

Life Behind the Veil in Du Bois' The Souls of Black Folk

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Life Behind the Veil in Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* Du Bois' metaphor of double consciousness and his theory of the Veil are the most inclusive explanation of the ever-present plight of modern African Americans ever produced. In his nineteenth century work, *The Souls of Black Folks*, Du Bois describes double consciousness as a "peculiar sensation. . . the 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" (Du Bois, 3). According to Du Bois assertions, the Black American exists in a consistent "twoness, - an American, a Negro"(3). Further, he theorizes, the African American lives shut behind a veil, viewing from within and without it. He is privy to white America's perspective of him, yet he cannot reveal his true self. He is, in fact, protected and harmed by The Veil. Nearly a century later, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., himself a Harvard scholar, addresses the anomaly of the Afro-American as he has existed for the past two centuries; that the Black American's greatest obstacle is the lack of self determination. The inability to define oneself will undoubtedly lead to an unhealthy dependence upon the definition of a biased party that will apply an erroneous definition. Gates states that "the Afro American's attempt to gain self-consciousness in a racist society will always be impaired by the fact that any reflected image that he or she seeks in the gaze of white Americans is refracted through 'the dark veil-mirror of existence'..."(Du Bois, xx). Since 1945, in what is defined by

literary scholars as the Contemporary Period, it appears that the "refracted public image"(xx) whites hold of blacks continues to necessitate middle of paperone existing trapped within the view of hegemonic society; angry, but powerless so long as he remains in this state. Yet Sanchez provides a succinct plan for Black Americans in their quest to ascend the Veil: to exist as both African and American while feeding white America a pacifying view of a half truth-destruction fueled by deadly ignorance. The speakers of the poems are merely victims of the same system, seeking the same freedom. While the works of these authors differ greatly, one characteristic is common in both works: The desire for power to ascend the Veil that hangs heavily upon them like a cloak that prevents their ascension. The desire to live beyond the Veil. Works Cited Du Bois, W.E.B. The Souls of Black Folk. New York: Bantam, 1989 Lauter, Paul, ed. The Heath Anthology of American Literature: Volume Two. New York: Houghton Mifflin Inc., 1996

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