

## W.E. B. Du Bois

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“On Being Crazy” (1907)

It was one o'clock and I was hungry. I walked into a restaurant, seated myself, and reached for the bill of fare. My table companion rose.

“Sir,” said he, “do you wish to force your company on those who do not want you?”

“No,” said I, “I wish to eat.”

“Are you aware, sir, that this is social equality?”

“Nothing of the sort, sir, it is hunger,” and I ate.

The day's work done, I sought the theatre. As I sank into my seat, the lady shrank and squirmed.

“I beg pardon,” I said.

“Do you enjoy being where you are not wanted?” she asked coldly.

“Oh no,” I said.

“Well you are not wanted here.”

I was surprised. “I fear you are mistaken,” I said, “I certainly want the music, and I like to think the music wants me to listen to it.”

“Usher,” said the lady, “this is social equality.”

“No, Madame,” said the usher, “it is the second movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.”

After the theatre, I sought the hotel where I had sent my baggage. The clerk scowled.

“What do you want?”

“Rest,” I said.

“This is a white hotel,” he said.

I looked around. “Such a color scheme requires a great deal of cleaning,” I said, “but I don't know that I object.”

“We object,” said he.

“Then why,” I began, but he interrupted.

“We don't keep niggers,” he said, “we don't want social equality.”

“Neither do I,” I replied gently, “I want a bed.”

I walked thoughtfully to the train. I'll take a sleeper through Texas. I'm a little bit dissatisfied with this town.

“Can't sell you one.”

“I only want to hire it,” said I, “for a couple of nights.”

“Can't sell you a sleeper in Texas,” he maintained. “They consider that social equality.”

“I consider it barbarism,” I said, “and I think I'll walk.”

Walking, I met another wayfarer, who immediately walked to the other side of the road, where it was muddy. I asked his reason.

“Niggers is dirty,” he said.

“So is mud,” said I. “Moreover, I am not as dirty as you – yet.”

“But you're a nigger, ain't you?” he asked.

“My grandfather was so called.”  
 “Well then!” he answered triumphantly.  
 “Do you live in the South?” I persisted, pleasantly.  
 “Sure,” he growled, “and starve there.”  
 “I should think you and the Negroes should get together and vote out starvation.”  
 “We don’t let them vote.”  
 “We? Why not?” I said in surprise.  
 “Niggers is too ignorant to vote.”  
 “But,” I said, “I am not so ignorant as you.”  
 “But you’re a nigger.”  
 “Yes, I’m certainly what you mean by that.”  
 “Well then!” he returned, with that curiously inconsequential note of triumph. “Moreover,” he said, “I don’t want my sister to marry a nigger.”  
 I had not seen his sister, so I merely murmured, “let her say no.”  
 “By God, you shall not marry her, even if she said yes.”  
 “But – but I don’t want to marry her,” I answered, a little perturbed at the personal turn.  
 “Why not!” he yelled, angrier than ever.  
 “Because I’m already married and I rather like my wife.”  
 “Is she a nigger?” he asked suspiciously.  
 “Well,” I said again, “her grandmother was called that.”  
 “Well then!” he shouted in that oddly illogical way.  
 I gave up.  
 “Go on,” I said, “either you are crazy or I am.”  
 “We both are,” he said as he trotted along in the mud.

### Reading Comprehension Questions:

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- 1) Why is this story titled “On Being Crazy”? Who is crazy in the story?
- 2) Why doesn’t any character in this story have a name?
- 3) Can you describe the verbal responses of the main character? How does this character speak? What does it tell us about the main character? Does it tell us anything about the other characters?
- 4) Why are the supporting characters so concerned about “social equality”? What does this phrase mean to these characters? How do the supporting characters use this phrase? Does this phrase have the same meaning or any meaning to the main character?
- 5) Analyze the arguments that the supporting characters make to turn away or criticize the main character (claims, evidence, conclusions, and logic). Do these characters make good arguments? Evaluate and criticize each argument and explain how it follows or does not follow the rules of argumentation and logic.