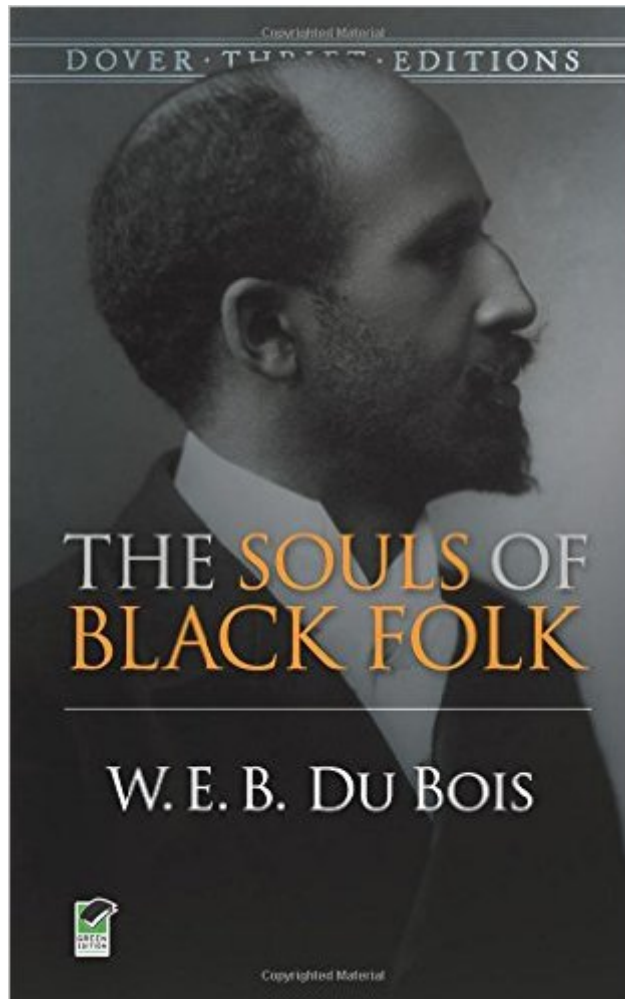


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# The Souls Of Black Folk (Dover Thrift Editions)



## Synopsis

This landmark book is a founding work in the literature of black protest. W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) played a key role in developing the strategy and program that dominated early 20th-century black protest in America. In this collection of essays, first published together in 1903, he eloquently affirms that it is beneath the dignity of a human being to beg for those rights that belong inherently to all mankind. He also charges that the strategy of accommodation to white supremacy advanced by Booker T. Washington, then the most influential black leader in America, would only serve to perpetuate black oppression. Publication of *The Souls of Black Folk* was a dramatic event that helped to polarize black leaders into two groups: the more conservative followers of Washington and the more radical supporters of aggressive protest. Its influence cannot be overstated. It is essential reading for everyone interested in African-American history and the struggle for civil rights in America.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

W.E.B. DuBois (1868-1963) was the first black man to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard University. This fact alone doesn't really mean much in today's world; there are many firsts occurring at a rapid pace. But DuBois accomplished his feat when America subscribed to Jim Crow segregation and openly espoused racism. Moreover, DuBois went on to a spectacular career of stunning accomplishments—he was, by turns, a sociologist, a historian, a cultural critic, and an accomplished

essayist. In "The Souls of Black Folk," DuBois wears all of these hats and a few more. Published in 1903, this collection of DuBois essays quickly became a cornerstone for future black progressives who wished to bring about changes in American society long promised since the days of the American Civil War. DuBois went on to help found the NAACP before disillusionment with the slow pace of change led him to leave the country. He died in Ghana in 1963. Every essay in this collection is an absolute jewel of intellectual prowess, eloquent and captivating language, and groundbreaking insight into the conditions of America's black population. Time and time again, DuBois calls it like he sees it and does so without malice or hysterical claims. DuBois's writings are the archetype of calm, reasoned analysis. His goal is not to divide but to expose, not to create divisions but understanding. He differs radically from current race hustlers such as Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson, whose only concern is creating a perpetual black underclass with them as self-anointed leaders. One of DuBois's essays actually take aim at a black leader who, during DuBois's time, harmed black progress. This man was Booker T. Washington, founder of the Tuskegee Institute, believer in vocational education for all blacks (at the expense of a classical education necessary in training teachers to staff vocational schools), and orator of the "Atlanta Compromise" which promised black acceptance of segregation. DuBois's concern in the essays rests with the concept of the "veil." This veil is a symbol for the ignorance of America towards the problems of blacks. The veil blocks insight into the problems, as well as preventing blacks from taking their place in American society as full American citizens. Until the veil is removed, argues DuBois in carefully constructed essay after essay, the continuing schism between the two races will grow wider and wider. Closely tied to the concept of the veil is that of "double consciousness," or the process by which blacks have two identities within one body. At times, blacks are Americans; they take part in working, fighting, and dying so America may reach its full potential. At other times, blacks are Africans lacking the rights white Americans enjoy on a daily basis. According to DuBois, American blacks are conscious of this dual identity and must always be careful about their actions in public. DuBois argues it is this "two-ness" that causes many problems in the life of the American black. DuBois knows travelogue as well. Two essays, "Of the Black Belt" and "Of the Quest of the Golden Fleece" examine the conditions of blacks in Dougherty County, Georgia. It is a sad tale of overwhelming debt, bleak futures, and segregated conditions. DuBois carefully examines the reasons for black failure in Georgia in these two chapters, discovering that the system is set up for black failure. Owning land is difficult for blacks, and the low literacy rate ensures that hustlers will cheat blacks out of money and crops. The extension of credit guarantees that blacks will continue to exist in a perpetual state of debt peonage. The need for education is great, says DuBois, as learning

will allow blacks to push for greater gains in society while allowing poor blacks to understand their plight in relation to the rest of the country. Education is a major theme in many of the essays. DuBois himself received a classical education and it shows on every page of this book. References to Greece and Rome vie with extensive religious themes. These references not only show that a black can benefit from education, but also shows how education will provide a common ground between black and white. However, DuBois does not believe every black should receive a classical education. He recognizes many are not up to the task (as many whites are not, either), but a "talented tenth" could receive this type of education. These blacks will then go out and spread education and culture within the black community. The essays build up to the phenomenal "Of the Coming of John," a short story incorporating almost every theme DuBois expresses throughout the book. This short story relates the tale of John, a poor Georgia black traveling north for an education. At first, John fails to fit in due to poor discipline and lack of interest. When faced with expulsion, John reaches inside himself and succeeds beyond expectations. He learns history, language, and mathematics while growing into manhood. When he finally goes out into the world, he runs smack into the veil; John is ejected from a classical music concert in New York because he is black, and when he goes home, both blacks and whites are wary of his cynical views about southern conditions. John takes a job as a teacher, but quickly loses the job when local whites feel threatened by the subjects he teaches. The story ends on a depressing note without resolving any of the problems John encounters as an educated black man in the American South. This is an important American text, required reading for anyone interested in race relations and intellectual history. DuBois never saw the struggle for civil rights in the 1960's or its continuing legacy to this day. This book explains the underpinnings of that movement. Through intellectual examination, elegant prose, and an unswerving belief in what is right and wrong, DuBois's contributions continue to resonate in the present.

Along with Malcolm X's biography, this book should be a mandatory text in American high schools. If you got this far, please, engage yourself and read the sample pages that has allowed to be shown here. This work is not just an eloquent attempt of one man to make sense of himself and his history, it is also by far the most sensitive, interesting (and accessible) treatment of Hegel the world has yet to see (including Marx- even though Du Bois spent the later years of his life smitten with socialism and the USSR- a viewpoint that eventually led him to abandon the NAACP's ((which he helped found in 1910)) agenda of integration). One could spend much time tracing Du Bois' intellectual movements and his confrontations (as with Booker T. Washington). I won't attempt that

here. Instead I'll attempt a cursory revealing of his Hegelian sensibilities. I don't use the word debt, because Du Bois doesn't borrow from Hegel- he resurrects him. Du Bois's understanding of himself as a 'problem,' is as illuminating now as it was in 1903. I think at least a cursory engagement with Hegel is needed to truly understand this book and Du Bois' thought in its entirety. For that reason I highly suggest you purchase the critical Norton version of this book (ISBN: 039397393X). It adds a great deal. The preface alone is worth the ten-note...The master/slave dialectic, as well the unfolding and development of a consciousness of freedom: Du Bois breathes life into this system of 'necessary' rational progression. Hegel himself traced the development of 'World Spirit,' through six historical peoples: Chinese, Egyptians, Indians, Greeks, Romans and Germans. This forms the genesis of Du Bois' conception of black Americans as historically a, "...sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,- a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world... 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." And that's just page 3. If Hegel himself had been this eloquent... Ah well... Du Bois once wrote of his heritage that it included "a flood of Negro blood, a strain of French, a bit of Dutch, but, Thank God! No 'Anglo-Saxon'..." There is much to be admired in that statement's forwardness, and there is much to be understood and reconciled in its anger. As a white American, I have a cultural debt to black Americans, one that I will never be able to pay back. But the impossibility of a task does not preclude one from not attempting it. Today America is as divided by race as it ever was. Honest dialogue is the only solution. This book- I can think of few places better suited to initiate that dialogue.

I didn't know what to expect when I picked up this work to read and be part of a book discussion group in downtown D.C. I came away amazed by many aspects of this seminal work. First, it may not be seminal if it were written in 2003, but it was written in 1903! An in-depth critique of the structures that support racism written in words that have carried themselves over a century. Second, W.E.B DuBois is not only a sociologist in the inchoate years of sociology, he is a philosopher as well. Yet, there is a tender chapter on the loss of his first born child. DuBois did not reject the head to follow his heart, nor did he reject his heart to follow his head. He was balanced regarding what influenced him, following sometimes the heart and sometimes the head. To see him only as someone who opposed slavery and racism is one-dimensional. However, this cannot be dismissed, either. Still, he is a magnificent story-teller, as seen in the chapter, "Of the Coming of John". Hurt

more than helped by official religion, he is nonetheless spiritual, as seen in his chapters of faith, and the sorrow songs. He is a prolific author, writing well over a dozen books. Because his voice is dangerous, the powers-that-be have kept his name away from our ears and eyes. That needs to change. It is time for an awakening! I don't give 5-stars easily. This book demanded it.

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