

Reading Questions: W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

1. What is the problem of the twentieth century, according to Du Bois? Is his answer prescient?
2. What does Du Bois say he sets out to do in *The Souls of Black Folk*? Why might he think this task is important?
3. What is the Veil? How does Du Bois describe what it is like to live within the Veil? Have you ever experienced the kind of double-consciousness he describes?
4. How does double-consciousness make a black American's body home to warring ideals? How does it cause alienation, in the sense of an inability to be comfortable in one's own skin?
5. By what act did the United States government take responsibility for the emancipated former slaves, according to Du Bois? Do you agree that through this act, the US government took on responsibility for them?
6. Does Du Bois think the Freedman's Bureau ultimately failed? Why or why not?
7. Why does Du Bois criticize Booker T. Washington? What is the Atlanta Compromise and what does Du Bois think is wrong with it?
8. What kind of challenge to the betterment of black Americans does Washington primarily target? What does he leave out according to Du Bois?
9. What specific strategy does Du Bois think is needed to improve the lives of black Americans?
10. What kind of training and education does Du Bois insist upon as part of this strategy? Why might others like Washington oppose this kind of training? What do you think about the importance of this kind of education as a means for uplifting a people?
11. What does the story of Alexander Crummell suggest about the challenges facing black leaders? Does his story complicate Du Bois's strategy of relying upon a talented leadership class to improve the state of black Americans?
12. Who is John? What messages does his story convey? How, for instance, does the story reflect Du Bois's fears about his strategy for uplifting black Americans?
13. Why does John fail as a leader of the black community? What does his failure have to do with religion? What does it have to do with alienation?
14. Why does Du Bois begin each chapter with an excerpt from the Sorrow Songs juxtaposed with an epigraph from a prominent European or American cultural figure?
15. How do the Sorrow Songs address alienation?