passed in 1868 and 1870 to recognize black Americans as U.S. citizens and to provide them with equal protection under the law. Nevertheless, by the turn of the century, segregation was still intact, particularly in the South. Although the Southern states had received assistance during the Reconstruction period, the region was still feeling the effects of the Civil War by the end of the nineteenth century and race relations reflected hostility on the part of whites for blacks.
- Limitations were placed on black employment opportunities and property ownership, interracial marriage was illegal in every state, and all public facilities, including schools, restaurants, hospitals, and government buildings, etc. were still segregated.

Issues & Themes

- Double Consciousness/Dualism or Dual/Dueling Identities
- The "Veil"
- Classical education v. vocational education (agricultural and trade training)
- Short term thinking and planning v. Long term thinking and planning
- Progress

Chapter 1 – Of Our Spiritual Strivings

Addresses the following issues: identity, the notion of Double Consciousness, the "Veil" of racism

Significance of the Sorrow Song

The spiritual is "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" and the verse is Arthur Symon's "The Crying of Water." "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen" is one of the "Ten master songs...of undoubted Negro origin and wide popular currency, and songs peculiarly characteristic of the slave." Du Bois writes further that "When, struck with a sudden poverty, the United States refused to fulfill its promises of land to the freedmen, a brigadier-general went down to the Sea Islands to carry the news. An old woman on the outskirts of the throng began singing this song; all the mass joined with her, swaying. And the soldier wept." Du Bois probably got this story from "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Had" in *Allen, Ware, and McKim, Slave Songs of the United States*. That book has sheet music to another version of the song, with different music and verses. According to Sundquist, the melody and words come from Fenner, Hampton and Its Students (*To Wake the Nations* 676n46).

The general mentioned was the head of the Freedmen's Bureau, General Howard. Eric Sundquist, in *To Wake the Nations* (494), says that the song can be traced — perhaps apocryphally — to a slave whose wife and children had just been sold away.

Summary of the Text

This essay raises the issue of African Americans' quest for identity—the "longing to attain self-conscious manhood." Although granted freedom, citizenship, and suffrage by the Civil War amendments, the emancipated black person had yet to be seen as a person by white society—and, often, by himself or herself. By the fact of being black, one qualified as a "problem." This profoundly affects the African American (enslaved and free) psyche and how they are treated. This leads to the notion of Double Consciousness. By being black, one had to maintain a "double consciousness"—looking at oneself first through the eyes of white society. DuBois writes of the "double identity" and "double aims" of the Negro during the years following the Civil War. By being black, one has to navigate between two worlds, the mainstream/white world and the African American world. This creates conflict – the two warring ideals and souls that DuBois describes.

In this chapter, DuBois raises the following questions: How does selfhood survive these obstacles? How does one maintain self-respect in this environment? Where does one find solace from the strife?

Chapter 3 - Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others

Addresses the following issues: how to progress/advance, resistance v. subservience, Booker T.'s Atlanta Compromise, classical v. industrial/vocational education

Significance of Sorrow Song (perhaps sarcastic choice?)

Sundquist, in *To Wake the Nations* (496-97) thinks that the lyrics are accommodationist, Satisfaction is deferred to "heben." The words are in a possibly caricatured black dialect measured to please white audiences. But the song could have also been construed as an announcement of a secret meeting among the slaves according to Yolanda Y. Smith, in "He Still Wid Us—Jesus: The Musical Theology of Spirituals," in *Christianity Today*. That would contradict Sundquist's reading, but it is not clear what would be the interpretation in its stead. Perhaps the song construed as an announcement is DuBois' call to action, a call for the non-accommodationists to get together, with the promised land being the world above the veil of racism. This would put Washington in the role of powerful oppressor, with the non-accommodationists meeting, perhaps in secret at first, to strike a blow against the neo-slavery of the "New" South.

Key Figure

Booker T. Washington: A leader who advised blacks to give up social equality in exchange for access to economic power.

Summary of the Text

This is Du Bois' rebuttal to Washington's plan for black progress, and his vision of the activism required in the new century. Du Bois boldly challenged Booker T. Washington and his accommodationist approach to race relations.

Since the end of Reconstruction in 1876, Du Bois claims that the most significant event in African American history has been the rise of the educator, Booker T. Washington, to the role of spokesman for the race. Du Bois argues that Washington's approach to race relations is counterproductive to the long-term progress of the race. Washington's acceptance of segregation and his emphasis on material progress represent an "old attitude of adjustment and submission."

Du Bois asserts that this policy has damaged African Americans by contributing to the loss of the vote, the loss of civil status, and the loss of aid for institutions of higher education. Du Bois

insists that “the right to vote,” “civic equality,” and “the education of youth according to ability” are essential for African American progress.

Chapter 4 – Of the Meaning of Progress

Addresses the following issues: the progress of blacks, the obstacles that blacks face, and the possibilities for progress in the future.

Significance of Sorrow Song

This is a spiritual that sings of this life rather than the other. Upon returning to the place where he taught after graduating from Fisk, Du Bois finds Josie, the girl who told him of the teaching job, dead, the log schoolhouse replaced with a board shack, and in general, very little in the way of progress toward a meaningful freedom. Perhaps Du Bois is ironically referring to himself as one of the angels sent down, or perhaps, it is his occluded vision that requires some kind of intervention to reap the rewards of Jubilee/freedom. (Sundquist, 500-501)

Summary of the Text

Reflecting back on his experiences as a young teacher in rural Tennessee, and later re-visiting the area where he taught and his former students, DuBois raises the following questions: What is true “progress”?

He begins this essay like a traditional fairy tale. However, life is anything but a fairy tale for those mentioned in this book and it doesn’t end with “and they all lived happily ever after.”

He tries to measure blacks’ progress since emancipation and questions the infrastructure available for their progress.

Chapter 6 - Of the Training of Black Men

Addresses the following issues: short term thinking v. long term thinking, training merely to earn money or training for full participation in life (economically, politically, socially)

Significance of Sorrow Song

This verse is obviously a reassurance that Black folk should march on to gain victory, with the South as Egypt.

Key Terms

“Talented Tenth” = an educated vanguard that would serve as the teachers and leaders in the black community. Du Bois used the term "the talented tenth" to describe the likelihood of one in ten black men becoming leaders of their race in the world, through methods such as continuing their education, writing books, or becoming directly involved in social change. He strongly believed that blacks needed a classical education to be able to reach their potential, rather than the industrial education

Summary of the Text

This is a continuation of the debate with Booker T. Washington. In this he outlines specifics regarding the education or training of African Americans.

In terms of education, African Americans should not be taught merely to earn money. Rather, Du Bois argues there should be a balance between the "standards of lower training" and the "standards of human culture and lofty ideals of life." In effect, the African American college should train the "Talented Tenth" who can in turn contribute to lower education and also act as liaisons in improving race relations.