

## *The Shape of Fear*

W.E.B. Du Bois

### Introduction

You already read a short biography of W.E.B. Du Bois included with his earlier essay, *On Mr. Washington and Others*. By the 1920s, Du Bois was an internationally known scholar, writer, and political leader. During the 1910s and 20s, he became increasingly involved with the fight to end European colonialism in Africa and the Middle East. In 1919, he formed the Pan-African Congress, a group of black leaders from across the world who hoped to influence the post-World War I world. In fact, the first Pan-African Congress met in Paris, France during the summer of 1919, not too far from the Paris Peace talks where President Woodrow Wilson presented his plan for the post-war world called the Fourteen Points. Decolonization was not included in the Treaty of Paris, leaving Du Bois increasingly disillusioned with the possibility of racial equality in the United States and Europe.

Anti-immigrant sentiment and violence increased dramatically following WWI. During the first Red Scare, law enforcement, the Federal Government, and every day Americans targeted immigrants as communist operatives working for the newly formed Soviet Union or simply here to destroy the country from within. Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1924 (sometimes called the Johnson-Reid Act) which effectively ended immigration from southern and eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East. The Ku Klux Klan was at the height of its power during the 1920s. Hundreds of “Klan candidates” were elected to all levels of the government, and “Klan culture” was embedded in American popular culture. In addition to immigrants, the KKK continued to target African Americans, particularly in northern cities where the black population had significantly increased during the ongoing Great Migration.

In this essay, published in the Summer 1926 edition of the prestigious literary journal, *The North American Review*, Du Bois addresses the rhetoric and power of “Klan culture.”<sup>1</sup>

---

### Primary Source

Read [\*The Shape of Fear\*](#) by W.E.B. Du Bois.

---

<sup>1</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, [\*The Shape of Fear\*](#), originally published in *The North American Review*, Summer, 1926. The full article is provided by permission of the copyright holder at this URL:  
<http://www.unz.com/print/NorthAmericanRev-1926q2-00291>

## Additional Footnotes:

<sup>2</sup> In August, 1926, over 30,000 Ku Klux Klan members marched up Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, DC to the Lincoln Memorial. [Here is a good article from \*The Atlantic\*](https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/12/second-klan/509468/) by Joshua Rothman, US historian and chair of the history department at the University of Alabama, about the resurgence of the KKK during the 1920s. The article has a lot of information about the 1925 marches, as well the parallels between the August 1925 KKK rally and the August 2017 White Nationalist rally in Charlottesville, VA.  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/12/second-klan/509468/>.

<sup>3</sup> The differences between the first and second KKK should be in your notes.

<sup>4</sup> Most of Ohio was settled by migrants from New England. Northeast Ohio (Cleveland, Youngstown) was originally the Connecticut Reserve, and what is now Washington Courthouse was land given to Revolutionary War veterans from New England (George Washington owned a large amount of the land, which he essentially flipped and sold to the federal government who then paid the veterans with the land).

<sup>5</sup> Joshua R. Giddings was an abolitionist whose home in Ashtabula served as a station on the Underground Railroad. He served in the House of Representatives from the 1830s through the 1860s, and was an outspoken critic of slavery.

<sup>6</sup> All facts. [Ohio History Central entry on the KKK](#) explains Klan politics in Ohio, including the interesting tidbit that the national convocation (meeting) of the KKK took place at Buckeye Lake several times during the 1920s. Keep in mind that Middletown is Muncie, Indiana, heart of Klan country during the 1920s.

<sup>7</sup> In 1925, a mob of whites (led by the KKK), attacked the Detroit home of Dr. Ossian Sweet after he moved into a predominantly white neighborhood. Both the crowd and the Sweets were armed, two white men were wounded, and Sweet and his wife were arrested for attempted murder. After years in jail, both were acquitted. Gladys Sweet contracted tuberculosis in jail. Within a year of her release, Gladys died of tuberculosis as did the Sweet's daughter, Iva, and Ossian's brother Henry (all in the same year). Dr. Sweet struggled with mental illness, alcoholism, and bankruptcy for the rest of his life. Dr. Sweet committed suicide in 1960 at the age of 55.

<sup>8</sup> Ben Lindsey was a progressive reformer and lawyer who established the first juvenile court in Denver, Colorado in 1907. Interestingly, after witnessing an endless parade of young adults charged with "sex crimes" of one kind or another, Lindsey co-wrote a book called *Companionate Marriage*, which advocated for young couples to live together for a year before getting married so they could get to know each other, sexually and otherwise, as long as they didn't have children while unmarried.

<sup>9</sup> William Ellery Sweet was governor of Colorado from 1923-25. Sweet was a Progressive who ran as a Democrat. Sweet opposed the Ku Klux Klan and believed he lost the 1925 election to Republican Clarence Morley who was a card-carrying member of the KKK.

<sup>10</sup> Above all, wealth fears Democracy.

<sup>11</sup> Krim was a Riffian Berber from North Africa who fought against French and Spanish colonialism of the region (specifically northern Morocco) during the 1910s and 20s.

<sup>12</sup> Gandhi led the fight against British colonialism during the first half of the twentieth century. Chittaranjan Das was an Indian statesman and part of the Indian Freedom Movement.

<sup>13</sup> The Bolsheviks led the 1917 communist revolution in Russia (called the Soviet Union after the Revolution). Much like Progressive reformers in Europe and the US, the Bolsheviks wanted to curb the power of business and industry and reign in government corruption. This is not to say that people calling for regulation of business are communists. There are a variety of ways to enact progressive reform. Nevertheless, Du Bois raises the same question Samuel Strauss did in *Things are in the Saddle*.

<sup>14</sup> Fascism is rooted in nationalism and authoritarianism – ultraconservative, suppression of any political dissent or disagreement (hence one-party rule), and power and wealth concentrated among a small group of men. Modern Fascism emerged in Italy after WWI, culminating in the appointment of Fascist leader Benito Mussolini to Prime Minister in 1922. Mussolini, like all fascist leaders, developed a cult of personality, meaning people believed anything he did was good and right. As a result, Mussolini could (and did) destroy the country without his followers questioning his actions. Instead, fascists believe anyone who challenges the leader or his government is a traitor who deserves to be exiled, jailed, or killed. People who support fascist leaders even as they destroy the country and its principles, are themselves, fascists. Even if you disagree with some of the beliefs of a fascist leader, if you vote for a fascist, you are a fascist. If you support a fascist leader and his government, you are also a fascist. That's the thing with fascism – there is no nuance, only undying loyalty at all costs. Hence, you cannot vote for one aspect of fascism (lower taxes, for example) and reject other aspects of the fascist leadership (shutting down immigration, misogyny, individual politicians making money off of government policy, etc). During the 1920s, Italy was fascist under Mussolini, Germany was quickly devolving into fascism (Nazism is fascist) as Hitler rose to power, and Spain struggled to fend off a fascist revolution led by General Francisco Franco. In 1936, Franco and parts of the Spanish military stage a coup d'état against the democratically elected socialist government. The United States refused to aid the elected government because it was socialist (which was more important than the fact that it was democratically elected). General Franco remained dictator of Spain until his death in 1975.

<sup>15</sup> Schadenfreude is deriving pleasure from someone else's suffering or pain.

<sup>16</sup> Flotsam is debris from a ship or cargo floating in the ocean, lake, or some other body of water.

<sup>17</sup> Du Bois is referencing the 1925 trial in Dayton, Tennessee of science teacher John Scopes, charged with violating the recently passed state law making it a crime to teach evolution in the classroom.

<sup>18</sup> Dago is an ethnic slur used against Italians and Spanish people, probably a reference to the fact that most were day laborers paid "as the day goes."

<sup>19</sup> "In fine" from the last paragraph means "finally."