
Depiction Of Double Consciousness in Invisible Man And The Souls Of Black Folks Novels

Reconciling Double Consciousness

W.E.B. Du Bois coined the term “double consciousness” in order to describe the dual identity, the cognitive dissonance, that black Americans lived with. Du Bois wrote “...The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this 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. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” (887) This description of the black American experience is echoed in subsequent black literature. In Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, the unnamed protagonist wrestles with many of the same struggles described by Ta-Nehisi Coates in his “Letter to My Son.” While W.E.B. Du Bois’s concepts of double consciousness and his metaphor of the veil resonate strongly in their writings, they disagree on the implications of this double consciousness. They present very different ideas about how and if Black Americans (Ellison) should reconcile their Black identity with their American identity.

In his *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois summed up the racial divide with a question: “How does it feel to be a problem?” (886) to Du Bois, this question captures the nature of race relations in the years after reconstruction. Du Bois wrote, “Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nonetheless, flutter around it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, ‘How does it feel to be a problem?’ they say I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, ‘I fought in Mechanicsville’; or, ‘Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil?’ At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, ‘How does it feel to be a problem?’ I answer seldom a word.” (886). According to Du Bois, this blend of condensation, oppression and pity that White Americans treated Black Americans with created a sense among Black Americans of not being welcome in the same society as white Americans. Du Bois uses two terms extensively to describe this situation and its effects on Black Americans: his metaphor of “the veil” and his term of “double consciousness.”

Du Bois used his metaphor of the veil to describe the separation of White society from Black society. Du Bois first became aware of this divide as a child. He provides an anecdote describing when he first became aware of this division as a young boy, when a new classmate rejected him because of the color of his skin. This experience of discrimination had a profound impact on Du Bois. He wrote about the incident’s impact: “Then it dawned on me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil.” (886) It is from within this veil that Black Americans experienced oppression. While Black Americans could see and understand life outside of the veil, the lives and world of White Americans, White Americans were themselves unable to see

through the veil, to understand the lives of Black Americans, as it was impossible for them to understand the oppression faced by members of the Black race. However, to Du Bois, the veil was not always a curse, the veil also afforded Black Americans the opportunity to understand the world in ways that White Americans could not. This enhanced understanding of the world helped shape Black identity, and the hopes of Black Americans for the future. Du Bois articulated this: "...He saw himself darkly,—darkly as through a veil, and yet he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission. He began to have a dim feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself and not another." (889) To Du Bois however, this Black identity alone was insufficient to describe the character of the Black race.

To Du Bois, Black Americans had two separate identities, first their understanding of themselves as Black, and secondly of themselves as Americans. To describe this dual identity, Du Bois coined the term "double consciousness." With the term double consciousness, Du Bois intended to capture not only the duality of being both Black and American, but also how Black Americans found themselves constantly judged by White society, and constantly judging themselves by the standards of White Society. "...The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this 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. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." (887) To Du Bois, a key question facing the Black Community was that of how to reconcile their double consciousness, how to merge their Black identity with their American identity. To Du Bois, it was vital for Black Americans to not surrender any part of their culture in order to achieve a balance. To this end Du Bois wrote, "In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face." (887) In order to accomplish any sort of reconciliation however, Black Americans would first have to achieve a greater degree of equality with White Americans. In order to attain equality, Black Americans would first need to gain true freedom.

It was for this reason that Du Bois broke from the prevailing ideas of Black leaders, namely those of Booker T. Washington. Washington's advocacy of surrendering hope for civil rights in exchange for meager economic advancement was to Du Bois unforgivable. Du Bois summarizes the various paths that Blacks had hoped would lead to true freedom. First the abolition of slavery, which was insufficient as slavery left in its wake a multitude of other problems. Then Black Americans looked to the ballot to make their voices heard, only to have their votes taken from them. They looked to education, "book learning," then to vocational training and economic advancement. (889) Du Bois seeks to make the point that any of those paths to liberty on their own are insufficient. Thus, he rejects Washington's surrender of equal civil rights, demands Black suffrage be unencumbered, and advocated the importance of higher learning to the future of the Black Community.

The narrator of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* also rejects Washington's ideas. The narrator tells of his "grandfather's curse," how his grandfather, a man who had his whole life been the

'ideal' black citizen and who embodied the ideals of Booker T. Washington on his deathbed declared himself "...a traitor and a spy, and spoke of his meekness as a dangerous activity." (215) The narrator is left confused by these last words, and his family tells him not to dwell on it. However, he is haunted by these words for years. At his high school graduation, the narrator gave a speech espousing the ideals of Booker T. Washington. Indeed, the narrator clearly already questioned the idea that "...humility was the secret, indeed, the very essence of progress." (215). He added "Not that I believed this—how could I, remembering my grandfather?—I only believed that it worked." (215). He also acted to embody the ideals of Booker T. Washington, the ideal of humility. He wanted in no way to antagonize white folks, and tried When invited to give his speech for the town's leading white citizens, he endures tremendous humiliation while taking part in the "battle-royal." He gets beaten brutally by a much larger opponent, is forced to watch a white woman strip, and is made to writhe on an electrified rug while scrambling for money. All of this is to make the black boys participating in the battle royal look pathetic to the white audience, and reinforce the white narrative of black dependence and inferiority. This is a grotesque and visceral example of Du Bois's veil, as the White citizens are not interested in the actual situation of Black Americans, only in perpetuating their vision of black America. Indeed, after being beaten to a bloody pulp to the point of choking on his own blood, the narrator is the allowed to give his speech, a speech that was almost entirely the words of Booker T. Washington, and with almost none of the narrator's own input. And this is the speech that the white people want to hear. They pay little mind to his speech until he broke from the cultural narrative and declared "Social equality" (223). Suddenly all the voices of the white citizens hushed and he was made to repeat himself. The narrator redacted, and the script was resumed. The white citizens present the narrator with a scholarship and send him on his merry way.

In breaking from the cultural narrative enforced by the white community, the narrator exposed the true nature of the veil as the way of perpetuating black inferiority in the eyes of white Americans. In the prologue of *Invisible man*, the narrator sums up what it is like to live under the veil. He declares in the opening lines, "I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allen Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance... I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me." (208) He describes being ignored by the world at large due to his race. In response to this, he acts with what Du Bois would describe as "blind rage" when he beats a white stranger to within an inch of his life, by doing his best to leech off the power company, and by rejecting societal standards by living without a traditional residence. Du Bois would consider such behavior unproductive. Rather than rejecting his identity as an American and instead living only as a member of the black race as the narrator of *Invisible Man* tries to do, Du Bois would rather he live as a productive member of society, and strive to reconcile his Black identity with his American identity. Instead, the narrator does the opposite.

Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote in his "Letter to My Son," about coming to terms with many of the same things that Du Bois and the narrator of *Invisible Man* struggle with. From a young age, Coates was keenly aware of the veil. "In the evenings I would sit before this television bearing witness to the dispatches from this other world... That other world was suburban and endless, organized around pot roasts, blueberry pies, fireworks, ice-cream sundaes, immaculate bathrooms, and small toy trucks that were loosed in wooded backyards with streams and endless lawns. Comparing these dispatches with the facts of my native world, I came to understand that my country was a galaxy, and this galaxy stretched from the pandemonium of West Baltimore to the happy hunting grounds of Mr. Belvedere. I obsessed over the distance between that other

sector of space and my own. I knew that my portion of the American galaxy, where bodies were enslaved by a tenacious gravity, was black and that the other, liberated portion was not. I knew that some inscrutable energy preserved the breach. I felt, but did not yet understand, the relation between that other world and me. And I felt in this a cosmic injustice, a profound cruelty, which infused an abiding, irrepressible desire to unshackle my body and achieve the velocity of escape." As a young man wrestling with double consciousness, Coates saw much of what Du Bois would call "wasted rage" or "blind submission." On the streets he saw wasted rage in the endless violence committed by black kids against one another, he saw it in the "boy with the small eyes [who] reached into his ski jacket and pulled out a gun." He saw blind submission in the deep fear that his community had of law-enforcement.

Coates had to come to terms with his own wasted rage while attending school at Howard University, he had to come to terms with his own blind submission. Coates had come to Howard University on a mission to legitimize black culture in his mind. "... I came to Howard toting a new and different history, myth really, which inverted all the stories of the people who believed themselves to be white. I majored in history with all the motives of a man looking to fill a trophy case. They had heroes, so we must have heroes too." However, Coates eventually came to realize his mission was futile. Just like Du Bois, Coates believed in the need to create black intellectuals, and strove to be one. However, Coates initially failed to realize that black Americans and white Americans could also draw from the same cultural sources without sacrificing their distinct identities. He struggled with a question asked by Bellow: "Who was the Tolstoy of the Zulu." Coates first tried to find a black author to match Tolstoy. After spending much time struggling with the quip, he stumbled upon an essay by Ralph Wiley. He eventually found peace when he came across an essay written by Wiley. "Tolstoy is the Tolstoy of the Zulus," wrote Wiley. "Unless you find a profit in fencing off universal properties of mankind into exclusive tribal ownership." And there it was. I had accepted Bellow's premise. In fact, Bellow was no closer to Tolstoy than I was to Nzinga." Coates rejects the notion that Black and White Americans necessarily had to have different sets of cultural heritage. "And what did that mean for the Dreamers I'd seen as a child? Could I ever want to get into the world they made? No. I was born among a people, Samori, and in that realization I knew that I was out of something. It was the psychosis of questioning myself, of constantly wondering if I could measure up. But the whole theory was wrong, their whole notion of race was wrong. And apprehending that, I felt my first measure of freedom." His rejection of having to judge himself by some abstract racial standards enabled him to reconcile his double consciousness.

His perspective on race changed. His professors at Howard challenged his concept of what it meant to be "Black." His education forced him to reevaluate his motivations for going to school. He was disarmed of his "Weaponized history." Thus Coates came to realize his prior conceptions of race were just another form of blind submission, "My great error was not that I had accepted someone else's dream but that I had accepted the fact of dreams, the need for escape, and the invention of racecraft." That said, Coates still acknowledges that race, while an artificial construct is a very real part of American society, and has very real impacts on members of American society. He stresses to his son that racism is a visceral thing, that racism can and does physically destroy the bodies of Black Americans. He starts his essay with an anecdote showing the persistence of the veil in American media, which is to show that despite his personal reconciliation, there are still very real racial problems in America.

With this in mind, he ends his letter with his message for his son. He bluntly states that it won't be easy for him to live his life as a Black American. He makes it clear that he can not and would

not make that fact any easier for his son. In a very Du Bois way, he encourages his son to struggle with the adversity that comes naturally with being born as a Black person in America, because he believes that that very struggle will make his life more meaningful.

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