
Booknotes for Souls of Black Folk

Authorial Background:

W. E. B. Du Bois was born in 1868 in Great Barrington of southwestern Massachusetts. He graduated from high school there in 1884. After an undergraduate career at Fisk University, in Nashville, Tennessee, where he received a B.A., Du Bois entered Harvard as a junior, on scholarship, in 1888. He received his M.A. in history in 1891. In 1895 he received the Ph.D. from Harvard, the first black person in American history to obtain a doctorate in a secular subject. His dissertation, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870*, was the first publication of the Harvard Historical Series and marked the beginning of the scientific study of black history. Virtually throughout his life, Du Bois worked as writer, editor, and scholar. In 1903 he wrote Souls of Black Folk; his reason for writing the book was to express pride in his people, his belief that they have a mission to perform for mankind out of their oppressed condition, and to influence public policy. In 1910, Du Bois joined the executive board of the newly launched NAACP and became an organizer and agitator for the rest of his life. He died on August 27, 1963, the day before the Civil Rights March in Washington, D.C.

Literary Period / Country:

Modern, United States

Setting:

The southern United States, during the time between the end of slavery and the beginning of the twentieth century. Socioeconomically, the colored race was at the bottom of society and were forced to retain a slave-like status by working for no pay. Worked farmland and large houses represented the distinct divide between the two races and classes.

Theme:

The major theme of The Souls of Black Folk is the oppression of Negroes and the perpetual hope for a better lifestyle. Another theme is the consequences of ignorance. Because the Negroes did not know of any better lifestyle, they naturally accepted whatever the white man gave to them. Also, man's inhumanity to man was seen in the way the white man did injustice to the Negroes. However, one of the most important themes in the novel was the importance of keeping one's faith. The Negroes kept their faith by going to church, remaining relatively peaceful in the face of heinous injustice, and keeping hope for their children.

Author's Unique Style:

Du Bois sought to change public policy toward colored and disadvantaged people, and so used a historical narrative for that purpose. His argument for socioeconomic, political, and spiritual freedom was carried out by listing examples and narrating events in chronological order. To make his narrative more detailed, he uses statistics such as “. . . two hundred are laborers, teamsters, etc., including twenty-four artisans, ten merchants, twenty-one preachers, and four teachers” (100). The songs and lyric poems he uses are representative of Negro culture. Du

Bois also uses symbolism to express his thesis. Prominent in his work are motifs, or recurring words or phrases; he uses the word "Veil" many times, often in an ambiguous manner. The Veil is sometimes referred to as a shadow, a thought, or a discriminate action. Allegory is pronounced in Chapter 11--the baby and the terms of his life as related to the "Veil" are symbolic of the struggles of the Negro race to survive, to be finally overcome, and die.

Quotes:

1. "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (3). This quote shows how the Negroes were divided as a people and as people; it further serves to support Du Bois' thoughts about discrimination.
2. "Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil?" (1) Instead of acknowledging the fact of the situation, that colored people are a problem, the speaker does not wish to address the issue. Instead, he wants to euphemise.
3. "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line" (10). It is a problem; this quote shows how America is divided, and for any progress to be made, it is necessary for people to begin working together.
4. "Not dead, not dead, but escaped; not bond, but free" (150). This represents the dream of the oppressed Negro race, since there is no sign of eventual freedom.
5. "White man sit down whole year; Nigger work day and night and make crop; Nigger hardly gits bread and meat; white man sittin' down gits all. It's wrong" (105). This quote expresses the dissatisfaction that Negroes feel, put briefly and bluntly.

Glossary:

1. Allegory: a story in which people, things, and events have another meaning. The personal "I" that is used is allegorical of the Negro race, and in Chapter 11, Hope, the Negro race, the "Veil," and Death are allegorized in the story as the struggle of the baby to live under the "Veil."
2. Ambiguity: multiple meanings a literary work may communicate. Du Bois narrates the story from a first person point of view, but whenever he uses the personal "I," he is actually referring to the Negro race as a whole.
3. Motif: a pattern or recurring phrase. In the novel, the word "Veil" is repeated.
4. Imagery: vividly described pictures used to appeal to the five senses. In the quote "So I walked on and on--horses were too expensive--until I had wandered beyond railways, beyond stage lines, to a land of "varmints" and rattlesnakes, where the coming of a stranger was an event, and men lived and died in the shadow of one blue hill," imagery is used to describe the dismal scene of country life (44).
5. Pathos: a quality that arouses the reader's emotions and sympathies. Very prominent in the novel are the appeals made to the emotions; the author describes the hardships of the Negro race, their longing for a good, prosperous life, and the Sorrow Son