

**W. E. B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*:
Freedom, Equality and Racial Discrimination**

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W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963)

Courtesy: <https://www.naacp.org/naacp-history-w-e-b-dubois/>

Abstract

Students and research scholars who want to specialize in Black Literature must read W. E. B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, published originally in 1903. The book has 14 chapters, preceded by a section THE FORETHOUGHT and followed by the section AFTERTHOUGHT.

The following are the chapters of the book *The Souls of Black Folk*.

1. Of Our Spiritual Strivings.
2. Of the Dawn of Freedom
3. Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others
4. Of the Meaning of Progress
5. Of the Wings of Atlanta

6. Of the Training of Black Men
7. Of the Black Belt
8. Of the Quest of the Golden Fleece
9. Of the Sons of Master and Man
10. Of the Faith of the Fathers
11. Of the Passing of the First-Born
12. Of Alexander Crummell
12. Of the Coming of John
13. Of the Borrow Songs

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was an American sociologist, historian, civil rights activist, Pan-Africanist, author, writer and editor. He was born on February 23, 1868 in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, USA and died on August 27, 1963 in Accra, Ghana. He obtained his Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1895 (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/W._E._B._Du_Bois). He was a great “American sociologist, historian, author, editor, and activist who was the most important black protest leader in the United States during the first half of the 20th century” (Elliott Rudwick, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/W-E-B-Du-Bois>).

Du Bois uses an elegant language in this masterpiece, but sentences are usually long with several clauses. So, it does require some attentive reading. In addition, unless we are really interested in Black Literature, we could easily lose our interest in completing the reading of this very valuable and interesting book.

The book is both autobiographical as well as a scholarly treatment of the issues and problems faced by the Black people (Negro) in the United States.

Chapter 1: Du Bois’ troubling experiences with the Whites began in his “wee wooden schoolhouse”. “In wee wooden schoolhouse, something put into the boys’ and girls’ heads to buy gorgeous visitingcards – ten cents a package – and exchange. The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card, -- refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil” (Chapter 1 Our Spiritual Strivings, p. 3).

Du Bois calls the colour-line a veil. Veil in some sense refers to the segregation practiced in the United States. Colour-line is distinction between the Blacks and the Whites. These two abstracts as well as concrete ideas are found practiced in India too based on caste distinctions. Du Bois argues, “[African American] would not bleach his Negro soul in a blood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit

upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (Chapter 1 Our Spiritual Strivings, p. 4).

Chapter 2 presents a summary of steps taken to resettle the Negroes as freedmen and women. The chapter is given the title “Of the Dawn of Freedom.” The chapter begins with a poem by the author and these lines are part of this poem:

Truth forever on the scaffold,
Wrong forever on the throne;

Du Bois declares, “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line, -- the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea” (p. 7). The period of history from 1861 to 1872 is the focus of this chapter.

Negroes freed or emancipated from slavery moved in large numbers to the North and other states which did not support slavery. Problems faced by the fugitive Negroes and conflicting positions taken by US Army commanders are narrated showing the pain suffered and the disadvantages still persisting. This is a sad picture: “Masses of Negroes stood idle, or, if they worked spasmodically, were never sure of pay; and if perchance they received pay, squandered the new thing thoughtlessly” (p. 9). This one is a great description what the freed Negro underwent: “Then amid all the crouched the freed slave bewildered between friend and foe. He had merged from slavery, -- not the worst slavery in the world that made all life unbearable, rather a slavery that had here and there something of kindness, fidelity, and happiness, -- but withal slavery, which, so far as human aspiration and desert were concerned, classed the black man and the ox together” (p. 13).

Chapter 3 is titled “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others”. DuBois points out the declaration of Booker T. Washington, “In all things purely social we can be as separate as the five fingers, and yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress” (p. 19). Du Bois writes, “South interpreted it in different ways: the radicals received it as a complete surrender of the demand for civil and political equality; and the conservatives, as a generously conceived working basis for mutual understanding” (p. 19). Unfortunately, even though Booker T. Washington is highly praised, his declaration is unacceptable to large section of the Black population. Du Bois sympathetically describes Booker’s condition: “a lone black boy poring over a French grammar amid he weeds and dirt of a neglected home” (p. 19).

Washington’s programme for Blacks is described as Gospel of Work and Money. Du Bois argued (and his arguments seem to be valid even today), “... Mr. Washington is especially to be criticized. His doctrine has tended to make the whites, North and South, shift the burden of the Negro problem to the Negro’s shoulders and stand aside as critical and rather pessimistic spectators; where in fact the burden belongs to the nation, and the hands of none of us are clean if we bend not our energies to righting these great wrongs” (p.25).

Chapter 4 is given the title “Of the Meaning of Progress”. This chapter describes the geographical beauty of various states including Tennessee where DuBois was a schoolteacher.

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Despite his hard work, he was segregated: “I remember the day I rode horseback out to the commissioner’s house with a pleasant young white fellow who wanted the white school. The road down the bed of a stream; the sun laughed and the jingled, and we rode on. “Come in,” said the commissioner, -- “come in. Have seat. Yes, that certificate will do. Stay to dinner. What do you want a month?” “Oh,” thought I, “this is lucky”; but even then, fell the awful shadow of the Veil, for they ate first, then I – alone” (p. 27).

The chapter, while discussing, in an elaborate and convincing manner what needs to be done to improve the education, working conditions, social issues, etc., presents such heart-rending episodes of experience extended to the Negroes. I would highly recommend that out students of Literature must read this chapter in full so that they will really understand the background of issues embedded in Black Literature.

The language style is very appealing and brings out the underlying emotions and yearnings of Blacks. A very impressive autobiographical note leading the way to autobiography novels among the downtrodden around the world.

Chapter 5 is given the title “Of the Wings of Atlanta”. A beautiful description of Atlanta City is presented.

Now in 2019, Atlanta City in Georgia State has Black or African American: 52.29% of its total population, over 12% more than the White population (White: 40.08%).
<http://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/atlanta-population/>

Du Bois writes in his book “[Men of] Atlanta turned resolutely toward the future; and that future held aloft vistas of purple and gold:--Atlanta, Queen of the cotton kingdom; Atlanta, Gateway to the Land of the Sun; ... the city crowned her hundred hills with factories, and stored her shops with cunning handiwork, and stretched long iron ways to greet busy Mercury in his coming. And the Nation talked of her striving” (p. 32).

Du Bois laments the changes taking place among the Black people: “In the Black World, the Preacher and Teacher embodied the ideals of this people ... but today 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.” He is worried: “What if the Negro people be wooed from a strife for righteousness, from a love of knowing, to regard dollars as the be-all and end-all of life?” (p. 33). Du Bois is focused on the education of the Negro people: “... the true college will ever have one goal, --not to earn met, but to know the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes” (p. 34). Great ideal, indeed.

Chapter 6 has the title “Of the Training of Black Men”. A powerful suggestion for the Black People and others to follow is presented in this chapter among other important points: “... we may decry the color-prejudice of the South, yet it remains a heavy fact. Such curious kinks of the human mind exist and must be reckoned with soberly. They cannot be laughed away, nor always successfully stormed at, nor easily abolished by act of legislature. And yet they must not be encouraged by being let alone” (p. 37).

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I would greatly recommend this chapter for all the educationists to read if our goal is to improve the living conditions of downtrodden and socially and economically weaker sections of our society. This chapter is also meant for the students from such groups of students. They will see clearly what needs to be done by them to ensure a safer community in the future.

Chapter 7 (“Of the Black Belt”) deals with Georgia, the Black Belt, where “the Negro problems seem to be centred in this State” (p. 45). A journey in the “Jim Crow Car” through Georgia to enjoy the Nature and also to depict the lives of the Negroes is presented. This chapter, like other chapters, is fundamental for us to understand Black Literature. In fact, this chapter is a masterpiece of Black Literature. “How curious a land is this, --how full of untold story, of tragedy and laughter, and the rich legacy of human life; shadowed with a tragic past, and big with future promise!” (p. 49). The suffering and torture of the Blacks greatly move our hearts, and our souls begin to identify themselves with the souls of the Black.

Chapter 8 is given the title “Of the Quest of the Golden Fleece”. What the author wrote in 1903 is still valid today: “We seldom study the condition of the Negro to-day honestly and carefully. It is so much easier to assume that we know it all” (p. 55). “The keynote of the Black Belt is debt; not in commercial credit, but in the sense of continued inability on the part of the mass of the population to make income cover expense.” The chapter presents the living conditions of the Negro people. The housing and other arrangements are focused. Negro localities are described. Discrimination of the Black labour against the White labour population in all respects, including housing, are described. Indian first generation college students will relate themselves easily to the conditions described. Many individual lives are presented, and the chapter continues the storytelling mode adopted in earlier chapters. “... ninety-six per cent are toiling; no one with leisure to turn the bare and cheerless cabin into a home, no old folks to sit beside the fire and hand down traditions of the past; ...” (p. 55).

Chapter 9 “Of the Sons of Master and Man” pleads, “... the strife of all honorable men of the twentieth century to see that in the future competition of races the survival of the fittest shall mean the triumph of the good, the beautiful, and the true; ...” (p. 66). This chapter is an excellent introduction sociological analysis – what should we look for, what should be the focus of our study, why we need to take a descriptive approach, why we should not be prejudiced and why we should not presume findings, and so. The suggestions are presented in an easy to follow language and in systematic manner with great examples. Political history and suffering of the Black people are presented, and this discussion easily becomes a background for many novels of Black Literature.

Chapter 10 “Of the Faith of the Fathers” is a great depiction of the Faith of the Negro people: “Three things characterized this religion of the slave, -- the Preacher, the Music, and the Frenzy” ... The Preacher is the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil, ... A leader, a politician, an orator, a “boss,” an intriguer, an idealist ...” (p. 76). Christianity of the Black people has its own dynamism and has given many dynamic preachers.

“The Music of Negro religion is that plaintive rhythmic melody, with its touching minor cadences, which, despite caricature and defilement, still remains the most original and beautiful expression of human life and longing yet born on American soil. ... it became the one true expression of a people’s sorrow, despair and hope.” ... “the frenzy of “Shouting” ... made him mad with supernatural joy...” (pp. 76-77).

This chapter deals with a major characteristic of Black culture. The Church is an integral part of Negro life. This chapter is not only about the religion, it is also about how religion changed the life of Negro people in America and how Negro people contributed to American Christianity in a very significant manner.

Chapter 11 “Of the Passing of the First-Born” presents the description of the birth and death of Du Bois’ first baby. I do not know how to describe the events – heartrending, sorrowful, and a language that moves our heart and soul. “... it seemed a ludicrous thing to love; but her I loved, my girl-mother, she whom now I saw unfolding like the glory of the morning – the transfigured woman. Through her I came to love the wee thing, as it grew strong; as its little soul unfolded itself in twitter and cry and half-formed word, and as its eyes caught the gleam and flash of life. How beautiful he was, with his olive-tinted flesh and dark gold ringlets, his eyes of mingled blue and brown, his perfect little limbs, and the soft voluptuous roll which the blood of Africa had moulded into his features! (p. 83). “A perfect life was his, all joy and love, with tears to make it brighter, --sweet as a summer’s day beside the Housatonic. The world loved him; the women kissed his curls, the men looked gravely into his wonderful eyes, and the children hovered and fluttered about him. I can see him now, changing like the sky from sparkling laughter to darkening frowns ... He knew no color-line, poor dear—and the Veil, though it shadowed him, had not yet darkened half his sun. He loved the white matron, he loved his black nurse; and in his little world walked souls alone, uncolored and unclothed” (p. 85).

Chapter 12 is titled “Of Alexander Crummell”. DuBois was the protégé of Alexander Crummell (March 3, 1819 – September 10, 1898), a pioneering African-American minister, academic and African nationalist leader. He was ordained as an Episcopal priest in the United States. He was also missionary to Liberia. His books include *The Future of Africa* (1862), *Greatness of Christ* (1882) and *Africa and America* (1891). A great Black thinker and leader whose name is rarely mentioned in our research on Black Literature. Du Bois writes, “Three temptations he met on those dark dunes that lay gray and dismal before the wonder-eyes of the child: the temptation of Hate, that stood out against the red dawn; the temptation of Despair, that darkened noonday; and the temptation of Doubt, that ever steals along with twilight. Above all, you must hear of the vales he crossed,—the Valley of Humiliation and the Valley of the Shadow of Death” (p. 86). As Du Bois declares in the beginning of the chapter, “This is the history of a human heart,—the tale of a black boy who many long years ago began to struggle with life that he might know the world and know himself.” (p. 86).

This chapter brings out the story how Alexander Crummell was denied admission to the General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church, how he was humiliated because he was a Black person. After he became a pastor of an Episcopal Church, he still continued to face

hatred. He had to go through the Valley of Humiliation. Even as the Bible teaches differently, leaders could still hold their prejudice and hatred toward the Black or to the downtrodden in any nation, including India. Du Bois writes, “And now that he is gone, I sweep the Veil away and cry, Lo! The soul to whose dear memory I bring this little tribute. I can see his face still, dark and heavy-lined beneath his snowy hair; lighting and shading, now with inspiration for the future, now in innocent pain at some human wickedness, now with sorrow at some hard memory from the past” (p. 90). Suffering of downtrodden is described with great love and sympathy for them.

Chapter 13 is given the title “Of the coming of John”. It is a powerful story of two Johns, one white and another black, from the same village. They knew each other well and played together. But their paths take them in different directions. The white John go to Princeton and the black John go to Preparatory School. They both reach the railway station to go to their respective destinations, and the white people showing their disapproval for a black boy going to school, comment: “It’ll spoil him—ruin him.” Ultimately black John also works hard and go to college and get his degree in due course. Accidentally both meet in an extraordinary circumstance in a theatre performance in New York City, sitting next to the Judge's son John. This John sees only that a black man is seated near him and asks the usher to remove him and refund him the money for his ticket. Sad indeed. Problems faced by the Black even when they are well educated and employed are clearly illustrated here.

Chapter 14 is given the title “Of the Sorrow Songs.” This is a detailed study of Negro songs. Du Bois reports that these songs are articulated message of the slave to the world. These songs go beyond the usual songs we discuss under the title Folk Songs. The Negro songs may give the impression that the slaves were happy and carefree. Du Bois points out that these are the songs of the “unhappy” people, expressing their suffering under slavery in spiritual terms, appealing to and worshipping God. The songs express their hope for freedom, and they express this hope through their dependence on spiritual worship and singing. The music is authentically from Africa, from several African nations and communities. Their traditional music enables them to forget their suffering both physical and spiritual under the white domination. The music still continues in their original tunes and forms. Whites thoughts that such music only showed that the Black were happy living a life of slaves. They also laughed at the tunes and words, and so on. Du Bois suggests that the Slave Songs are wholly for and by the Blacks, and thus they reveal and stand as testimony of the Veil that still surrounds them.

Conclusion: the work *The Souls of Black Folk* is both autobiographical and sociological and historical study of the Black people. Their souls are revealed through their suffering as slaves. Even when they got freedom from slavery with hard work and united agitation, Du Bois found the liberation is minimal and their suffering continued. He is critical of American Mammonism – Capitalism, which focuses more on employment and gaining economic wealth. But then when the Blacks succeeded within Capitalism in USA, they were still ill-treated, Du Bois declared in his work *The Souls of the Black People*.

Finding: Autobiographical novel and storytelling are very popular now in modern Indian literature, written in Indian languages and English. The word *self-respect* is frequently used in Du

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Bois' work. Social reform movements in India have also used this term often. Wonder whether social reform leaders like Dr. Ambedkar, Periyar EVR, Arignar Anna, and similar leaders around India have been influenced by Du Bois' works. This would be a good research.

Work Cited

Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co.; [Cambridge]: University Press John Wilson and Son, Cambridge, U.S.A., 1903.

The text of the book *The Souls of Black Folk* is available through a number of websites, including the Kindle edition.

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