

Writing in Black and White

Assignment 1

- **1.1 due Friday, September 22. Bring three copies to class with you.**
- **Conferences from Sept. 22 – Sept. 26**
- **1.2 due Friday, September 29. Bring a copy of first draft with my comments, and all peer reviews to class.**

In your first essay, you'll be doing something called a "close reading," the most basic form of analysis in the humanities. A close reading is pretty much what it sounds like: you'll try to show a reader something meaningful about a text, or about an issue touched on by a text, by paying very close attention to the text itself. Since, for the moment, the only text we're all familiar with is DuBois, we'll start with that one: later, though, you'll probably end up doing more close readings of many other texts.

It might be helpful at this point to consider what a close reading is *not*. For starters, it is not an "english paper," or at least not in the sense in which that term is usually used: not "A List of the Important Themes in *The Souls of Black Folk*," nor "Some Things that W.E.B. DuBois Said in *The Souls of Black Folk* that I Am Going to Say in a Slightly Different Way, and in a Different Order, Here, Because I Have Been Asked To." No: those things are generally referred to as "reports," and most people are as little interested in reading them as you are, surely, in writing them. Nor is a close reading a *review* of the book: you're not trying to convince somebody that the book is good or bad, a pleasant read or a difficult one, a page-turner or a snooze. *People* magazine already has the market cornered on that, so you don't need to do it yourself.

A good close reading, though, is a different kind of animal. It is something written by a thoughtful person, who is speaking to other thoughtful people about a text. The writer assumes, usually, that the readers have read the text – or at least are familiar with it – and that they are curious to know more. The task of a writer in this kind of writing is to help intelligent people understand the text better, more deeply, and in context. What you're trying to do, in short, is to help your reader get past what's obvious about the text, and into what's really interesting about it. A report-writer begins with the question "what did that book say?" A reviewer begins with the question "did I like that?" But a close reader begins with the deeper question: "what's really happening in this book?" The first two start with what they know about the book, but the academic writer always begins with what he or she doesn't know, what he or she can't immediately figure out, but is still curious about.

So, to write this paper you'll need to do two things. First, you need to imagine an audience receptive to the paper: usually, it's a good idea to imagine that audience as the other students in the class – people who are curious about what you're curious about, people who are smart and interested, people you don't have to talk down to or up to. Then, you need to decide how you want to approach the text. You can't say everything – and the more you try to, the more what you write will turn into a report. So you need a topic, a theme, a starting point that will get you moving into the text. You need to be curious about something. That could be almost anything, and I'll read almost anything you're actually curious about. But here are some ideas that might get you started:

- You might write a paper that tries to explain why and how DuBois uses “the veil” as his central metaphor to describe the color-line. Why a veil and not, say, a curtain? Or skin? Or railroad tracks, as in “the wrong side of”? How does DuBois introduce that metaphor, and how does it change as you move through the book? *Why* do you think he finds that metaphor more apt than another metaphor? How does that metaphor change the way his audience understands the “souls of black folk”?
- You might write a paper that extends and deepens the piece you’ve already written on “Of the Coming of John” or “Of the Passing of the First Born.” Again, just pick one, and make that the central emphasis. What do you think that particular chapter is about? What point, or points, does it leave the reader considering? What feeling does it convey to the reader? And how does that chapter fit in with the points and feelings conveyed by the rest of the book? Do these chapters undercut DuBois’s overall mission? Do they forward it? How?
- You might write a paper about “double-consciousness,” and how it affects DuBois as a writer and as a person. Try to explain, first, what exactly he means by it. Then try to show how double consciousness is at work in this book. In what ways is this book addressed to a white audience, and what does it aim to tell them? What does the book *show* its white audience? What does it hide from them? How does DuBois reach out to a white audience? How does he protect himself from them? These, I realize, are sort of broad questions: but if you ask them, and think about them, I think they’ll make a lot of things in the book stand out.
- You might write a piece about DuBois’s view of education, and the role he gives education in the development of the souls of black folk. What kind of education does he value? What kind of education does he not value? Is his view of education, given what the book has to say about the life of black folks in the south in the early 1900s, realistic? Is it fair? Explain that, if you can.
- You might write a paper about DuBois’s relationship with other black folk and black movements in the early 20th Century. Start, maybe, by doing a little outside reading on Booker T. Washington. Then focus on DuBois’s chapter about Washington? What, at bottom, is his problem with Washington? What deeper problems – of self-definition, of education, of goals – does his argument with Washington imply? Is DuBois an elitist?

Any of the prompts above could be turned into a paper. And, as you read them, you may actually think of more ways of approaching the paper, more questions you could ask. So if one of those prompts grabs you, run with it, and let’s see what comes out of it. If not, consider them examples of the kind of questions you can ask – and then go on to start with a question of your own. Just remember that all analytical writing starts with a question, and the better the question, the better the writing that comes out of it. So think about it, and try to have a little fun with this, too.