

Double consciousness and the harlem renaissance



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In W. E. B. DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, he introduces two concepts which are key to understanding what life is like for the modern Black American. These concepts are: Double Consciousness, and the Veil. These two concepts are intrinsically linked; to understand Double Consciousness requires understanding the Veil, and vice-versa. Double Consciousness refers to the idea that Black Americans live in two separate Americas: white America—where they are forced to behave according to the social protocol of white America and where they must live up to the expectations non-Black Americans have for Black Americans— and Black America, where there is an entirely distinct protocol. “ It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness,” writes DuBois. “ 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 twoness,—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.” (*Souls of Black Folk* 885) The Veil represents the cause and effect of Double Consciousness. In his essay, “ The Veil of Self-Consciousness”, DuBois says: “ Then it dawned upon 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” (“ Veil” 1). The Veil is a tangible representation of three intangible concepts, which are: the inability of white people to see past their assumptions about Black people; the inability of Black people to see themselves outside of the stereotypes and assumptions being made about them by white people; and the inability of white and Black people to ever fully connect and work in solidarity, or see one another as equals.

This idea is also explored— although through a different metaphor— in Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem, “ We Wear the Mask.” In this poem, Dunbar specifically addresses the internal struggle of a Black American working within non-Black (specifically white) America. “ Why should the world be otherwise, / In counting all our tears and sighs? / Nay, let them only see us, while / We wear the mask” (1033). In this stanza, Dunbar tells the reader that the veil can be used in the Black American’s favor. This stanza begs the question: why let the cries of the oppressed fall upon ears which are intentionally covered? In Dunbar’s opinion, no good comes from expressing to white people those same things that can be expressed among other Black people. Instead, Dunbar chooses to use the Veil to his advantage. To consciously shift his consciousness to that which white America expects so that his own true consciousness may remain safe underneath.

Not all Black authors, however, agree that living a life behind a mask is ideal. In his poem, “ If We Must Die,” Claude McKay directly rails against the concept of shifting his consciousness within white spheres, as a Black man, to better fit in with white society. The poem, “ If We Must Die” thematically tells the reader that it is better to die for living genuinely— with dignity— than to assimilate into white culture and die anyway, stripped of dignity. “ If we must die, let it not be like hogs / Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot, / While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs, / Making their mock at our accursed lot. / If we must die—oh, let us nobly die, / So that our precious blood may not be shed / In vain; then even the monsters we defy / Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!” (483). McKay, through this poem, maintains the binary of oppressor vs. oppressed (in this case, white vs.

Black), but McKay's concept differs from DuBois' concept of Double Consciousness because he argues: while this binary does exist— and the Black man must be aware that it does— it is more ideal for a Black man to fully embrace the Black side of his consciousness and band together in solidarity with his Black community to overcome their oppressor: “ Oh, Kinsmen! We must meet the common foe; / Though far outnumbered, let us show us brave, / And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow! / What though before us lies the open grave? / Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack, / Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!” (483). He suggests that meekly observing the white ideal of what a Black man must be in order to survive, the Black community ought not sell themselves short because they are fewer in numbers than the white majority, but ought to fight for their right to claim their Black identity.

With this ideal, McKay launched the Harlem Renaissance, inspiring his peers such as Langston Hughes. Like McKay, Hughes writes of the beauty of his Black community, and cautions against allowing oneself to be split into a Double Consciousness, instead valuing the Black man who embraces his Black self and community. Hughes starts his manifesto, *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*, by saying: “ One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, ‘ I want to be a poet-not a Negro poet,’ meaning, I believe, ‘ I want to write like a white poet’; meaning subconsciously, ‘ I would like to be a white poet’; meaning behind that, ‘ I would like to be white.’ And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself. And I doubted then that, with his desire to run away spiritually from his race, this boy would ever be a great

poet. But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible” (348). Hughes argues that a Black person can never create art that is true to themselves unless they embrace their Blackness. Hughes interprets the veil between white people and Black people as a mountain; something to be overcome. This, like the writings of McKay, is in direct opposition with DuBois’ idea that surviving in America requires better assimilating with white culture; or, rather, posits that just surviving is not enough. To thrive in America, to create art, requires doing away with having two separate consciousnesses and, instead, embracing one’s consciousness in its entirety— Blackness and all.

Hughes does not think DuBois was wrong in his writings, per se— in fact, Hughes calls DuBois’ writings “ the finest prose written by a Negro in America.” But there is a time for meeting the oppressor where they are at and, for Hughes and his contemporaries in the Harlem Renaissance movement, that time is over. “...within the next decade,” writes Hughes, “ I expect to see the work of a growing school of colored artists who paint and model the beauty of dark faces and create with new technique the expressions of their own soul-world. And the Negro dancers who will dance like flame and the singers who will continue to carry our songs to all who listen—they will be with us in even greater numbers tomorrow” (349). For Hughes, the way to dismantle the systematic oppression of Black people is through art. He works towards this goal in his poetry specifically by honoring the musical traditions of the Black community. “ Most of my own poems are

racial in theme and treatment, derived from the life I know. In many of them I try to grasp and hold some of the meanings and rhythms of jazz. I am as sincere as I know how to be in these poems [...] Jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America; the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile” (349).

At this early point in the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes’ work created a spark of controversy in the Black community of the time, who prescribed to the writings of DuBois and were ashamed of their Blackness. “ The old subconscious ‘ white is best’ runs through her mind. Years of study under white teachers, a lifetime of white books, pictures, and papers, and white manners, morals, and Puritan standards made her dislike the spirituals. And now she turns up her nose at jazz and all its manifestations—likewise almost everything else distinctly racial. [...] She wants the artist to flatter her, to make the white world believe that all negroes are as smug and as near white in soul as she wants to be” (349). The mindset, at the time, was to dispose entirely of the Black side of consciousness and to fully embrace and live with the consciousness that is closest to white; most acceptable to white society. Hughes, however, believed the opposite. He believed Black people should express themselves truly through art and should be able to see themselves, free of flattery, free of wishing to be white; resplendent in their Blackness. “ But, to my mind, it is the duty of the younger Negro artist, if he accepts any duties at all from outsiders, to change through the force of his art that old whispering ‘ I want to be white,’ hidden in the aspirations of his people, to ‘

Why should I want to be white? I am a Negro—and beautiful” (349). This ideology— that art should express what being Black truly means, and that it is beautiful— runs at the core of the Harlem Renaissance. Hughes’ manifesto was a call to action, and Hughes himself inspired the Black artists who caused the Harlem Renaissance to thrive.

While DuBois made great strides for Black liberation by naming the existing facts of life as a Black man in white America— namely, the idea that two modes of consciousness are necessary to survive in a world where Black people are separated from their white oppressor by a thick veil of prejudice— his theories alone were not enough to set his Black contemporaries on the path towards liberation. Like Dunbar, DuBois cautioned that it is better— safer— to hide behind a mask of what white people want a Black person to look like. McKay and Hughes knew the truths within DuBois’ theories to be true, but argued that safety was no longer the prime directive. They made great strides in shedding light on the oppression facing Black people in America, and did so by making the point that Double Consciousness and the veil must become things of the past. The Harlem Renaissance was a re-writing of DuBois’ theories and a re-writing of the fate of Black Americans. “ We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the [racial] mountain, free within ourselves” (Hughes 350). Now— say McKay and Hughes— now is the time for the beauty of Blackness to shine through that thick veil. Now is the time for Black Americans to be seen for that which they truly are: beautiful.

Works Cited

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