

Looking Through Others' Eyes- Literature and the Double Self in the 20th Century

Laura Jacklin

A. Philip Randolph Career Academy High School

Abstract

In a curriculum unit designed as an elective in a 12th grade literature course, students will be asked to take an inquiry-based approach to discuss and analyze the growth of disillusionment and disorganization in American society. The effects of World War One changed the structures of society by loosening family ties and making way for the emergence of individualism. It is this idea of the individual that connects to another important idea of the 20th century: the double-consciousness. The most important instance of this double-consciousness idea comes from W.E.B. Du Bois' critical, beginning of the century piece, *The Souls of Black Folk*. In the section "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" Du Bois presents this important concept of the double-consciousness as, "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 (9). Of course, Du Bois speaks of the trials facing blacks in America in the post-Civil War era. However, I believe this idea connects not only to black individuals dealing with the hypocrisy of a sometimes subversively racist country, but also to the same individuals created from the disillusionment and disorganization of society as a whole.

The unit will consist of one quarter during the semester of my senior elective class. The focus of the unit will ask students to do close readings of specific characters in 20th century American short stories and novels in order to use the lens of looking through another person's eyes. Students will then explicate the process of working with the literature to go beyond and make the same connections in their own lives – namely, how other people see them. Because looking at characters through different lenses requires a lot of questions and discussion, the unit will be centralized on the Socratic Seminar. This way, students will be able to ask questions that not only discuss character motivations, but get to the core ideas of our designated theme – the double consciousness of the individual in 20th century America. Through guiding questions, students will look at the ways in which the rise in individualism pushed out the family/communal values of the previous century and how the individual in America came to look. The unit will be fueled by essential questions and will ask students to critically analyze and discuss thematic concepts in the literature. The topic that Du Bois brings up of having to look at oneself through another's eyes, I believe, is especially important for my students to look at. All of my students are young adults almost ready to face the realities of life beyond high school, but at the same time they are in that transition period from teenager to young adult. In addition, the vast majority of my students are African American and many of

them come from underprivileged socioeconomic backgrounds. Because of all these reasons, the rest of society chooses to look at them through very specific eyes. My students have the ability to look at themselves through the eyes of others, and this curriculum unit will hopefully explicate this process by looking at the same idea in literature. This is important because of something brought up in Du Bois' "Of the Coming of John." After John comes home, an educated man, his sister asks, "does it make every one – unhappy when they study and learn lots of things?" (171). My students, as they apply for colleges, trade schools, or jobs, have to understand that how other people see them effects how they see themselves.