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**Literature**  
Teaching Unit  
*Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide*



The Souls of  
Black Folk

by W.E.B. Du Bois

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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# Literature Teaching Unit

*Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide*



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## Notes

*The Souls of Black Folk* is a complicated text that combines a critique of historical events with a proposal for how to shape America. The text is a compilation of fourteen separate essays that range from autobiographies to sermons. While the teacher may find it helpful to study each chapter separately in order to interpret the complexities of Du Bois' argument, the essays are meant to build upon one another, creating, for the reader, a portrait of what it means to be African-American at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Because of its reliance on historical knowledge, the teacher may find it beneficial to have students research W. E. B. Du Bois, Reconstruction, the Atlanta Compromise, and Booker T. Washington.

The teacher may also find it helpful to prepare students for the language used in *The Souls of Black Folk*. The novel contains historically accurate language that is offensive and derogatory nowadays, including references to African-Americans as “niggers” and “Negroes.” In addition, the dialect may seem stereotyped, but the teacher may wish to make students aware of its historical accuracy. Much of Du Bois' writing is complex, with long, convoluted sentence structure. Students are encouraged to work through these complexities to understand Du Bois' philosophical, social, historical and racially motivated theories.

Note: All page references come from the Dover Thrift edition of *The Souls of Black Folk*, copyright 1994.

## Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. explain and discuss Du Bois' purpose for writing the text.
2. understand Booker T. Washington's "Atlanta Compromise."
3. discuss the meaning and purpose of the Sorrow Songs and Du Bois' use of the Sorrow Songs in his text.
4. discuss the importance of education, religion, and music in the lives of African-Americans.
5. discuss the implications of the color-line in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
6. explain the Freedmen's Bureau, its development, and its purpose in the South.
7. compare and contrast Du Bois' policy ideas with Washington's policy ideas.
8. explain the success and failures of Washington's policy according to Du Bois
9. discuss the three schools of thought about African-Americans that have evolved since the beginning of slavery.
10. discuss the economical situation, including the reasons for their living conditions and the economic classes, of the African-Americans in the South during the time Du Bois is writing this text.
11. list the ways in which African-Americans and whites have contact in the South and what the effects of that contact are.
12. explain the importance of Alexander Crummell in the life of Du Bois.
13. discuss how education is a pervasive theme throughout the text and cite examples from the text that support this theme.
14. define and cite examples of:
  - personification
  - irony
  - symbolism
  - allusion

### Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Explain what Du Bois means by the term “color-line” and cite examples of how it functions in the lives of African-Americans in 1903.
2. Discuss the situations in which the color-line might still function in today’s society.
3. Explain the “Veil” that Du Bois mentions throughout his text.
4. Discuss whether Du Bois is a product of life within the Veil or outside of it.
5. Discuss the ideological controversy between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois.
6. Discuss Du Bois’ feelings toward Alexander Crummell.
7. Explain the Sorrow Songs and discuss Du Bois’ use of them in the text.
8. How does Du Bois’ education shape his philosophy of education and the advancement of the African-American people?
9. Discuss Du Bois as an elitist. Is he capable of commenting accurately on the African-American situation in the South? Why or why not?
10. Discuss Booker T. Washington’s policy for the African-American population.
11. Discuss the function and purpose of the Freedmen’s Bureau.
12. Explain the development of formal education in the South.
13. Discuss the “Atlanta Compromise.”
14. Discuss how Du Bois characterizes the African-American population in the South.
15. Explain how Du Bois organizes his text. Does that organization work to expand Du Bois’ arguments?
16. How does Du Bois’ natural prejudice affect his philosophy?

### Chapter I – Of Our Spiritual Strivings

#### VOCABULARY

**credulous** – inclined to believe, especially on slight evidence  
**demagogy** – an emotionally charged appeal made by a political leader  
**dyspeptic** – characterized by uneasiness and upset  
**emancipated** – liberated or released  
**enfranchised** – freed from slavery  
**exponents** – advocates or champions  
**homage** – praise  
**inculcate** – to teach by repetition  
**obeisance** – respectful gesture  
**peremptorily** – indisputably  
**plaintive** – sad; sorrowful  
**quackery** – deception  
**spectre** – spirit or ghost  
**swarthy** – dark in color or complexion  
**sycophancy** – extreme flattery  
**travail** – to labor hard  
**wanton** – unchaste, lewd

1. How does Du Bois initially set up the contrast between whites and blacks in America?

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2. What is the unasked question that Du Bois intends to address in his writing?

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3. What does it mean to “be a problem”?

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## Chapter II – Of the Dawn of Freedom

### VOCABULARY

**autonomy** – the right or power of self-government  
**blighted** – devastated  
**defalcation** – embezzlement  
**devolved** – transferred  
**exigencies** – requirements  
**incongruous** – out of place  
**marauders** – plunderers  
**peonage** – servitude  
**quailed** – lost heart  
**query** – a question  
**quixotic** – foolishly impractical  
**rapine** – pillage and plunder  
**recalcitrant** – stubbornly resisting authority  
**shibboleth** – a language that is used for distinguishing members of a group  
**stalwart** – brave; valiant

1. What does Du Bois believe is the cause of the Civil War?

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2. What does the Emancipation Proclamation do to the Negro problems?

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3. What is the Freedmen's Bureau's purpose?

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### Chapter IV – Of the Meaning of Progress

#### VOCABULARY

- affectation** – a showy, artificial behavior
- blighted** – discouraged and defeated
- bravado** – blustering, swaggering conduct
- fatalism** – a belief that events are predetermined and unchangeable
- incorrigibly** – unable to be reformed
- inimitable** – not capable of being imitated
- saffron** – deep orange pungent spice
- sallied** – ventured forth
- shiftlessness** – lazy indifference

1. Explain both the statement and the context of the following quotation: "...but even then fell the awful shadow of the Veil, for they ate first, then I –alone."

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2. Explain why Du Bois is important in the lives of his students.

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