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Under the Shadow of the Veils: The Search for Self-Consciousness

At the heart of W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* is the question of identity, of the inner duality born of perpetual strife which paralyzes and self-alienates. Indeed, amidst the warring parties of double consciousness, of the maladies of economic and social stratification, the most severe constriction on African American dignity is the shadow of the color-line and the Veil which falls in its wake. Du Bois' essays seek to render into palpability the contradictory impulses of black consciousness as it traverses above and across the veils of ignorance, blindness, and spiritual paralysis within the African American community.

Within the poetic pages of *The Souls of Black Folk* is the motif of the "Veil" – the psychological and social manifestation of the color-line of oppression and injustice. While the Colored Curtain gives boundary to worlds of blacks and whites, the events and troubles of the American South bound together of all corners of life, regardless of race. For under the Veil, African Americans live in a "world which yields no true self-consciousness" (Du Bois 2); rather, it provides the paradox of double-aims as blacks must socialize not only from within the colored side of the Veil but also from without as the white world of oppression interacts with the African American community. Consequentially, the Veil forces upon the black community a negated sensation of self-consciousness, relinquishing no single soul, but "two thoughts, two unreconciled strings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (2). This fate inflicted upon the black population prompts the individual to seek self-revelation through measurements by the tape of prejudice, hate, and distrust entrenched in the white world; thereby bringing the "inevitable self-questioning, self-disparagement, and lowering ideals which ever accompany repression" (6). It is from this inner-tempest that the duality of black identity is ultimately born and the souls of the American and the Negro rendered distinctive. Du Bois, however, offers a tool by which spiritual dysphoria becomes nullified; for on the wings of Atalanta shall come the absolver Education.

Behind the veil of ignorance, the gospels of work and money tangle the strivings of the black population. Troubled by the South’s rapid industrial growth, Du Bois feared the erosion and brutalization of education’s humanistic ideals of “Truth, Beauty, and Goodness” (49). Booker T. Washington, a contemporary and rival of Du Bois, is evidence of the conflicting ideologies within the black conscious, as Washington advocated for the industrial training of the African American population. To Du Bois, the ideas furthered by Washington posed a threat to the impulses of the black soul, for the desire of wealth and property “must not lead the South to dream of material prosperity as the touchstone of all success” (49) and “overshadow the higher aims of life” (30). Instead, it is through the university that the blight of dysphoria and ignorance is healed, as it shall be the unraveling by the hands of the Talented Tenth – the college-trained black men – that a synthesis of self-consciousness and society is formed. Education, Du Bois believes, is the panacea fit to reconcile the duality of the black soul and “stamp out those that in sheer barbarity deafen [African Americans] to the wail of prisoned souls within the Veil” (56). Universities, as the “Wings of Atalanta” (53), shall guide African Americans over fields of cotton and gold away from the befoulment of Washington’s gospel of wealth and common schools and into a spiritual reconciliation where blacks “move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas... Aristotle and Aurelius…with no scorn nor condescension” (67). Here Du Bois is at last able to form a synthesis of the entangled two-ness of educational progress, thereby rising African Americans above the veil of ignorance and across the color-line.

As members of the Talented Tenth undergo processes of socialization in both the white and black worlds, the black Americans unable to traverse across the color-line develop a veil of blindness to divergent self-consciousness of the intellectual strata. Ironically, higher education can work to embolden the process of self-estrangement, for among Du Bois’ most educated class of intellectuals, spiritual agony is intensified by a process of intra-cultural alienation. Acculturation into a world willfully blind to the values of African American history entrenches the two-ness of black souls between the “enlightened” ideals of white society and the foundations of black culture. Du Bois explores this struggle in the chapter “Of the Coming of John,” using the fictional character of John Jones – a once boisterous young man now molded by higher education – to demonstrate an awakening of the self, as “[John] grew slowly to feel almost for the first time the Veil that lay between him and the white world” (144). And yet, despite this positive realization, John experienced a more sinister change in which the Veil rendered him a stranger to the people of Altamaha who were “distinctly bewildered” (147) with his mannerisms upon arrival. Already, Du Bois introduces the divide between John and the foundational traits expected of him by the black community. Du Bois further constructs the veil of blindness when John calls for the people of Altamaha to “abandon all that littleness [of religion], and look higher,” but is met only with “scorn and scathing denunciation for trampling on the true Religion” (148). John, now isolated and self-estranged in his own community, becomes the allegory for the intensified tension between the paradoxical double aims of the black intellectual, as “the knowledge [John’s] people needed was a twice-told tale to his white neighbors, while the knowledge which would teach the white world was Greek to his own flesh and blood” (3). In doing so, Du Bois brings to life the conflicting impulses behind the consciousness of an African American behind the Veil.

To accurately capture the entanglement of black identity, Du Bois must concern the text with the aesthetics of consciousness. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, each essay is framed with a series of lyrics which serve to demonstrate how a deeper sense of self is developed through creative or expressive means. These sorrow songs, as Du Bois described them, are the primal impulses of the black body that speak to the terrors of a raced identity. The frenzy of black churches served to break the Veil; however, within African American practice of Christianity, there exists a veil of paralysis which inhibits the individual’s sense of meaning in a community. So integral is the physical and verbal fervor to the black religion, wrote Du Bois, that “many generations firmly believed that without this visible manifestation of the God there could be no true communion with the Invisible” (116). Through such fervor, black individuals are placed in communion with that which dissolves the two-ness of the self, for the value of the black body as a vessel for God synthesizes the warring impulses as a newfound level of spiritual being overrides the social, economic, and physical realities of the color-line. Spiritual paralysis, however, occurs when a black individual becomes “conscious of his impotence…bitter and vindictive; and his religion, instead of a worship, is a complaint or a curse” (123). The two approaches presented by Du Bois, the vessel and the curser, work to enforce the aesthetic notions of contradictory impulses behind the development of black consciousness.

W.E.B. Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folk* is an exploration of self-development amidst a world of competing influences. Though strongest among the influences is the Veil born of the color-line, for from this boundary came consciousness dysphoria and the dual souls of the black American. The American society, through its codification of the Veil, gave the black population a negated self-consciousness only to be understood through a series of interconnected essays. Du Bois, in writing this text, thereby sought to bring forward the ways in which the educational, social, and spiritual impulses of an African American’s soul interact in light of a community – be it black or white, for all dimensions of society are under the shadow of the Veil.

Work Cited

Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt. The Souls of Black Folk. Dover Publications, 1994.