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The Souls of Black Folk

by

W. E. B. DuBois
1903



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SYNOPSIS

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. DuBois assembles fourteen of his essays on the history, politics, and sociology of the black community.

The Souls of Black Folk opens with a “Forethought,” in which DuBois directly addresses the reader, introducing the essays that comprise the text and outlining its main themes. DuBois tells the reader that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line.” This statement is repeated throughout the text. The issue of the “color line,” or the division of African Americans from the rest of American society (namely, “white” society), is the main theme of this text.

DuBois begins Chapter One by discussing what it means to be a “problem.” He says that people never come right out and ask him what it is like to be a problem; although he knows they consider him a problem because he is African American. Instead, people talk about nice African Americans they know or tell him about how they fought in the Civil War to end slavery. DuBois is polite when people say these things. Following this introduction, DuBois recalls an incident from his childhood in New England. One day, DuBois and his school mates were exchanging visiting-cards. DuBois was shocked, when a girl who was new to the school refused his card. He realized, then, that he was different from the other children (who were, presumably, white). DuBois then decided he lived within the veil and held contempt for those who lived outside of it. After some time, DuBois’s contempt faded and he decided he would do something important with his life.

DuBois outlines the classification of the races (Egyptian, Indian, Greek, Roman, Teuton, Mongolian, Negro) and says that the “Negro” is a seventh son with the gift of second-sight. DuBois calls the second sight a “double consciousness,” explaining that African Americans always see themselves through others’ eyes. Thus, DuBois argues, the Negro is constantly striving to merge his various selves in a.....

W.E.B. DuBois – BIOGRAPHY

W.E.B. (William Edward Burghart) DuBois (Born Feb. 23, 1868 and died August 27, 1963) was born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts and raised by his mother, after his father abandoned the family. The town in which DuBois grew up, Great Barrington, was approximately 95-98% white at the time. DuBois was a successful student and graduated with a B.A. from Fisk University in Tennessee. DuBois went on to become the first African American to earn a doctoral degree from Harvard University.

DuBois worked for a time at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, where he.....

GENRE

The Souls of Black Folk is work of non-fiction. It is important to note the differences between non-fiction writing such as *The Souls of Black Folk* and novels. A novel is a fictional narrative in which literary elements such as exposition, rising action, climax, denouement, and characterization are.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES / ANALYSIS

CHAPTERS 1 – 2: Forethought

Summary

The Souls of Black Folk opens with a “Forethought,” in which DuBois directly addresses the reader, introducing the essays that comprise the text and outlining its main themes. DuBois tells the reader that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line.” This statement is repeated throughout the text. The issue of the “color line,” or the division of African Americans from the rest of American society (namely, “white” society), is the main theme of this text. DuBois notes that some the essays collected in this volume were

previously published elsewhere and each begins with a bar of African American music. Finally, he tells the reader that he lives within the Veil.

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DuBois outlines the classification of the races (Egyptian, Indian, Greek, Roman, Teuton, Mongolian, Negro) and says that the “Negro” is a seventh son with the gift of second-sight. DuBois calls the second sight a “double consciousness,” explaining that African Americans always see themselves through others’ eyes. Thus, DuBois argues, the Negro is constantly striving to merge his various selves in a quest for self-conscious manhood: he wishes to be both a Negro and an American.

DuBois claims that the promises of the freedom for African Americans, fought for in the Civil War, remain unfulfilled. Even though African Americans were given the right to vote following the war, they were disenfranchised after Reconstruction ended. DuBois argues that African Americans should not be judged by the same standards as the rest of the world until they are equally free and given the opportunity to address the social issues that have been forged in their oppression.

DuBois begins Chapter 2 by echoing the phrase he introduced in the Forethought: “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line.” This time, he defines the statement as “the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.” Essentially, this line (or “Veil”) separates African Americans from lighter-skinned Americans. DuBois points out that it was this issue that ignited the Civil War, even though he knows many Southerners would not agree with that estimation. DuBois says the aim of this second essay is to examine what the years 1861-1872 meant for African Americans. DuBois is particularly interested in the Freedmen’s Bureau, which he calls “one of the most singular and interesting attempts made by a great nation to grapple with the vast problems of race and social condition.”

DuBois examines the problem slaves posed during the early years of the Civil War. The North was not sure what to do with escaped slaves and did not have a unified response until the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, which freed slaves in states of rebellion (i.e. the Confederacy). DuBois traces the history of the Freeman’s Bureau to various attempts to manage fugitive slaves during the war, such as the Port Royal experiment and various Freedmen’s Aid societies.

What came to be known as the Freedmen’s Bureau was passed by Congress in March, 1865 and was officially called the “Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands.” Initially, this Bureau was intended to support former slaves and manage abandoned lands for the duration of the Civil War (which ended shortly after the Bill was passed) and for the year after the war ended. DuBois notes that the Bureau faced two major problems in its first year that made the situation seem even more complicated than it had when the Bureau was erected. Bureau members had to decide: 1. what to do with abandoned lands, 2. how to handle the logistics of implementing the Bureau throughout the South. However, DuBois argues that the Bureau accomplished three important goals in its first year: 1. it relieved many people of physical suffering; 2. it returned 7,000 fugitives to farms; 3. it inaugurated the crusade of the New England “schoolma’am” (women from New England who came to teach in Southern school houses). The Freedmen’s Bureau continued to take shape in the next years, when its

powers were outlined in Congress and its tenure extended again and again until it was eventually dissolved with the end of Reconstruction in 1876.

DuBois observes that the period in which the Bureau was establishing itself in the American landscape was tumultuous and the Bureau workers faced vast many hardships. In DuBois's opinion, the Bureau was most successful in establishing Negro schools. The Bureau was least successful in its judicial functions because it was prejudiced in favor of blacks. DuBois points out that the South could be a terrifying place for African Americans and that civil courts perpetuated slavery by relegating blacks to serfdom. Thus Bureau members sought to balance judicial atmosphere by finding cases in favor of African Americans.

Notes

Throughout this text DuBois uses the terms "Negro" and "colored." At the time, Negro was the most widely-accepted term for describing someone of African descent. In the 1960s and 1970s "Afro-American" became the preferred term and today it is "African American" or "black."

In these essays, DuBois coins the significant, interrelated terms: "the veil" and "double-consciousness." For DuBois, African Americans were separated from American ("white") society by a metaphorical veil. This veil produced the effects of double-consciousness, meaning that in their separation from whites, African Americans were forced to see themselves through white America's eyes as well as their own.

In the second chapter, DuBois begins with a discussion of why the Civil War was fought, arguing that despite what some Southerners might say, the war was fought over slavery. The cause of the war remains controversial even today. James Loewen points out in his text, *Lies My History Teacher Told Me*, that various public school text books in the South do not mention the cause of the war, or claim it was fought over state's rights. While most historians agree that slavery was the cause of the war, it remains a sensitive topic in many places.

In the second chapter DuBois glosses some important legislation that occurred during and immediately following the Civil War, which is important to understand to fully comprehend the political/ social atmosphere of these years. The Emancipation Proclamation was passed in September 22, 1862 (it went into effect January 1, 1863). This law did not actually free any slaves. The Emancipation Proclamation only freed slaves in the states that had succeeded from the Union and were not already under Union control. Moreover, it left slavery untouched in border states that had remained loyal to the Union (Delaware, Maryland, Missouri, Kentucky, and West Virginia). However, this order proved strategic diplomatically, by convincing foreign governments that the Union was committed to ending slavery. Thus it would be difficult for a foreign government (such as Britain or France) to support the Confederacy.

Following the war, three Amendments to the Constitution were passed: 13th, 14th, and 15th. The 13th Amendment (1865) abolished slavery; the 14th Amendment (1868) guaranteed Due Process and Equal Protection to all citizens; the 15th Amendment (1870) guaranteed voting rights, regardless of race (although, not gender).

Finally, DuBois places the end of Reconstruction in 1876, while most historians today pinpoint 1877; although both dates accurately capture the reason for Reconstruction's demise, which was the Compromise of 1877. This compromise, which was an informal agreement made by Congress, resolved the disputed Presidential election of 1876 between Rutherford B. Hayes and Samuel Tilden. Tilden had beaten Hayes in the popular vote; however 20 electoral votes were disputed. Congress awarded Hayes (a Republican) the presidency. In turn, Hayes removed federal troops from the former Confederate states and appointed a Southern Democrat to his cabinet.

CHAPTER 3

Summary

In this chapter, DuBois considers the ascendancy of Booker T. Washington, which he calls “the most striking thing in the history of the American Negro since 1876.” DuBois argues that while Washington was not the first to conceive of an industrial school, he was the first to ally a school that focuses on trades with “the best” Southerners. DuBois summarizes how Washington began Tuskegee University and discusses how significant this achievement was, commenting that Washington was able to curry favor with both northern and southern whites.

While DuBois pays tribute to what Booker T. Washington has accomplished, he also discusses the many people, particularly African Americans, who disagree with Washington’s theories. DuBois concedes that some black men may criticize Washington because they are envious but maintains that many educated black men oppose Washington.

DuBois situates Washington within the history of black male leadership in American history, highlighting, especially, the strength of Frederick Douglass, who, even in his old age, “bravely stood for the ideals of his early manhood—ultimate assimilation *through* self-assertion, and on no other terms.” Conversely, DuBois calls Washington a “compromiser between the South, the North, and the Negro.”

DuBois is critical of Booker T. Washington because he believes Washington promotes a policy of submission for African Americans in asking them to give up three fundamental privileges: 1. political power, 2. civil rights, 3. higher education. DuBois sees three major results of this policy, which he argues Washington is not solely responsible for but has helped develop: 1. the disenfranchisement of the Negro, 2. legal inferiority of the Negro, 3. the withdrawal of aid from Negro institutions of higher learning. DuBois argues that African Americans cannot make economic progress if they lack political rights and opportunities to develop as men. Thus he claims Washington faces a “triple paradox”: 1. Negro artisans cannot become businessmen and property owners if they are denied suffrage; 2. African Americans cannot be self-respecting if they continue to be submissive; 3. Washington advocates industrial education for African Americans, but even Tuskegee could not survive without teachers trained in Negro colleges.

DuBois offers some suggestions for how black men should respond to their current circumstances. He argues that the South should not be judged blindly, as the present generation is not responsible for the past and there are many good southerners. He also argues that African American men have a duty to oppose some of Washington’s ideas, even if he is an important leader. DuBois recommends praising the good Washington has done but advocates standing up against propaganda that devalues black votes, that supports an emasculating caste system, and that does not value higher education.

Notes

In this chapter DuBois cautiously criticizes prominent black leader, Booker T. Washington (1856-1915). DuBois believes Washington is promoting an assimilationist strategy for African Americans—specifically, African American men, as he does not directly address African American women. While DuBois acknowledges that Washington has done much good for the race, he believes black men must take him to task on three important issues. First, DuBois argues that African Americans should pursue their right to vote. At this time, despite the 15th Amendment, many southern states implemented poll tax laws, which required male citizens to pay a tax to vote unless their father or grandfather had been able to vote (ensuring that even poor white men could continue to vote). These laws were not repealed until the 24th Amendment was passed in 1964. Additionally, many whites threatened or enacted violence against blacks who attempted to vote. Next, DuBois believes Washington is not strict enough in his pursuit of civil equality for African Americans, who were often found guilty of petty crimes (such as vagrancy) and leased to plantation owners to work off their

debt, effectively perpetuating serfdom. For more on the experiences of civil inequality by African Americans in this period, see Douglas Blackmon's *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (2008).

Finally, DuBois is critical of Washington's advocacy of industrial/ trade schools for African Americans. While DuBois saw the value in schools that would prepare blacks for trades, he also promoted the idea of the "talented tenth," explained further in another 1903 collection of his essays, entitled *The Negro Problem*. DuBois argued that one in every ten African Americans had the ability to be a leader of the race. In encouraging black men to amass wealth or to learn a trade, DuBois believed the opportunity would be missed to cultivate the talented tenth into educated, "real" men.....

IMPORTANT / KEY FACTS

Title: *Souls of Black Folk*

Author: W.E.B. DuBois

Date Published: 1903.....

STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

When examining a piece of non-fiction writing, the reader should always be concerned with methodology. An author's methodology is the way he or she constructs the argument. This includes the sources the author uses as well as the way he or she presents the argument—what evidence the writer includes and the order in which the evidence is presented. The main reason for evaluating methodology is to.....

MEMORABLE / NOTABLE QUOTES

Edition Used: Avon Books, 1965

1.) "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line" (209). This statement appears for the first time in the Forethought, and is repeated throughout. The issue of the "color line," or the division of African Americans from the rest of American society (namely, "white" society), is the main theme of this text.

2.) "To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word" (213). DuBois begins Chapter 1 by discussing what it means to be a "problem." He says that people never come right out and ask him what it is like to be a problem (because he is African American). Instead, people talk about nice African Americans they know or tell him about how they fought in the Civil War to end slavery. DuBois is.....

MEMORABLE / NOTABLE QUOTES QUIZ

Match the quote to the corresponding description of its relevance.

1.) "In the Black World, the Preacher and the Teacher embodied once the ideals of the people, -- the strife for another and a juster world, the vague dream of righteousness, the mystery of knowing; but to-day the danger is that these ideals, with their simple beauty and weird inspiration, will suddenly sink to a question of cash and a lust for gold"

2.) "If somewhere in this whirl and chaos of things there dwells Eternal Good, pitiful yet masterful, then anon in his good time America shall rend the Veil and the prisoned shall go free"

A.) DuBois begins Chapter 1 by discussing what it means to be a "problem." He says that people never come right out and ask him what it is like to be a problem (because he is African American). Instead, people talk about nice African Americans they know or tell him about how they fought in the Civil War to end slavery. DuBois is polite when people say these things, but knows what they.....

ANSWER KEY

1.) H 2.) J 3.) B 4.) C 5.) F 6.) A 7.) I 8.) D 9.) G 10.) E

VOCABULARY

Peremptory - leaving no room for debate or discussion

Sycophant - someone who flatters a person in power for his own gain

Obeisance - an action or attitude of respect.....

STUDY QUESTIONS – MULTIPLE CHOICE QUIZ

1. What is the Veil?
 - A. A religious garment worn by the students in DuBois's school
 - B. A metaphor for what divides African Americans from the rest of society
 - C. A old African folk tale
2. When did DuBois first realize he was a "problem"?
 - A. When a girl, new to his school, would not take his visiting card
 - B. When his family moved to GeorgiaHe never felt like a problem.....

ANSWER KEY

1.) b 2.) a 3.) c 4.) a 5.) a 6.) c 7.) b 8.) b 9.) b 10.) c 11.) a 12.) b 13.) a 14.) c 15.) b

TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION / IN-CLASS WRITING

Forethought- Chapter 2

1. How would you describe DuBois's tone in these chapters? Does he seem angry? Is he trying to gain support?
2. How do you think the other children might have reacted when the little girl would not accept DuBois's card?
3. Why would someone who knew the perils of racism want to go to the South, where it was more pronounced?

Chapter 3

On what does DuBois agree with Booker T. Washington?.....

TOPICS FOR TAKE-HOME ESSAYS

1. What is the meaning of the title: "The Souls of Black Folk"? To answer this question, use examples from the text and make an argument about what you think DuBois was trying to achieve with this collection of essays.

Write a response from Booker T. Washington's perspective to DuBois's arguments in.....

END OF SAMPLE MONKEYNOTES EXCERPTS

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