

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Robert F. Sayre, PhD

## **W.E.B. Du Bois** (1868-1963)

*The Shadow of Years*

W.E.B. Du Bois was a master at writing fierce, tough-minded, and yet visionary essays with an autobiographical perspective, a form of literature perfectly suited to his training as a sociologist and to his later work as editor of *The Crisis*, the journal of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. He helped to found the NAACP in 1909, so as to oppose Booker T. Washington's program of acceptance of menial labor and segregation, and he needed to write articles for *The Crisis* (and other journals) that combined sociological and historical data with the shocking and illustrative material of personal testimony. In that way he could both inform his biracial audiences and also give his readers a perspective they never got from white writers.

*Darkwater* (1920), subtitled *Voices from Within the Veil*, has many such essays, like "The Servant in the House," where he begins an attack on job discrimination by recalling his own refusal to accept service jobs, except for one summer at a hotel in Minnesota, and "Of Beauty and Death," where he gives his own experience of Jim Crow waiting rooms and railroad cars, as part of a build-up to attacking discrimination in the army in 1917-19. His anger, irony, and shifts of frame and context anticipate the essays of James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and other writers.

"The Shadow of Years," which is the introduction to *Darkwater*, is the most autobiographical of these essays, being about his family, childhood, and education—and the least polemical. But he still jabs at his white readers and shares laughs with his black ones. Through the entire account, he remains both disgusted by America and hopeful, telling of "Days of Disillusion" and ages of "Miracles." His progressivism shows up in the facts that the miracles outnumber the disillusionments, that he used his comparative good fortune in life in order to help others, and that he worked as a scientist and writer, not an evangelical preacher.

Du Bois published two more autobiographies, *Dusk of Dawn* (1940) and *The Autobiography: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (1968). *Critical Essays on W. E. B. Du Bois*, ed. William L. Andrews (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1985), contains analyses of Du Bois and his work.

Reprinted from *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920) by permission of David G. Du Bois.

### Reading

The Souls of Black Folks  
<http://www.bartleby.com/114/>