

Du Bois's "Double Consciousness" As Theory and Form:
"What I have briefly sketched in large outline, let me tell again in many ways"
Humanities 110
Nathalia King

Argument

1. In response to the pseudo-scientific claim that race is biologically determined, Du Bois puts forth an innovative and distinctive theory. He defines race as socially constructed, asserting that the lived experience of social, political, and economic systems has an impact on the very structure of individual consciousness. For Du Bois, relations ensuing from the history of black enslavement by white slaveholders has shaped the consciousness of all Americans.
2. An unquestioning sense of 'superiority' has enabled white Americans to form the consciousness of an undivided self.
3. In contrast, the black American's experience of an always demeaning white gaze constitutes black consciousness as divided, split by the conflicting demands of two cultures. In the tension between familial ties to Africa and painful assimilation to a hostile America, black consciousness is caught between two dissonant realities, "two souls, two thoughts... two warring ideals."
4. Influenced by his own interdisciplinary study, Du Bois's account of double consciousness makes an original contribution to the fields of sociology, philosophy and psychology.
5. Du Bois's theory of "double consciousness" is deliberately modelled in the form of his essays, especially in his choice of epigraphs, which juxtapose the literate tradition of 19th-C British/American poetry with the oral traditions of an African heritage incorporated in the spirituals or 'sorrow songs'. These two artistic traditions exemplify the dialectical elements of "double consciousness," suggesting an unrelieved tension, a dissonance in tones, that both invites and resists resolution.

Quotes

1. "Every thought... is part of a personal consciousness. Within each personal consciousness thought is always changing. Within each personal consciousness thought is sensibly continuous. It always appears to deal with objects independent of itself. It is interested in some... of these objects to the exclusion of others, and welcomes or rejects—chooses among them... all the while." William James, "The Stream of Thought" in *The Principles of Psychology* (NY: Dover Press) 1950, p. 225.

2. "As thinkers, *mankind have ever divided into two sects*, Materialists and Idealists; the first class founding on experience, the second on consciousness, the first class beginning to think from the data of the senses, the second class perceive that the senses are not final... The materialist insists on facts, on history, on the force of circumstances, and the animal wants of man; the idealist on the power of thought and of Will, on inspiration, on miracle, on individual culture. *These two modes of thinking are both natural, but the idealist contends that his way of thinking is in higher nature.*" [...] "by showing that there is a very important class, or imperative forms, of ideas which did not come by experience, but through which experience was acquired..."

"The worst feature of *this double consciousness is, that the two lives, of the understanding and of the soul*, which we lead, really show very little relation to each other, never meet and measure each other: one prevails now, all buzz and din, the other prevails then, all infinitude and paradise, and with the progress of life, the two discover no greater disposition to reconcile themselves."

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Transcendentalist," in *Essays and Lectures* (NY: Library of America, 1983), pp. 193, 198, 206

3. "Self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction [recognition] only through another self-consciousness."

"The[re] are... opposed shapes of consciousness; one is the independent consciousness for which the essence is Being-for-itself, the other is the dependent consciousness for which the essence is life or being for another; the former is the *lord* (master); the latter is the *bondsman* (slave)."

The "recognition [that arises between them] is one-sided and unequal. [...] The truth of independent consciousness is accordingly servile consciousness.... So too, [servile] consciousness [is] driven back into itself, will withdraw into itself and be converted into true independence." Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Inwood, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2018), p 76, 79.

4. “Before each thought that I have written in this book I have set a phrase, a haunting echo of these weird old songs in which the soul of the black slave spoke to men. Ever since I was a child these songs have stirred me strangely. They came out of a South unknown to me, one by one, and yet at once I knew them as of me and mine.” P. 167

5. “I have sometimes thought that the mere *hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than reading whole volumes of philosophy* on the subject could do. [...] They told a tale of woe...; they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains.” Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of an American Slave* (NY: Doubleday) 1989, p. 14.

6. “This music.... traverses every shade of emotion without spilling over in any direction. Its most tragic utterances are without pessimism, and its lightest, brightest moments have nothing to do with frivolity. In its darkest expressions there is always a hope, and in its gayest measures a constant reminder of sadness. Born out of the heart-cries of a captive people who still did not forget how to laugh, this music covers an amazing range of mood. Nevertheless, it is always serious music and should be performed seriously, in the spirit of its original conception.” Hall Johnson, “Notes on the Negro Spiritual,” (1965). In *Readings in Black American Music*, comp. and ed. Eileen Southern, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983), 277.

7. “By incorporating the spirituals into the fabric of his text, Du Bois turned sociological commentary into sensate, vocalized text—radically crossing generic boundaries, employing the languages of silence and implication to carry significant communicative burdens, and dwelling in the most profound autobiographical way in the spiritual resources of his text.” Eric Sundquist, “Swing Low: The Souls of Black Folk” in *To Wake the Nations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 323

9. “In his epigraphs, Du Bois was listening to consciousness, that is developing a theory of listening to consciousness in an attempt to understand the trauma of racism and the long, drawn-out historical repercussions of slavery. Du Bois’s thinking...begins from the premise that trauma is the *sine qua non* of theorizing racism, which makes itself felt not only outwardly in social and economic structures, but inwardly in consciousness and memory.” Julie Beth Napolin, “Listening to and As Contemporaries: W.E.B. Du Bois and Sigmund Freud,” <https://soundstudiesblog.com/tag/arthur-symons/> September 24, 2018

The Crying Water, Arthur Symons

O water, voice of my heart, crying in the sand,
All night long crying with a mournful cry.
As I lie and listen, and cannot understand
The voice of my heart in my side or the voice of the sea,
O water, crying for rest, is it I, is it I?
All night long the water is crying to me.

Unresting water, there shall never be rest
Till the last moon droop and the last tide fail,
And the fire of the end begin to burn in the west;
And the heart shall be weary and wonder and cry like the sea,
All life long crying without avail,
As the water all night long is crying to me.

Negro Spiritual, anonymous

Oh nobody knows the trouble I've seen
Nobody knows my sorrow
Nobody knows the trouble I've seen
Glory, Hallelujah

Sometimes I'm up, Sometimes I'm down
Oh yes Lord
Sometimes I'm almost to the ground

Oh yes Lord
Oh nobody knows the trouble I've seen
Nobody knows my sorrow
Nobody knows the trouble I've seen
Glory, Hallelujah

Although you see me going on so
Oh yes Lord
I have my trials here below
Oh yes Lord

Oh nobody knows the trouble I've seen
Nobody knows my sorrow
Nobody knows the trouble I've seen
Glory, Hallelujah

Canon of 19th C British & American Poems

1. Arthur Symons, "The Crying of the Waters," 1903
2. James Russell Lowell, "The Present Crisis," 1844
3. Lord Byron, Childe Harold's Pilgrimage," 1812
4. Friedrich Schiller, "The Maid of Orleans," 1801
5. John Greenleaf Whittier, "Howard at Atlanta," 1869
6. Omar Khayyam, "The Rubiyat," 1869
7. The Song of Solomon I:5-6, Hebrew Bible
8. William Vaughn Moody, "The Brute," 1901
9. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "A Vision of Poets," 1844
10. Fiona McLeod, "Dim Face of Beauty"
11. Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Itylus*, 1866
12. Alfred Lord Tennyson, "The Passing of Arthur" 1869
13. E. B. Browning, A Romance of the Ganges, 1838

Canon of "10 "Master Songs," more or less"

Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen
My Lord, What a Mourning
A Great Camp Meeting in the Promised Land
My Way's Cloudy
The Rocks and Mountains
Bright Sparkles in the Churchyard
Children You'll Be Called On
I'm A Rolling
Steal Away Home
I Hope my Mother Will Be There
Swing Low, Sweet Chariot
I'll Hear the Trumpet Sound
Wrestling Jacob
Negro Song: Lay This Body Down

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- Eric Sundquist, "Swing Low: The Souls of Black Folk" in *To Wake the Nations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press) 1993.

Questions

1. “Double consciousness” might be defined as a form of alienation intrinsic to the human condition (e.g. Emerson or Symons) or, following Du Bois, as the product of subject formation in a social hierarchy, especially that of two racialized classes (master-slave, black-white). What are the differences between these two theories?
2. In a close reading of any longer passage in Du Bois, explore how his writing exemplifies or challenges characteristics of the essay genre (as defined by Ulrich Langer), including:
 - a skepticism of universal claims coupled with attentiveness to exceptions;
 - a disarming record of thought or revelation “from a particular man living a particular life” that also “conveys an understanding of the social, political, and religious context in which he lived”;
 - a testing out of “judgments, observations, reflections, arguments” without claiming universal validity;
 - a freedom to “test and reject” prior philosophical traditions present in the text “through allusions, examples, quotations”;
 - an objective analysis of social or political relations that also advocates for the practice of an ethical life.
3. In Du Bois’s account, how have institutional forms of systemic racism contributed to the different lived experiences of blacks and whites?
4. From Du Bois’s perspective, what are the possible advantages to “double consciousness”?
5. In a close reading of one (or more) other pairs of epigraphs (listed above), analyze what resonances are at work between poem, spiritual, and essay. You can find most of the texts on-line and many of the spirituals on youtube.