

# PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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## Chapter 9: William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868-1963)

Page Links: | [Primary Works](#) | [Selected Bibliography 1980-Present](#) | [MLA Style Citation of this Web Page](#) |

| [A Brief Biography](#) |

Site Links: | [Chap. 9: Index](#) | [Alphabetical List](#) | [Table Of Contents](#) | [Home Page](#) | February 2, 2008



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Described variously as the "most outspoken civil rights activist in America," "the undisputed intellectual leader of a new generation of African- American, and "the central authorizing figure for twentieth-century African-American thought," Du Bois was the inspiration for the literary movement known as the Harlem Renaissance. As a co-founder of the NAACP and the long-time editor of its magazine *The Crisis*, Du Bois nurtured and promoted many young and talented African-Americans. Underlying his controversial notion of "the talented tenth," was his belief that true integration will happen when selected blacks excel in the literature and the fine arts.

### Awards and Honors

Spingarn Medal from NAACP, 1932; elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters, 1943; Lenin International Peace Prize, 1958; Knight Commander of the Liberian Humane Order of African Redemption conferred by the Liberian Government; Minister Plenipotentiary and Envoy Extraordinary conferred by President Coolidge; LL.D. from Harvard University, 1930, and Atlanta University, 1938; Litt.D. from Fisk University, 1938; L.H.D. Wilberforce University, 1940; honorary degrees from Morgan State College, University of Berlin, and Charles University.

(From *Contemporary Authors*, New Revised Series, Volume 34, and the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Volume 47.)

| [Top](#) | Primary Works

*The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903; *John Brown*, 1909; *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, 1911; *The Star of Ethiopia*, 1913; *The Negro*, 1916; *Darkwater*, 1920; *The Gift of the Negro*, 1924; *Dark Princess: Voices from within the Veil*, 1928; *Black Reconstruction*, 1933; *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*, 1940; *Color and Democracy, Colonies and Peace*, 1945; *The World and Africa*, 1947; *The Black Flame - A Trilogy: The Ordeal of Mansart*, 1957; *Mansart Builds a School*, 1959; *Worlds of Color*, 1961.

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## | [Top](#) | William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868-1963): A Brief Biography

### A Student Project by Kathryn Adams

Had it not been for the race problem early thrust upon me and enveloping me, I should have probably been an unquestioning worshipper at the shrine of the established social order into which I was born. But just that part of this order which seemed to most of my fellows nearest perfection seemed to me most inequitable and wrong; and starting from that critique, I gradually, as the year went by, found other things to question in my environment.

--W.E.B Du Bois, *The Autobiography: A Soliloquy on Viewing: My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century*. (From David Lewis's *W.E.B. Du Bois The Fight for Equality and The American Century, 1919-1963*)

By the time of his death in 1963, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois had made his mark on American history. Throughout his lifetime he completed an immense amount of literary study and works intended for the advancement of blacks in their struggle for equality and civil justice. He devoted his life to this social issue—which he called in his best know work *The Souls of Black Folk*, “the problem of the color line”— and has become one of the most well known, influential intellect and race leader of his time (Moore 65).

Du Bois was born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts on February 23, 1868. He often describes his youth as “a happy, sometimes idyllic haven from the radical and social conflicts to which he would ultimately devote his life” (Moore 17). His boyhood was more pleasant than most black boys growing up in America during the same time; his birth town is described as being more bigotry towards the new Irish settlers as opposed to its deep rooted black families. The few upsets of his youth described by Du Bois were such harmless incidences as “when his mother cut off his lovely curls because people from their (integrated) church were calling him a little girl” (18). Du Bois's heritage, which consists of

both black and white blood, was acknowledged as his being black played no significant role in his youth. His blue eyes and light skin were accepted by both his blacks and white neighbors. In fact, "Nearly all his school friends were white" (21).

Great Barrington Massachusetts was unlike other areas in America, and due to this fact Du Bois was able to become highly educated, unlike most African American males growing up during the same historical period. Du Bois excelled in school, and gives his high school graduation speech as Valedictorian in 1884 (Marable 219). After high school, Du Bois wishes to attend Harvard University, however due to economic reasons is unable to do so. He instead attends Fisk University, the black school in Tennessee, in 1885. While at Fisk Du Bois, "first realized what it meant to be a Negro in a white dominated land" (Moore 23).

While at college, Du Bois studies philosophy and history, and concludes that his goal in life is to lead his people forward. To obtain this goal, Du Bois undertakes a controversial interaction with Booker T. Washington. Du Bois does so because he disagrees with Washington's idea that advancement of the race could be obtained through educating blacks to be laborers. Instead, Du Bois claims that by educating the top ten percent of the black race—"The Talented Tenth"—their knowledge of modern culture could help aid in the evolving American Negro's advancement into "higher civilization" (Moore 60). Du Bois states that "The better classes of Negroes should recognize their duty towards the masses" (Marable 26). Although Du Bois disagrees with Washington's proposal for the advancement of the race, he acknowledged that, "Washington, born into slavery in the South, had 'felt a lash,' and that he, Du Bois, had not" (Moore 61). Later on in his life Du Bois is able to attend Harvard University and eventually receives his PhD in history from this institution.

Du Bois's first book, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870*, was published in 1896. This thoroughly researched historical study was intended to point out the follies of slavery. In this work Du Bois writes, "we must face the fact that this problem arose principally from the cupidity and carelessness of our ancestors" (Moore 30). Just as seen in works written after *The Suppression*, Du Bois uses persuasive arguments and clear facts to fight for black civil liberties. In his second book, *The Philadelphia Negro (1889)*, Du Bois plays the role of urban anthropologist and presents scientifically collected sociological data in an attempt to better understand the colored people and their societal relationship (37). Du Bois also contributed numerous periodical articles and other writings dedicated towards advancing his people. He writes tirelessly for and is editor of *The Crisis*, the official monthly for the NAACP, from 1910 to 1934. The central political theme of these editorials is "the relationship between racism and American democracy" (Marable 76).

Du Bois's most influential and widely read and respected work is *The Souls of Black Folk*. After writing *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois "transformed himself into a race leader who with both passion and scholarship revealed with shrewdness, honesty, and artistic sophistication a level of black existence that had never been shown before" (Moore 64). Through his artistic style of writing this work and its persuasive arguments, *The Souls of Black Folk* creates "an unparalleled impact upon a diversity of readers" (64).

In his spare time, when he is not writing, Du Bois takes part in other activities which he believes are be beneficial for blacks in their struggle out of history and slavery. He teaches as a professor of such subjects as sociology, black studies, economics and history. Du Bois additionally participates in such liberating causes as the Pan-African Conference (he attending a total of 6), the NAACP, and creates and/or edits periodicals, essays, and texts all aimed towards dealing with what he coined as "The Negro Problem" Also, Du Bois takes an active part in American politics and even ran for the U.S. senate on the American Labor Party ticket, and eventually becomes a member of the U.S. Communist party (Marable 220-222).

Du Bois did marry in 1896 to Nina Gomer, she would be his wife for fifty-three years. Their marriage is described as a good one, however the Puritan raised Du Bois once stated that he " 'was literally frightened into it,' apparently because he felt intimidated by the sexual advances he received at school" (Moore 25). She dies in 1950. In a last recognition of his African roots Du Bois becomes a citizen of Ghana. He dies there on August 27 at the age of ninety-five. Since his death his name has become infinitely linked to the African Americans' struggle for civil liberty, and his dedication and devotion to his life cause has made him one of the most important racial leaders of all time.

| [Top](#) | A Brief Chronology

1868 William Edward Burghardt Du Bois born on February 26 in Great Barrington, Mass.

1883- Correspondent for the New York Globe, New York Age, and other black

1885 newspapers.

- 1884 Graduates as Valedictorian from his high school; mother dies
- 1885- Attends Fisk University
- 1888 Receives B.A.; enters Harvard.
- 1890 Receives B.A. in history; begins graduate study in history.
- 1891 Receives M.A. in history from Harvard. Begins doctorate study;
- 1892 Travels for two years in Western Europe and attend school in Berlin.
- 1894 Returns to U.S. and accepts position as chairman of Classics Dept. at  
Wilberforce University.
- 1895 Receives Ph.D. in history from Harvard.
- 1896 Marries Nina Gomer; Writes *Suppression of the African Slave Trade*.
- 1896 Accepts position in Atlanta University; Edits *Atlanta University Studies*.
- 1889 Writes *The Philadelphia Negro*.
- 1900 Attends the first Pan-African Congress; Attends Paris Exposition.
- 1903 Writes *The Souls of Black Folk*.
- 1906 Founds periodical *The Moon*; Organizes second Atlanta Conference.
- 1907 Founds *Horizon*.
- 1909 Writes *John Brown*.
- 1910 Accepts offer to become director of publications and research for the  
NAACP; Edits first issue of *The Crisis*.
- 1911 *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*.
- 1915 *The Negro*
- 1919 The infamous Red Summer; Du Bois organizes Pan African Conference.
- 1920 Founds, edits *Brownies Book* for children. *Darkwater*.
- 1923 Award—Receives Spingarn Medal.
- 1924 *The Gift of Black Folk*.
- 1926 Founds Krigwa Players, black repertory theater group in Harlem.
- 1927 Award—Krigwa Players win little theater award, in New York City.
- 1928 *Dark Princess*
- 1935 *Black Reconstruction in America*

- 1938 Award—Receives honorary Ph.D. from Fisk.
- 1939 *Black Folk, Then and Now*
- 1940 Edits *Phylon. Dusk of Dawn*.
- 1950 Chairman of Peace Information Center; Runs for U.S. Senate on American labor party ticket.
- 1951 *In Battle for Peace*.
- 1957 Publishes first volume of "Black Flame" trilogy, *The Ordeal of Mansart*.
- 1959 Award—Wins Lenin Peace Prize.
- 1961 Travels to Ghana to work on *Encyclopedia Africana*; Joins U. S. Communist Party.
- 1961 *Autobiography* published in Soviet Russia.
- 1963 Becomes a citizen of Ghana; Dies in Ghana at the age of ninety-five.

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