The Song of the Smoke Study Guide

The Song of the Smoke by W.E.B. DuBois

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

W. E. B. Du Bois was 39 years old when "The Song of the Smoke" was published in the February 1907 issue of *Horizon,* a magazine which he himself edited. The poem is understood as "an affirmation of black pride," but Du Bois's ultimate acceptance of the need to call for black pride was the culmination of a difficult process. He was born into a community of free blacks in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, in 1868, and after his mother's death, he was given a scholarship by the primarily white town. Although he had deeply desired to go to Harvard, it was the town's stipulation that this scholarship was to be used at Fisk University, founded for the children of emancipated slaves. While Du Bois had long believed that education and a sense of purpose were all that blacks needed to gain a place as Americans after having been freed from slavery in 1865, his education at Fisk was twofold. Here he could feel what it was to engage with educated minds, with no race considerations to affect the exchange. He also was made acutely aware of "the color line" in the South, and realized it would take far more than the higher education of African Americans to overcome this barrier.

In 1895, Du Bois became the first African American to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard. His reputation as a distinguished scholar commenced with the acceptance of his dissertation, "The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade in the United States of America, 1638-1870," as the inaugural work in the Harvard Historical Studies series. Du Bois soon acknowledged, however, that his subsequent schol- arly work in the new field of social science was not having the impact that he expected. Thus he turned to other forms of writing, including poetry, to present his theories and beliefs regarding "the problem of the color line," which he considered the major problem of the twentieth century. He further took responsibility for bringing this message to the public by editing the magazines *Moon, Horizon,* and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) publication *Crisis,* all of which introduced the work of many new black writers, including Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston.

Du Bois was one of the first African Americans to foster the idea of race-consciousness and of the African American as hero. His life's work focused on the rebuttal of the claim that the African race engendered only slaves and savages unable to make contributions to civilization and American culture. "The Song of the Smoke" clearly stands as an affirmation for African Americans, but it is also a proclamation to America as a whole of the historical and economic significance of African Americans.

Author Biography

Du Bois was born on February 23, 1868, in the western Massachusetts town of Great Barrington, to a family whose ancestry was French Huguenot on his father's side and Dutch and African on his mother's side. Du Bois' father Alfred Du Bois left his family when his son was a young boy. Du Bois lived with his mother Mary Sylvina Burghardt Du Bois until her death in 1884. Left penniless, Du Bois moved in with an aunt and worked as a timekeeper at a local mill to support himself. He graduated from high school that same year, the only black student in his class. An outstanding student, Du Bois was encouraged by his principal to attend college. With the aid of a scholarship, he enrolled at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1885. Du Bois graduated with a bachelor's degree in 1888 and entered Harvard University as a junior, where he graduated, cum laude, with a second Bachelor of Arts degree in 1891. Du Bois studied at the University of Berlin in Germany for two years before returning to Harvard, where he received his Ph.D. in 1895. He was the first African American to receive this degree from Harvard. From 1895 to 1897, Du Bois taught Latin, Greek, German, and English at Wilberforce University in Ohio. While Du Bois was at Wilberforce, his dissertation, "The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870," was published in 1896 as the first installment in the Harvard Historical studies series. Also in 1896, Du Bois married Nina Gomer, a Wilberforce student. They had two children. In 1897, he moved to Atlanta University, where he taught economics and history for more than a decade. In 1903, Du Bois published his most widely acclaimed work, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches.*

In 1905, Du Bois expressed the desire to publish a journal that would appeal to intelligent African Americans. This coincided with his belief that the most promising blacks should be educated in colleges and universities, and they in turn would emerge to serve and lead the black race. In 1906, with the help of two Atlanta University graduates, he established a small printing shop in Memphis, Tennessee, and began the *Moon Illustrated Weekly.* A year later Du Bois established the *Horizon* in Washington, D.C. This publication was meant to be the voice of the Niagara Movement, an organization of black intellectuals founded by Du Bois in 1905. The *Horizon* did not become the official voice for the Niagara Movement, but Du Bois managed to keep the monthly publication going until 1910, at which time he merged the Niagara Move- ment with the newly organized National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He also made several other important changes in his life that same year; he resigned his faculty position at Atlanta University, became director of publications and research for the NAACP, and founded *Crisis,* a magazine he would head for almost twenty-five years. Du Bois saw this magazine as a vehicle to communicate to the world the problems faced by blacks in American society as well as those faced by other oppressed people, mainly Africans on the African continent.

Following World War I, Du Bois took an even greater interest in Africa, especially those colonies once held by the now-defeated Germans and Italians. With an agenda designed to place the problems of all blacks before the world, Du Bois helped organize the second Pan-African Congress in Paris in 1919. (A previous meeting of this body had

taken place in London in 1900.) Du Bois argued for the seizure of German territories in Africa as the foundation for an international African state, and *Crisis,* which had obtained an international circulation, became the platform from which Du Bois could argue for the concept of "Africa for the Africans." The 1919 congress and subsequent meetings in 1921, 1923, and 1927 were well chronicled in the magazine.

Between 1934 and 1940 Du Bois spent much of his time teaching, conducting research, and writing. Already a prolific and well-known author, during the next five years Du Bois published two of his most important historical works, *Black Reconstruction: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (1935) and *Black Folk, Then and Now: An Essay in the History and Sociology of the Negro Race* (1939). He also wrote articles for several of the leading periodicals of the time, including *Current History, Journal of Negro Education, Foreign Affairs,* and *American Scholar.* However, Du Bois still desired the forum provided by a publication of his own. He proposed a scholarly journal dedicated to research and the documentation of matters concerning race problems throughout the world. He believed this kind of research must include the study of all groups of men. He explained: "Naturally, we shall usually proceed from the point of view of black folk where we live and work to the wider world." Du Bois became editor-in-chief of such a publication in 1940 with the establishment of *Phylon* at Atlanta University. He held that position until he retired from the university in 1944.

Also in 1944 Du Bois rejoined the staff of the NAACP as director of special research, but his association with the group was terminated in 1948 as the result of political disagreements with the NAACP's executive secretary. From this point on, the influence and leadership of Du Bois began to decline steadily. By the 1950s Du Bois was shunned by most leading publishers, except those with leftist views. For years Du Bois had made no attempt to conceal his approval of Soviet Communism. After a trip to the Soviet Union in 1926, he wrote in the November issue of *Crisis:* "I may be partially deceived and half-informed. But if what I have seen with my own eyes and heard with my own ears in Russia is Bolshevism, I am Bolshevik." Du Bois's other political activities included a run for the U.S. senate on the American Labor Party ticket in 1948.

After his first wife died in 1950, Du Bois married Shirley Lola Graham in 1951. At age eightythree he was indicted by the U.S. Justice Department as an "agent for a foreign power." Although acquitted by a federal judge, he was not allowed to leave the country until 1958. This completely disillusioned Du Bois with American democracy, and in 1961 he officially joined the Communist Party and moved to Accra, Ghana. About a year later he renounced his American citizenship and became a citizen of Ghana. Before his death, he began work on "The Encyclopedia of Africana," a project he was not able to complete. Du Bois died on August 27, 1963, in Accra, Ghana.

Poem Text

I am the Smoke King
I am black!
I am swinging in the sky,
I am wringing worlds awry;
I am the thought of the throbbing mills,
I am the soul of the soul-toil kills,
Wraith of the ripple of trading rills;
Up I'm curling from the sod,
I am whirling home to God;
I am the Smoke King
I am black.

I am the Smoke King
I am black!
I am wreathing broken hearts,
I am sheathing love's light darts;
Inspiration of iron times
Wedding the toil of toiling climes,
Shedding the blood of bloodless crimes
Lurid lowering 'mid the blue,
Torrid towering toward the true,
I am the Smoke King
I am black.

I am the Smoke King
I am black!
I am darkening with song,
I am hearkening to wrong!
I will be black as blackness can□
The blacker the mantle, the mightier the man!
For blackness was ancient ere whiteness began.
I am daubing God in night,
I am swabbing Hell in white:
I am the Smoke King
I am black.

I am the Smoke King
I am black!
I am cursing ruddy morn,
I am hearsing hearts unborn:
Souls unto me are as stars in a night,
I whiten my black men□I blacken my white!
What's the hue of a hide to a man in his might?

Hail! great, gritty, grimy hands□
Sweet Christ, pity toiling lands!
I am the Smoke King
I am black.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-2

As this poem begins, Du Bois identifies the persona of the poem as "the Smoke King." The second line proclaims that, despite this light color, the persona is "black." This was a startling proclamation for the time, as "color" had become as much of an issue in the African-American culture as outside it. Lighter skinned people "passed" as white, of course, but there was also a general acceptance of the notion in the African-American culture that lighter skin was preferable. Du Bois himself was a very light-skinned black man, and he strongly objected to this kind of distinction.

Lines 3-4

There is an immediate identification here with the characteristic of "smoke" to float upward; this will be expounded upon in lines 5-7. The poet is likely also making reference to the popular spiritual "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," which includes the phrase "coming for to carry me home"□ "home" being Heaven. The implication is that the persona has been raised up.

The use of the alliterative "wr/w" sound focuses attention on this particular image. There is, of course, the sound association with the word "ringing," which combines with the image of the persona "swinging in the sky" to create the metaphor of the Smoke King's words pealing out like a bell for all to hear. But the purpose of the words themselves is focused in "wring," which means "to twist forcibly." Hence, the Smoke King's aim is to change "the worlds," which would seem to be a reference to the two separate black and white worlds. And he wants this change to "twist" the worlds "away from the expected direction," that is, perhaps, to stop racism's effects on both black and white Americans.

Lines 5-7

The image of "smoke" takes the shape here of an idea, as well as of the smoke coming from the stacks of the factories where great numbers of blacks who had come north worked at low-paying jobs. The "thought" is the collective black memory of the extremes of labor in both the South and the North.

The use of the phrase "soul of the soul" is inextricably linked to Du Bois's own philosophy of the "two souls" of "Black Folk." Here it indicates that even after the excesses of killing labor imposed by whites through slavery and low-paying jobs there is a "soul" that lives.

"Wraith" means "a visible spirit," and probably refers to the ancestors of those who were kidnapped from Africa and brought over along trade routes to be sold into slavery in the

United States. This suggests that it is vital to remember this history, the beginnings of the African American in the United States.

Lines 8-9

The Smoke King's image of "smoke," now identified with slave labor, rises from the land on which it has toiled and, as in "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," carries itself home to God.

Lines 10-11

At this repetition of these lines the "Smoke King" becomes more than simply the light-skinned African American identifying with the darker "black" African American, but a true identification with what all African Americans have experienced as citizens of the United States.

Note that in line 2, "I am black!" is exclamatory, a proclamation. In line 11, it is stated, by use of the period, as a fact. Further note that this restatement is linked to the emotional historical content of the stanza by the use of the semicolon at the end of line 9. Thus there is an equation between what is said prior to the semicolon and what comes in these two lines.

Lines 12-13

These lines take on the power of incantation at the beginning of this second stanza, and are now understood as well by the reader to provide a frame for the emotional memory of the history of the African American. Each stanza begins with the lines as proclamation, and each stanza concludes with their factual restatement.

Lines 14-15

The use of "wreathing" plays on a central alliterative sound used by the poet. It contrasts with "wringing" in line 4, as well as "awry." All of these words are defined as having to do with "twisting," although there is a gentler implication in "wreathing." The reference may be to these words soothing the broken hearts of African Americans at the time the poet is writing, but it also draws on the association of a wreath to honor the dead, and so honors the "broken hearts" of people kidnapped and sold into slavery, losing everything in the process.

The internal rhyme between "wreathing" and "sheathing" suggests also a gentleness, although "sheathing" might also refer to putting the "darts" into a sheath for use. In any case, these "darts" are "light" and they will be shot with "love." This likely means that the words of the Smoke King are spoken to both white and black out of love, though the words will be shot like "darts" to get the attention they deserve.

Lines 16-18

The Smoke King's words are inspired by the hard times his people have experienced; "iron" can also refer specifically to labor in northern factories. In fact, "[w]edding" is likely used to disclose that what the African American is expected to do in the North is not much different from the slave labor performed in the South. Both involve "bloodless" crimes, in that the conditions of labor under which African Americans have toiled are not intended for the purpose of individual murders or genocide of a people. Nonetheless, blood has been shed.

Lines 19-20

Alliteration and internal rhyme enhance the importance of these lines and their reference to contradictions inherent in two positions. The "blue" may refer to "high moral ground," to the Union Army whose victory brought about an end to slavery, or to being high in the sky. Hence, those whites who are at the top of the social structure in America, still do things that lower them. Contrarily, blacks who have been considered socially lower than whites, can bring themselves up toward truth, though this will require passionate ("torrid") involvement.

Lines 21-22

The matter of fact restatement of these two lines emphasizes the statement of the preceding lines 19-20. Furthermore, the lines are not "mere" restatement, but an idea closely connected to lines 14-20, as evidenced by the use of the comma at the end of line 20.

Lines 23-24

These lines become a chant that re-establishes the energy of identification with the history of the Smoke King's people.

Lines 25-26

The internal rhyme of "darkening" with "hearkening" links the purpose of these two lines, a pur- pose which is directly related to the poem itself through the use of the word "song." It is clear that the poet intends for this poem to inspire.

The Smoke King himself, despite his light skin, is accepting his place alongside darker blacks. Reciting his emotional history through this poem deepens his association with African Americans and allows him to understand that the wrongs that have been perpetrated on his people historically and on each and every one of his people now are done to him as well. This may also be a reference to the fact that a similar

kind of wrong is done by blacks who line themselves up against a color line from lighter to darker.

Lines 27-29

Each line emphasizes the focus on "black." The Smoke King promises to be "black" in every possible way, historically, culturally, and politically. Thus in line 28 "black" comes to mean the race or group of the Smoke King's people, rather than a color which can be judged along a continuum from lighter to darker. Furthermore, the full acceptance of being "black," with all the historical and cultural burdens it might carry with it, is how African Americans will gain true power. The reference in line 29 is to the common knowledge that humans first appeared on this earth on the African continent. It is a reminder that even though whites believe themselves superior, the original human was black.

Lines 30-31

The Smoke King is claiming God for himself. Typically black has been associated with evil and white with good, so that Heaven is seen in visions of whiteness. The Smoke King transposes this. The reference to "swabbing Hell in white" likely refers to the fact that African Americans through kidnapping and slavery, as well as conditions of labor and culture, experienced hell on earth at the hands of whites.

Lines 32-33

The colon at the close of line 31 indicates that it is as a result of what is said in lines 25-31 that the Smoke King can make this statement.

Lines 34-35

It is because of the strengthening connection of these lines as statement at the close of each stanza□through use of comma, then semicolon, then colon□that the repetition as proclamation gains power as introduction to each succeeding stanza.

Lines 36-37

The power now established by lines 34-35 allows the Smoke King to "curse" the morning over the night. Again, this refers to an association of "black" with night, "white" with day, and by the use of the word "ruddy" refers back to the "blood" of the second stanza.

This power also manifests itself in the knowledge that to accept all of African-American history, to remember the slavery as well as the African heritage, is vital. In effect, the

Smoke King sees this poem as a rehearsal for the song that African Americans as yet "unborn" will sing as they find their own hearts in the history of their people. Another interpretation of this line, however, might be that the "broken hearts" of line 14 were never truly born because they never truly lived, thus the "wreathing" of line 14 is brought into play here with "hearsing," so that the Smoke King is finally memorializing those who were cheated of African life through kidnapping and American life through slavery.

Lines 38-40

The connotation of night, with darkness and blackness, is given beauty and light through the placement in it of stars which are souls. It seems as if the Smoke King is using his association with God, begun in the first stanza, to emphasize that no soul is black or white. A further interpretation might be that shades of blackness and lightness are also irrelevant, for the color or shade of color of a person's skin has nothing to do with a human being's strength of purpose. Thus, again is sounded a call for all African Americans to identify□as black□with one another.

Lines 41-42

"Hail!" is a salute to the slaves, characterized as "hands," who labored for America. Though the slave past is "gritty" and "grimy," it is "great," and should be remembered and acknowledged as the past of African Americans. In fact, the Smoke King calls to the son of God to pity those hands which toiled on these lands.

Lines 43-44

The final chant of these two lines stands alone as an independent statement, signalled by the exclamation point at the end of line 42. This would seem to indicate that it is only through acceptance of the past history of blacks as Africans and as American slaves that blacks can move forward into an identity which is independent, which in fact we now refer to as African American.

Themes

Race

This poem's historical significance is that it presents a bold, defiant image of the black man at a time when black men, especially in the South, were routinely persecuted and even murdered for such harmless activities as talking to a white woman or walking into a bar or restaurant reserved for whites. There has always been a social division between blacks and whites in America, and when that division has meant competition, the whites have always had the upper hand. "The Song of the Smoke," published more than forty years after the end of slavery, shows readers how little had changed in society since blacks had been freed. At the same time, it showed progress in the very fact that a black writer could speak so freely and intelligently about the oppression of his race, inviting the hatred of insecure whites who felt that any gain for blacks was a loss for themselves. Instead of treating blackness as something that one should be ashamed of, which would have been something of an admission that being black was the same as being inferior, the speaker of this poem embraces his blackness and proudly declares that he is "darkening" and is glad to do it because "the blacker the mantle, the mightier the man!" Insecure whites may have felt threatened by this stance, but insecure blacks received the message that not only were they not inferior but they were superior. In this way, the poem redefined assumptions that had previously been held by members of both races.

Good and Evil

It would be easy to interpret this poem as a statement that blackness represents all that is good and whiteness is a sign of evil, especially if one focuses attention on lines 30-31, where the speaker says, "I am daubing God in night, / I am swabbing Hell in white." Such a simple reading, however, does not take into account the overall mood of the poem. Though it does, in fact, make a point of asserting the good things about blackness, and does so at the expense of whiteness, the social context that Du Bois was writing in has to be considered. This poem makes more sense when understood against the perceptions of different races that were common then. It is an unfortunate coincidence that the English language uses the word "black" to refer both to the descendants of Africa and to the mysteries of evil, whereas "white" is used to represent both Caucasians and virginal purity. This trick of the language often serves, if only on a subconscious level, to encourage the stereotypical attitude that is held by some blacks and whites about the morality of the two races. "The Song of the Smoke" is not so simple that it would merely reverse the old stereotypes, as the two lines already mentioned might indicate, but it does soften these old beliefs so that neither color and neither race can be associated with absolute good or evil. In line 39, the poem states that neither race is completely made of one color or the other. In line 40, it settles the question of color and morality by asserting that skin color is irrelevant to a moral person, separating black and white from the question of good or bad. The overall assertion that

black is good was necessary, given the prevailing prejudices of the early twentieth century, to move many readers toward the position that blackness is not bad.

Vitality

One of the main achievements of this poem is the way that it made its readers conscious of the power and vitality of African Americans. The old stereotype that Du Bois had to work against was one that presented blacks as "shiftless" and lazy this idea grew out of the lack of initiative or curiosity that whites observed when the two races had any interaction with each other. The irony of this stereotype is that white society discouraged blacks from taking initiative but then frowned on their passivity. Blacks were forced to do the detestable jobs that whites would not touch, and the ones who tried to avoid this work were considered lazy. Blacks, disenfranchised from the dominant social situation, had little motivation to approach anything that they did with enthusiasm, which gave whites more reason to call them too lazy and unintelligent to participate in the social system, in a classic example of a self-fulfilling prophesy.

"The Song of the Smoke" presents a black speaker who is proud, powerful, intelligent and in control of his world. Instead of taking an apologetic attitude about black history, this poem embraces it, even with all of the hardships involved, and celebrates the obstacles that African Americans have overcome. Each stanza begins with the same two lines, proclaiming the speaker's blackness and claiming his royal status. The poem uses powerfulsounding words, including "throbbing," "toil," "towering," "cursing," "gritty," and "grimy," that all suggest action and accomplishment. For audiences who were used to thinking of black people as being passive, after generations of social institutions that were designed to break their spirits, the vitality expressed in this poem must have been shocking and perhaps a little frightening.

Order and Disorder

The image of smoke that Du Bois used to represent black pride seems somewhat inappropriate, since smoke is passive and unable to accomplish much by itself. Smoke is dark, but it does not have the destructive, frightening power that fire does. The use of this metaphor is important to the poem's meaning because it puts Du Bois's intention in sharper focus. This is not a radical poem that calls upon blacks to destroy things. Smoke billows in confusing, unexpected patterns, and it obscures vision. The words of the poem do not call for the destruction of society so much as they suggest that the rigid social rules should be less clearly defined. In some cases, the language that Du Bois uses is also confusing, with references to "toiling climes" and "hearsing hearts": phrases such as these can have two or more interpretations, but the poet obviously does not want to provide readers with any clear understanding. The poem is as inexact as its speaker wants the social order to be. It does not try to make any claims about what black people will or can do, only that, like smoke, they have a great presence and rise up toward heaven.

Style

"The Song of the Smoke" is a story-song in the tradition of ballads vocally communicated before they were ever written down. As a poetic form, the ballad preserves the notion of storytelling as well as the musicality though the poem as ballad is rarely sung unless it is set to music, for example, as Paul Simon has done with Edwin Arlington Robinson's *"Richard Cory."*

Music is of course central to the ballad. The musicality of this poem is achieved by two distinct methods. First, the lengths of the lines in each of five blocks in a stanza are similar because the rhythm of the words creates corresponding musical patterns in blocks of 2 lines, 2 lines, 3 lines, 2 lines, and 2 lines in each of the four stanzas. The rhyme scheme of *abccdddeeab* further establishes this musical pattern or rhythm.

Secondly, "The Song of the Smoke" has a unique pattern of indention to signal the rhythm specific to each line-block. While this poem has appeared in several variations with significant alteration of the words, the most prominent difference has been in the setup of the line-blocks. The original version of the poem has the stanzas in three line-blocks each. Another version uses no indention pattern at all, setting the lines into eleven stanzas of varying line lengths. Some versions however, indent the stanzas into five line-blocks each, emphasizing the musical correspondence of rhyme scheme, rhythm pattern, and length of the lines in each block. In addition, this indention into five blocks emphasizes the repetition of the opening two lines throughout the poem by consistently setting them off at both the beginning and end of each stanza. This creates a chant or refrain that strongly reinforces the concept of this poem as a song.

The sounds of the words themselves accentuate the musicality of the poem. Alliteration manifests itself strongly in the word choices the poet makes. For example, in lines 3 and 4 of the first stanza, note the "s" of "swinging in the sky," and the "wr" and "w" of "wringing worlds awry." There is further emphasis on sound in the use of internal rhyme, exemplified in the third and fourth lines of the third stanza, "I am darkening with song, / I am hearkening to wrong!"

In addition to selection of words for their sounds, the poet pays considerable attention to the connotations of words associated with "black" (as in the word "smoke" itself, "iron," and "darkening") and with "white," as in the third and fourth stanzas, where the connotations of black and white are transposed.

Du Bois's poem presents this historical narrative of the African American in the first person "I," as if all African Americans are speaking in one voice, or as if one individual voice tells the story. The benefit of this, from Du Bois's political point of view, is that any individual African-American voice can speak this poem and experience the "author- ity" of these words. Du Bois's extensive body of work represents his mission: to place firmly in the minds of African Americans a recognition of their cultural and economic importance in order to create a sense of the rights and responsibilities of the African-American community.

Historical Context

Migration to the North

During the first decade of the twentieth century, there was a social shift in the American population. Before that time, the American economy had been primarily based upon agricultural production. The early 1900s coincided with a worldwide trend toward industrialization. Huge manufacturing plants grew up in cities. United States Steel, for example, started in 1901 with an initial investment of one billion dollars, which was twice the size of the United States government's budget for that year. In almost all industries, from building materials to petroleum to common household goods, the trend was to consolidate resources into larger, unified production facilities. Most of these were located in the northern states, which had had a history of manufacturing since the country began, with the South, because of its more temperate climate, focusing on agriculture. Workers from all over the world were drawn to the jobs that became available in cities across the northern states. Between 1900 and 1910, the population of the country grew an astonishing 21 percent, mostly from the influx of immigrants who came for jobs.

Between the end of slavery, with the Confederacy's defeat in the Civil War in 1865, and the turn of the century, two-thirds of African Americans remained in the South, where they lived under the pressures of discriminatory laws. These laws, referred to collectively as "Jim Crow" laws (after the name of a foolish black character in a 1832 minstrel show), were designed to limit where blacks could live, where they could work, where they could shop or congregate. To keep blacks from gaining the political power to change the laws, methods were devised to keep them from voting, with taxes and literacy tests administered unfairly at polling places. As the European population migrated to cities in the northern United States in search of work, so did blacks from the South. There, they still found discrimination, but they also found more opportunity than they had known previously. Colleges and newspapers gave urban blacks a sense of community that the South's violent traditions had repressed.

The Niagara Movement

In the summer of 1905, Du Bois and a coalition of twenty-nine prominent African Americans from fourteen states met at Niagara Falls, Ontario, for the purpose of drafting a manifesto calling for the end of racial discrimination in America. Their meeting was kept secret and had the main purpose of addressing the racial problem from an entirely black perspective, with no involvement from whites or support from white contributors. The manifesto that was developed at the Niagara meeting, which Du Bois helped write, called for complete self-determination for blacks and demanded equal rights, including the right to vote freely and to enjoy unhindered economic growth and open access to the political system. At the time, these simple tenants of equal protection that are taken for granted today were unheard of. The organization that came out of that meeting,

called the Niagara Movement, became well known, although the con- troversial positions it took kept people from joining it. The group went around the country, holding meetings with local black leaders in such historically significant locales as Harpers' Ferry, West Virginia, where an important rebellion against slavery was held in 1859, and Faneuil Hall in Boston where rebels met during America's colonial period to plan the Revolutionary War. Many years later, in a 1948 essay entitled "The Negro Since 1900: A Progress Report," Du Bois wrote that the Niagara Movement was "the first clear-cut demand for full citizenship rights in the twentieth century."

The movement expanded to include thirty local branches across the county and was successful in promoting the cause of racial equality in a few cases, but its existence was short-lived. Weak finances and restrictive enrollment policies that limited membership to a core of black intellectuals kept it from gaining widespread attention. A massive race riot in Springfield, Illinois, drew national attention to the problems faced by African Americans, and many white supporters became interested in supporting the cause of equality; the following year, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was formed. W. E. B. Du Bois shifted his affiliation from the Niagara Movement to the NAACP, and the earlier movement, having lost its most prominent member, disbanded in 1910.

The NAACP

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was formed in 1909 by three white supporters of civil rights: William English Walling, Mary White Ovington, and Dr. Henry Moskowitz. The three headed a conference on the problem of race in America, and from that conference came a series of meetings to establish the goals and formalize the rules of a nationwide organization. At first the group was named the National Negro Committee, changing its name the following year to the title that is familiar today. Du Bois joined the NAACP in 1910, convinced that an interracial group would be more effective to address the country's prejudices than a segregated group like the Niagara Movement. He became the Director of Publications and Research for the new group and its most prominent black member. For almost twenty-five years he was the editor of *Crisis,* the NAACP's official publication, giving it a level of serious national attention that such a publication normally would not have enjoyed.

The NAACP soon became a dominant voice in the struggle for civil rights. Throughout most of the twentieth century, the group was involved in all issues involving racial equality. Its role extended beyond discussion of the issues with the formation of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, which was instrumental in providing representation for black defendants and for challenging racially biased laws. In the early years, the group provided resistance to hate groups such as the new Ku Klux Klan, which sought to promote white dominance through murder and intimidation. After World War II, the NAACP was more active in broader issues of equality, providing support for lawsuits that opened housing and education opportunities for all races. After the radical movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the NAACP, by then an established organization, seemed old-fashioned and even conservative. Today, the group, having hit its height of

popularity in the 1950s, faces declining interest from young people who do not recognize its significance.

Critical Overview

"The Song of the Smoke" was initially published in 1907, between the time Du Bois was involved in the 1905 organization of the "radical" Niagara Movement (which demanded civil rights and other basic freedoms for black Americans), and his position as the only black founding member of the NAACP in 1909. By this time Du Bois had realized that if the African American "is regarded as an inferior creation, who can never successfully take a part in modern civilization and whose emancipation and enfranchisement were gestures against nature, then he will need something more than the sort of facts that I have set down [as a scholar]." He was, as Darwin T. Turner has noted, "a social scientist and a political leader who considered art□ especially literature□to be a vehicle for enunciating and effecting social, political, and economic ideas."

Consequently, Du Bois wrote many novels and plays, as well as essays and scholarly works, and composed enough poems to fill a respectable book. He was, furthermore, as Arnold Rampersad acknowledges, the first African-American poet to "resist the concept of poetry as escape from social and political reality." As a matter of fact, his perception of the need for action against American racism was likely responsible for the belief articulated later in his life that "[a]ll art is propaganda" and that the art of black Americans had to act as propaganda "for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy." Turner indicates that this statement prefigured the pronouncement of the Black Aesthetic movement of the 1960s, which maintained that African Americans should "define the excellence of the artistic work according to black people's concepts of beauty."

In fact, it was Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk,* a book of essays published in 1903, that provided the philosophical and creative ground for "The Song of the Smoke." The essays explore the "twoness" of being both black and American, borrowing for a theoretical base the concept of "double consciousness" propounded by such leading psychologists of the time as Du Bois's former Harvard professor William James. In this book of essays Du Bois addresses the idea of the invisibility of blacks as a result of slavery and racism, suggesting also that blacks are constrained by American culture to deal with their "two souls" in, as Rampersad sees it, "a contest between memory... and amnesia" with regard to slavery and Africa. It was in this book that Du Bois established "slavery as metaphor for the black experience." Accordingly, "The Song of the Smoke," as Michael J. C. Echeruo interprets the poem, moves through "a specific cultivation of blackness that changes the contextual meaning of the word, from a generalised euphemism for the enslaved to a precise identification of a person."

But even though Rampersad declares "The Song of the Smoke" to be "the first [poem] to celebrate the beauty of human blackness," he considers that Du Bois had little real genius for the practice of art. His ultimate appraisal of Du Bois's work as a poet and novelist is that it would not have achieved critical acclaim without his other accomplishments, but that all these together "extend our understanding of the history and character of his people and, indeed, of humanism itself." Thus Du Bois accomplished, finally, what he embraced as "'the bounden duty of black America' to

create, preserve, and realize 'Beauty' for America, for the aim of art and political struggle was not black power in isolation but a philosophically reconstructed universe." This poem with its proclamation that "[s]ouls unto me are as stars in a night," begins this reconstruction.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is a fiction writer and playwright who teaches at two colleges in Illinois. In the following essay, he argues that W. E. B. Du Bois's poem "The Song of the Smoke" is under-appreciated by readers who ignore its artistic use of unclear language and focus on its message but not its form.

Like the works of many pioneering African- American authors, W. E. B. Du Bois's 1907 poem "The Song of the Smoke" is often recognized for its social message, but far too seldom is it given credit for its achievement as a work of art. The fact that art is often subject to individual impressions does not mean that it can be anything that any person wants to say it is: in its most basic sense, artistry can be defined by the way that the form of a piece is used to highlight its message. In the case of Du Bois, as with so many writers who raise social concerns, critics tend to spend more time looking at *what* the poem says, skipping over the details about *how* its message is conveyed. Beyond its message, there is much about the style of "The Song of the Smoke" that proves Du Bois to have been wise in his instincts as a poet, as prudent as artists with much greater reputations.

Even a beginning poetry reader can tell that the basis of this poem's structure is repetition. The phrases "I am the Smoke King" and "I am black" appear eight times each, in the very eye-catching positions at the beginning and the end of each stanza, where even lines that are not repeated would draw attention to themselves. In addition to these, the phrase "I am" (or sometimes "I'm") appears another fourteen times. Readers certainly cannot come away from this poem without recognizing it as a declaration about its speaker's identity.

Judging from just these most-repeated lines alone, the identity of the speaker of this poem can be said to be made up of three main elements: blackness, kingliness, and something more vague, which can be identified as "smokiness." It is clearly part of the poem's social agenda to assert over and over again the connection between being black and being king, in order to reverse the white culture's under-appreciation of the abilities of blacks. The other main component is left a mystery, though. Readers can tell right away that smoke implies darkness, but in addition to darkness, it also has many other implications that are not nearly so easy to understand. Du Bois's use of metaphor in "The Song of the Smoke" shows a poetic gift that is too seldom recognized. The meaning of smoke, which is given so much attention, is almost as difficult for the human mind to take hold of as actual smoke is to wrap one's fingers around. Of course, smoke means darkness, in the poem as in life, but any number of clearer images could have been used to represent darkness. It also means danger, although this seems to be only a small part of Du Bois's meaning, if it is a part of it at all. After darkness, the most salient meaning of smoke seems to be its lack of solidity, the fact that its shape is constantly changing. Many critics who think of Du Bois as a militant figure have trouble appreciating this emphasis on adaptability, especially when they are used to thinking of him in contrast to his contemporary, Booker T. Washington, whose message for the African-American community is often summarized as accommodation. It would be too

easy to just forget about the idea of the smoke metaphor or to think that it does not fit in with the meaning of the poem. Many of the images here imply power and concrete hardness, with iron, molls, and toil, and there are also representations of flesh as hide or a mantle. Critics familiar with Du Bois's political views have mixed his politics with the aforementioned images of power and ended up interpreting the meaning of smoke in only one limited way.

It makes sense, though, that Du Bois would use the smoke image to contrast, not complement, the ruggedness that he ascribes to his people. The use of opposites gives his subject matter more range: it claims for the black people the multifaceted ability to be both hard-working toilers and also angelic spirits in flight. The contradictory imagery could have backfired, if Du Bois had not handled it with great care, but here it invests African Americans with a well-rounded wholeness.

The same strategy of pasting opposites together works for the poem's overall design. It is a careful, skillful mixture of a form that is strictly followed and a verbal looseness that makes "The Song of the Smoke" look, at times, as if Du Bois might have just written what came off the top of his head.

At times, the poem seems to be too tied up by the form, with every line in the last three stanzas committed to following the pattern that is established in the first one. The rhyme scheme repeats in exactly the same way time after time, the physical layout of indented lines stays the same, and, as mentioned, the same two lines repeat constantly, showing up twice in each stanza. This rigid adherence to form gives the poem a sense of tradition, of seriousness, as if the ideas being expressed are already carved in marble as universal truths. The tight structure Du Bois uses serves as a constant reminder of the author's control, keeping readers aware of the fact that the ideas are results of intelligent consideration.

The words Du Bois uses do not give this impression. They struggle against clear-cut interpretation. They seem carefully placed to match the sounds of one another, almost compulsively so, with no freedom allowed, a technique that allows little room for meaning. Not only are there solid blocks of end-rhymes (such as "mills/kills/rills" and "times/chimes/crimes"), but there are also rhymes within the third and fourth lines of each stanza. This emphasis on the sounds of words is actually what gives the poem its sense of freedom, even while seeming to make it a slave to structure. Even after going over it a dozen times, readers find themselves unable to grasp Du Bois's meaning, a marked contrast from the way that they "get" the rhythm and rhyme scheme almost immediately. Is there really any concrete way to understand a statement like "I am the soul of the soul-toil kills" or "Sweet Christ, pity toiling lands"? Lines like these give a general impression of toiling and proud defiance, but the words do not come together in any clear way. They relate more in the way their sounds fit into a pattern than in the interaction of the meanings of the various words. There seems to be meaning, but it swirls out of grasp when a reader tries to grasp it: like smoke, it floats off into the air.

There has always been strong resistance to the idea that Du Bois may have meant the language in his poetry not to be precise in meaning. Critics who find it difficult to

understand tend to look deeper and deeper, certain that there is something there, more often than not certain that it contains a hidden message about the black experience. Black American poets have often had their works examined in terms of their race, whether it is directly related to their subject matter or not. Only sometimes is this a case of crude stereotyping, of critics failing to recognize people's individuality. There is a positive side to reminding readers of the racial background of a writer of color: it tends to remind the world of black achievements and to counteract the old stereotypes about blacks' intellectual achievements. In the case of W. E. B. Du Bois, the fear of overemphasizing his race is moot, since he was so acutely aware of the place of blacks in the white-dominated American society and he worked to point out cultural inequality in just about everything that he wrote. Because of the seriousness of Du Bois's subject matter, readers tend to miss the fact that his poetry works because his use of language is simple, even light-hearted.

The dominant theme that runs through most of Du Bois's works over a career that spanned more than sixty years is a simple one: fairness. Readers tend to miss this. There are several reasons for not accepting the obvious. First, Du Bois is often characterized as an angry writer, calling for equality at a time when the field of black writers willing to express open dissatisfaction was extremely thin. Another was that he *was* angry if compared to Booker T. Washington, his intellectual opponent who favored a more timid approach to black dignity. Finally, there is the force of Du Bois's growing reputation: "fairness" seems a bit mild for a hero, and he is more often described loftily as a champion for the cause of justice. The difference in words is that one concept is somber, and the other is a simple, obvious way of life. The fairness that Du Bois championed throughout his life was not a prize; it was just, basically and obviously, the way things should be.

Readers need to look at a poem like "The Song of the Smoke" as a poem, not as a political statement. It uses words and poetic techniques to make its points, and the methods that it does use cannot be ignored. If the structure is rigid, it should be questioned; if the words do not completely make sense, readers need to ask whether there is a reason for this. It is misleading to think that these confusing aspects come from Du Bois's intellectualism or from his racial identity. They come from the requirements of art, and the poem manages to go beyond clarity in order to satisfy its own artistic requirements.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on "The Song of the Smoke," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Smith is a writer and editor. In this essay, she discusses how W. E. B. DuBois's "The Song of the Smoke" is poised within a critical moment in African- American history, reflecting the painful legacy of slavery in North America yet looking with hope toward the future.

W. E. B. Du Bois's poem "The Song of the Smoke" is a powerful statement on what it means to be an African American. Written in the early years of the twentieth century, it looks both back to the past, finding strength and sorrow in the legacy of the slave, and toward the future, hoping to find a new strength and dignity that all African Americans can unite behind.

The poem follows a song structure, including the repetition of a refrain ("I am the Smoke King / I am black"). On the one hand, this looks backward into the English folk poetry tradition, which often included song forms such as the ballad; on the other, it looks back to the rich tradition of African-American music, including the work songs sung by the slaves in the fields. The poem is filled with multiple associations and meanings like this.

Like much of Du Bois's work, this poem has a charged political content, a content that is served and exemplified by the multiple meanings that can be associated with almost every line of the poem. In his provocative and influential collection of essays, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois had argued that African Americans were forever conscious of having a "twoness" of their souls□being American and, at the same time, black. The ambiguity of the poem is a literary illustration of this idea: the multiple possible meanings can be seen as reflecting the multiple ways that African Americans were forced to exist in American society. Yet, almost paradoxically, the thrust of the poem is toward unity□toward fusing the often divided African-American community into a single, powerful black community.

The poem is written in the present tense, but it is almost impossible to understand its full meaning without understanding African-American history. Again, this device serves to demonstrate in a literary fashion the fact that the African-American experience is dominated by the long period in which African Americans were held as slaves in America. It also makes a subtle but potent connection between that time and the time the poem was written (1907), seemingly arguing that there is not a great deal of difference between the status of African Americans in the two times.

"The Song of the Smoke" is a poem of action and motion. Things are constantly happening in the poem; almost every important word ends in "ing." Thus, while steeped in history, the poem also conveys a sense of constant motion upwards, like the smoke "whirling home to God" in line 9. Again, this reflects Du Bois's own political views; he spent a lifetime tirelessly working for the betterment of conditions for African Americans, and he was a strong believer in African Americans lifting themselves up, without relying on white people to help them.

The poem's first two lines are repeated as a refrain throughout the poem, beginning and ending each stanza. The simple line "I am the Smoke King" contains a world of meaning. For one thing, it may refer to Du Bois's own skin color: he was a lightly-colored African-American man, a trait that was considered desirable by many African Americans at the time. Thus, his exclamation "I am black!" is a defiant cry of solidarity with all people of African descent as well as an expression of his determination not to seek preferential treatment based on his skin color. (After all, giving people different treatment because of their skin color is exactly what he spent his lifetime arguing against.) At the same time, the line "I am the Smoke King" may well represent the rise of American industry, particularly in the North. At the time the poem was written, many African Americans in the South existed in conditions of almost total economic bondage to the whites that owned the land, and discrimination prevented them from getting any jobs but the most menial. Northern industry, by providing jobs to African Americans, offered an escape from this suffocating condition. Also, industry was popularly seen as representing progress, the way to a new future, a future in which Du Bois wanted African Americans to participate. Finally, the identification of African Americans with smoke may be a reference to their rising from the ashes of slavery and the fires of the Civil War that had consumed the old slaveholding society. It may also serve as a subtle reminder that African Americans could not be expected to accept discrimination forever without fighting back: where there's smoke, after all, there's a fire as well.

Most importantly, however, the lines defiantly say that the speaker is not only black but that he is royalty□the Smoke King. This reflects a determination not only to stand up and be proud of that which the whites saw as hateful□being darkskinned□ but to take command of one's own destiny. Thus, the Smoke King is "wringing worlds awry" (line 4) by refusing to accept the role a racist society wishes to force on him.

The poem's second stanza is a bitter commentary on both the past and the present conditions of African Americans. There is the recognition that the ambitions, both public and private, of black Americans are dashed□hearts are broken, love seems impossible□but that by offering a new vision of pride in being black, the Smoke King hopes to focus and unite this suffering, healing it by breaking the pattern of racial discrimination.

Du Bois also illustrates in this stanza how much American society owes to the labor of African Americans, who "Wedd[ed] the toiling climes" (both America and Africa and the North and the South) and shed the blood of the "bloodless crimes," in this case not just slavery but the second-class status given to African Americans after the Civil War. The stanza concludes with an image of smoke hovering in the sky ("Lurid lowering 'mid the blue"). Given the popular identification of "heaven" with "sky," it can be said that Du Bois is trying to remind readers that while America might almost be a paradise for whites, it will still be flawed until racial prejudice is conquered; the next line is a reminder that African Americans will not be content to wait; they demand justice now.

The third stanza is a fantastic outburst of pride in being black, and it also clearly reminds the reader that God, who is just, is on the side of African Americans, who are unjustly persecuted. The powerful lines "I am daubing God in night / I am swabbing Hell

in white" are a pointed reminder that in Christian belief it must be the innocent victims of white oppression that rise to Heaven to be with God ("daubing him with night") while their oppressors must descend to Hell. In a country that still managed to equate lightness of skin with godliness, this was a powerful statement, one that still has application to readers' own times.

The last stanza of the poem, however, is more pessimistic. The future seems destined to be the same as the present and the past for African Americans: thus, the Smoke King curses the "ruddy morn" and, worse still, is "hearsing hearts unborn"; for those who are born under discrimination can be said to have almost died before they were born. Yet at the same time, souls sparkle like stars out of the blackness of night□again demonstrating that out of blackness, that which the white people despise, incomparable beauty can shine forth. And in an arresting pairing of images, the Smoke King notes that "I whiten my black men□I blacken my white!" In this simple sentence, Du Bois cuts to the heart of the true cost of racial discrimination in America. The suffering undergone by African Americans ennobles them in a certain way: as noted in the third stanza, it lifts them up to God, who judges all men; at the same time, white people, who have discriminated against African Americans, are degraded by their own prejudice. Racial prejudice thus destroys the lives of everyone it touches, robbing African Americans of their futures, and causing white people to live in a world of hypocrisy, where the nearly sacred words of the Declaration of Independence□ that all men are created equal□are reduced to a hollow mockery. Thus, the great cry that occurs in the next line (line 40), "What's the hue of a hide to a man in his might?" is not a call for brotherhood between the races, but the desperate plea for a world in which the color of a person's skin does not matter at all.

Since a religious tone has steadily been rising in the poem, it is fitting that it concludes with a prayer. (The frequent use of religious imagery in the poem may be a tacit acknowledgement of the important and influential role African-American preachers and ministers have played in the struggle against discrimination.) The prayer is, first, a call to black people to continue to better themselves through hard work ("Hail! great, gritty, grimy hands") and, second, a plea for pity from the Christian God over the "toiling lands," though whether this means the South, the North, or America as a whole is not indicated□nor does it matter much. For the most important message comes through, Du Bois's passionate plea that, united in a common history, African Americans must be united in a common pride in who they are and in a common determination to take control of their own destiny and change the future. Thus, the poem ends with its three most important words: "I am black."

Source: Erica Smith, Critical Essay on "The Song of the Smoke," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Adaptations

Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and Booker T. Washington are the focus of a videocassette from Churchill Films called *Black Paths of Leadership,* narrated by William Marshall.

"The Song of the Smoke" is included with poems from other African-American writers on the Audio Bookshelf recording *I, Too, Sing America,* released in 2000.

W. E. B. Du Bois is interviewed on a Smithsonian Folkways Records 1993 cassette entitled *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Recorded Autobiography.*

National Public Radio released a 1980 cassette with Douglas Turner Ward's renowned Negro Ensemble Company recreating Du Bois' life and times from his writings, entitled *A Sound Portrait of W. E. B. Du Bois.* It is part of their thirteen- part *A Question of Place* series.

Topics for Further Study

In his later life, Du Bois joined the Communist Party and eventually left America to avoid harassment by the government. Read about his ideas on race relations in the 1960s and point out places in this 1907 poem that anticipate these later views.

Find a contemporary song that you think carries the same message as this poem and point out the similarities and the differences.

The poem makes much of the black man's ability to do physical labor, hailing "great, gritty, grimy hands." Given that this is an age of information, do you think that the capacity for manual work is still considered a positive trait? Why or why not?

Research scientific theories about the original human beings, *homo erectus,* who first appeared on the African continent nearly 1.7 million years ago.

Du Bois, a brilliant scholar, was the first black man to graduate from Harvard University with a Ph.D. Research the story of James Meredith, a black air force veteran whose enrollment into the University of Mississippi sparked violent protests in 1962. Report on the tension between state and federal lawmakers at that time.

Compare and Contrast

1907: Racial discrimination is considered legal after the Supreme Court allows for "separate but equal" accommodations for blacks and whites in the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case. Housing, transportation and medical facilities for black Americans are often not "equal," but inferior.

Today: Federal laws strictly prohibit discrimination based on race.

1907: African-American political theory is divided between the pragmatic accommodationist theories of Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois's view that blacks should be independent and resist social injustices against them.

Today: Despite social gains made toward equality, the same basic attitudes about African- American progress prevail among political leaders like Reverend Jesse Jackson, who works within the political system, and Reverend Louis Farrakhan, who supports self-determination for blacks.

1907: An African American accused of a crime faces the likelihood of being lynched by vigilantes before standing trial, especially in the South.

Today: In spite of gains made toward racial equality, there are still frequent accusations of unfair treatment of blacks within the criminal justice system.

1907: America is a magnet for immigration: 1.29 million immigrants enter the country this year.

Today: The country still has not received as many immigrants in a single year as it did in 1907.

1907: The frustrations of racial segregation leads to race riots spontaneously breaking out in urban centers, such as Brownsville, Texas, in 1906 and Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1908.

Today: After the turbulent and violent period of the 1960s, race riots have become rare. The most recent and notorious happens after the acquittal of policemen charged with beating black motorist Rodney King in 1992, triggering the worst violence and looting in U.S. history.

What Do I Read Next?

Many of the most important writings of Du Bois's long and distinguished career are collected in *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader,* edited and with an introduction by Meyer Weinburg, and originally published in 1970.

Autobiobraphy of a People (2000) is a compilation of writings by African Americans from the Colonial period to today, edited by Herb Boyd with a forward by Gordon Parks, and showing the melding of the African and American cultures into a single identity.

James Weldon Johnson was a black author who wrote around the same time that Du Bois did. He was active with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and became its first black executive secretary in 1916. His most famous book is the novel *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), which examines race relations at the time.

The Harlem Renaissance, an artistic movement among African-American writers and scholars, is thought to have begun with Jean Toomer's 1923 book *Cane,* a collection of poems, vignettes, and stories about life in the South and the systematic destruction of the self-esteem of blacks, especially men.

Langston Hughes was an African-American poet, playwright and short story writer of the generation after Du Bois. He looked at the tragedy of race with more humor. His poems are available in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, 1994.

Du Bois' most influential work was his 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk,* his semiautobiographical musings on American life after the Reconstruction period.

Further Study

Banks, William M., *Black Intellectuals: Race and Responsibility in American Life,* W. W. Norton & Co., 1996.

Banks covers black intellectuals from history, like Du Bois, but he also examines the broader philosophical question of the relationship between intellectualism and the black community today.

Leamann, Nicholas, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America,* Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1991.

This book, broken down by popular northern cities that blacks moved to from the South, explains how race relations in America changed between the 1940s and 1960s, making today's world different from the one Du Bois knew.

Marable, Manning, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Black Radical Democrat,* Twayne Publishers, 1986.

This biography offers a serious, yet easy-to-read, telling of Du Bois's life.

Zamir, Shamoon, *Dark Voices: W. E. B. Du Bois and American Thought, 1888-1903,* University of Chicago Press, 1995.

This book traces Du Bois's intellectual development and shows its roots in both the American and European philosophical traditions. One of the most focused and telling books ever written about Du Bois.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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