

To Be Two: DuBois's Double Consciousness in Jeffers's *The Age of Phillis*

By Casen Lucas

Casen Lucas is a junior political science major at WT and a member of the Pi Sigma Alpha National Political Science Honor Society. He also serves as a peer mentor for the Attebury Honors Program, and he is currently studying politics at the University of Reading in Berkshire, England, as a study abroad student. He wrote his essay "To Be Two: DuBois's Double Consciousness in Jeffers's *The Age of Phillis*" for Dr. Matthew Harrison's Literary Analysis course, drawing upon W.E.B. DuBois's writing as a theoretical lens for interpreting Honorée Fanonne Jeffers's poetry. Casen chose an English minor to develop research abilities, writing proficiency, and analytical skills that will enhance his understanding of politics. After graduating from WT next year, he plans to attend law school and pursue a career in family law.

In his essay "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," W.E.B. DuBois outlines his awareness of a deeply rooted duality. He argues that the Black struggle is distinct for its twoness, as the African American is conscious of both his African heritage and his American experience with persecution. DuBois's model of double consciousness serves as an apt explanation for many of the internal conflicts in Honorée Fanonne Jeffers's *The Age of Phillis*, where Jeffers imagines the plight of Phillis Wheatley Peters navigating the horrors of the slave trade. Phillis was stolen from her home in West Africa and enslaved by Susannah Wheatley until she gained international prominence as a poet. This essay uses DuBois's framework as a theoretical lens for comparing Phillis and Susannah's vastly different experiences and identities.

As a child growing up in Massachusetts, W.E.B. DuBois excelled in his high school studies and earned several degrees from Harvard University. He went on to be a leader in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and his theory of double consciousness remains one of the most influential American texts on racial disparities ("W.E.B. DuBois").

Phillis Wheatley Peters, another influential Black writer, was born in West Africa and captured by slave traders as a young girl. She was purchased by Susannah Wheatley and was an enslaved person until she gained international prominence as a poet ("Phillis Wheatley"). Though DuBois and Phillis clearly had vastly different upbringings, they both experienced a sort of internal strife as

they navigated life under oppression in America. DuBois's model of double consciousness in "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" describes a cognizance of deeply rooted duality, and this framework provides an apt explanation for many of the moments of internal conflict, both Black and white, in Honorée Fanonne Jeffers's *The Age of Phillis*.

DuBois's theory of double consciousness outlines how the Black experience in America is tainted by a conscious understanding of two distinct selves. According to DuBois, the Black struggle is distinct for its twoness; the African American, he says, is conscious of both his African heritage and his American experience with persecution. He argues that the history of Black America is the history of two selves. Despite the horror of racial prejudice, though, DuBois argues that the African American would and should not sacrifice either of his two selves: "He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his [Black] soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that [Black] blood has a message for the world" (DuBois 327).

As part of his theory of double consciousness, DuBois argues that people of color are forced to view themselves at least partially through the lens of the white person in power: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, 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" (327). DuBois explains double consciousness as a sensation felt due to societal pressure; because of powerful people in oppressive systems, Black citizens must place their entire identity—"one's soul," as DuBois puts it—in the hands of the oppressor. As she imagines the plight of Phillis Wheatley Peters navigating the horrors of the slave trade, Jeffers elaborates on the placement of the Black identity. Like DuBois, she writes about what it means for the oppressor to control one's identity when Susannah Wheatley buys Phillis from the slave trade: "And so, / because the little girl was bony and frail, / Mistress Wheatley gained her for a trifling, / passing by the other slaves from the brig called Phillis" (Jeffers 41). When she purchases Phillis, Susannah solidifies the child's reduction to an identity—a "slave," purchased for a trifling—imagined by white people with inherent, systemic power.

Unlike DuBois, however, Jeffers reckons with the emotional perspective of the oppressor. She invites readers to consider Susannah's complicated, turbulent emotional state as she purchases Phillis. She compares the binary nature of Susannah's feelings to the mixed emotions she felt as she mourned a loved one: "I'm trying to both see and discard that day, / as when I stood over the open casket / of an old man,

counting the lines on his face, / grieving yet perverse” (Jeffers 41). By applying the concept to Susannah, a white woman with dangerous power over Phillis, Jeffers develops DuBois’s double consciousness into a universal sense of twoness. DuBois refers to “the veil” as specific to Black life, saying that the African American is “born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world” (327). In DuBois’s essay, then, both the veil and the double consciousness it engenders are distinctly Black burdens imposed by white oppressors. Jeffers develops this tradition in *The Age of Phillis* by proposing a conversation about Susannah’s emotional duality. When Phillis suffers from asthma, Susannah says, “This is a complicated space. / There is slavery here. / There is maternity here” (51). The woman is torn between her genuine affection for Phillis and her societal position that allows her to purchase another human being. Despite her reprehensible ownership of a child, Susannah does have love for Phillis. Still, if Susannah does possess a double consciousness of sorts, it is certainly different from the one DuBois describes. In fact, it might be the opposite of the double consciousness DuBois recognizes from his position of violent disenfranchisement. As a white slave owner, Susannah is certainly not reduced to an assigned identity from a white oppressor; nonetheless, like DuBois, she demonstrates a cognizance

of her own internal duality.

Jeffers also emphasizes Phillis’s double consciousness, perhaps a more obvious example of double consciousness as DuBois initially described it. She details Phillis’s complicated relationship with her purchaser, saying:

She took the child into her home,
fed and bathed her, deciphered
the naps on her head.

Dressed her in strange garments:
gratitude and slavery. (42)

Phillis’s double consciousness is comprised of gratitude for her maternal figure and horror toward her purchaser, both of whom are the same person. Unlike Susannah (and much like DuBois), Phillis’s double consciousness is entirely the result of an oppressive, racially violent system. She is not facing a complicated emotional binary; rather, a complicated emotional binary was forced onto her when she was stolen from her family and subjected to the violence of the slave trade. Like DuBois, Phillis exemplifies a clear longing to “escape both death and isolation” and return to a life of comfort and safety (DuBois 327). Unlike DuBois, though, Phillis shows no desire to cling to her two selves; she would prefer to dwell only in the kingdom of freedom, leaving behind her life of slavery. While DuBois longs to “merge his double self into a better and truer self,” Phillis has endured a violent life as an enslaved person and is not necessarily fond of her double self (DuBois 327). In

“Fragment #3: First Draft of an Extant Letter, Phillis Wheatley, Providence, to General George Washington, Cambridge Headquarters,” Phillis makes clear her frustration with Washington, Susannah, and the slave trade at large. “Sir, I have taken the freedom which if my master hadn’t given me would have been my own anyway to address your Excellency who I heard behaves like either a gentleman or a tyrant depending on his moods or his money” (Jeffers 139). In her honest remarks to Washington, Phillis demonstrates her frustration, making it unlikely that she would choose to merge her double selves. Although DuBois also resisted slavery and racial violence, he felt proud of both his African heritage and his American lifestyle. Phillis, on the other hand, was stolen from home at a young age, so her experience with her American self seems overshadowed by

her longing to return home to Africa.

Though they experienced vastly different childhoods, both DuBois and Phillis—and Susannah, though in the opposite way—dealt with the emotional turmoil of the slave trade. Each of them was conscious of two selves, and each attempted to move forward from their twoness in order to obtain peace. Though DuBois longed to merge his two selves and Phillis longed to break free from her American self, both epitomize the way in which double consciousness can manifest differently. Jeffers develops DuBois’s tradition by challenging readers to grapple with Susannah’s duality; likewise, as Phillis grows weary of life in the violent American slave trade, Jeffers makes evident that the theory of double consciousness is applicable yet distinct for DuBois, Susannah, and Phillis.

Works Cited

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